



# Without Exceptions

## *Envisioning Ubuntu Churches Confronting Abuse in Africa*

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### Abstract

Abuse is an ever-present and growing reality on the continent of Africa, even within the church. The Church should be a place of healing and belonging. So the Church must actively protect the vulnerable and relieve them of the shame and burdens placed on them by abuse. The Church must also hold abusers accountable and call them to repentance. When interpreted biblically and theologically, the traditional values of African people reflected in the philosophy of ubuntu can empower the Church to accomplish this task. Ubuntu, *when practiced without exceptions*, can enhance and deepen the Church's theology and praxis so that she responds well to abuse in her midst. Bias plays a significant role in the global failure to adequately address abuse; thus ubuntu's insistence on recognizing the humanity of others offers a significant African contribution to the global efforts to eliminate abuse.

### Résumé

Les abus sont une réalité omniprésente et croissante sur le continent africain, même au sein de l'Église. L'Église devrait être un lieu de guérison et d'appartenance. Elle doit donc protéger activement les personnes vulnérables et les soulager de la honte et du fardeau que leur imposent les abus. L'Église doit également demander des comptes aux abuseurs et les appeler à la repentance. Interprétées bibliquement et théologiquement, les valeurs traditionnelles des peuples africains reflétées dans la philosophie de l'ubuntu peuvent permettre à l'Église d'accomplir cette tâche. L'ubuntu, lorsqu'il est pratiqué sans exception, peut améliorer et approfondir la théologie et la pratique de l'Église de manière à ce qu'elle réagisse bien aux abus commis en son sein. Les préjugés jouent un rôle important dans l'incapacité globale à traiter les abus de manière adéquate ; l'insistance d'ubuntu sur la reconnaissance

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de l'humanité des autres offre donc une contribution africaine significative aux efforts globaux visant à éliminer les abus.

**Resumo**

O abuso é uma realidade sempre presente e crescente no continente africano, mesmo dentro da Igreja. A Igreja deve ser um lugar de cura e de pertença. Por isso, a Igreja deve proteger ativamente os vulneráveis e aliviá-los da vergonha e do fardo que lhes é imposto pelo abuso. A Igreja deve também responsabilizar os abusadores e chamá-los ao arrependimento. Quando interpretados bíblicamente e teologicamente, os valores tradicionais dos povos africanos reflectidos na filosofia do ubuntu podem capacitar a Igreja para realizar esta tarefa. O ubuntu, quando praticado sem exceções, pode melhorar e aprofundar a teologia e a praxis da Igreja para que ela responda bem aos abusos no seu seio. O preconceito desempenha um papel significativo na incapacidade global de lidar adequadamente com o abuso; assim, a insistência do ubuntu em reconhecer a humanidade dos outros oferece uma contribuição africana significativa para os esforços globais de eliminação do abuso.

**Keywords**

abuse, Church, trauma, ubuntu, bias, christological compassion

**Mots-clés**

abus, Église, traumatisme, ubuntu, parti pris, compassion christologique

**Palavras-chave**

abuso, Igreja, trauma, ubuntu, preconceito, compaixão cristológica

**Introduction**

As we come to the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, Africa is still suffering. The continent is bleeding from abuses of all forms. As people seek to recover from the traumas they have endured, cries for help are common across the continent: the land itself is groaning in pain (Rom 8:19–21). This “is the absence of *shalom* in all its meanings.”<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Plantinga defines *shalom* as

the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfilment, . . . universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight — a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural

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<sup>1</sup> Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, 86.

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gifts are fruitfully employed . . . *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things are supposed to be.<sup>2</sup>

Ubuntu is the traditional African virtue that arises from the recognition that humans exist as “individuals-in-community” and that “to be human is to be with others.”<sup>3</sup> Both the gospel and ubuntu call the community to seek the flourishing of all its members, without exceptions, and thus the concept of flourishing gives us a tool to evaluate for the presence of abuse. Where there are individuals or communities suffering deeply rather than flourishing, there is abuse. Where there are people who are harassed, helpless, defenseless, and abused, there are other people who are benefitting themselves at the expense of others. Ubuntu perspectives recognize that “human flourishing is at heart a matter of right relationship: with God, with fellow humans, and with other creatures.”<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Loyer links the concepts of ‘flourishing’ and ‘dignity’ because together they express special features: a “vibrant, flourishing life occurs when we live in justly ordered relationships with God and with others by recognizing and celebrating our own God-given dignity and that of others.”<sup>5</sup> “Justly ordered relationships” is an apt description of ubuntu. Christlike, ubuntu-motivated churches will seek the dignity and flourishing of all their members and of all the members of their surrounding communities.

We will highlight, through the lens of christological compassion, how ubuntu is lacking in the context of abuse. Ubuntu is the African/Bantu value of “humanness or the quality and essence of being human,”<sup>6</sup> famously expressed by John S. Mbiti as “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”<sup>7</sup>

It implies compassion, open-mindedness, and fraternity; it signifies our mutual involvement in each other’s life. A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirms others, does not feel threatened by others, and is open to doing good for others. Ubuntu is a rich expression of solidarity, participation, and willingness to share with others, to forgive others, and to mutually work together

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<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, 10; emphasis original. For an accessible reproduction of his argument, see also his online article, “Sin: Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be.”

<sup>3</sup> David Kirwa Tarus and Stephanie Lowery, “African Theologies of Identity and Community: The Contributions of John Mbiti, Jesse Mugambi, Vincent Mulago, and Kwame Bediako,” 306.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Christie, “Human flourishing and the environment.”

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth M. Loyer, “Dignity, justice, and flourishing within the human family: Methodist theology and the enrichment of public discourse and life,” 15.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine Chingwala Musopole, *Umunthu Theology: An Introduction*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 141; repeated verbatim on pp. 147, 152, 166, 189, 279, and 293.

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for human and cosmic flourishing through solidarity, community, dialogue, and commitment to peace-building, etc.<sup>8</sup>

Within this article, we will focus on violence against women. This is not to ignore other forms of abuse but rather to offer a critical process we can apply to all forms of abuse. Too often, we rush to establish policies to prevent abuse, but many or even most of those policies are misguided or misapplied or, perhaps more often, are laid aside entirely when we are confronted with specific situations of abuse. Years ago, I, Ruth, was starting on a journey while my husband was away. He usually takes care of mapping our route, and it was not until I was already driving that I realized that I did not know how to get to my destination and had not ensured I had a map to guide me. Similarly, by rushing to prevention before identifying where the church is currently located in our responses to abuse, we do not arrive at the correct destination. Therefore, we must take the time to identify our starting point. That starting point is bias, an ubuntu with exceptions. While ubuntu recognizes that I am because we are, and sees the self in the other, bias says certain people are different and better or worse than others. A person who is biased against another, whether consciously or unconsciously, fails to see the self in that other.<sup>9</sup> Thus the African Church must navigate toward an ubuntu without exceptions so that she may become an effective source of support for abused people and of accountability for abusive people.

Despite thirty years of focused attention from the UN and other organizations, violence against women remains a stark global reality. Abraham and Prabha note, “in this frightening scenario, the angst of the women who are victims of gender-based violence is a global concern.” The abuse of women is an urgent call for ubuntu, but we must lament that thirty years after ubuntu became a formative principle guiding the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa, “one begins to question the whole philosophy of ubuntu, as it cannot be practiced by ignoring the sufferings of women.”<sup>10</sup> How have three decades of global focus on the abuse of women and three decades of ubuntu’s application as a political principle failed so dramatically to decrease violence against women? How can we ensure our application of ubuntu over the next thirty years *does* significantly diminish violence against women?

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<sup>8</sup> Stan Chu Ilo, “Africa’s Place in World Christianity: Towards a Theology of Intercultural Friendship,” 142, footnote 46.

<sup>9</sup> The favoritism condemned as sin in James 2:1–9 can be understood as an anti-ubuntu bias.

<sup>10</sup> Lillykuty Abraham and Krishna V. P. Prabha, “The Angst of the Dehumanized: Ubuntu for Solidarity,” 1.

## Christ, Ubuntu, and the Harassed and Helpless Crowds in Africa Societies Today

As we consider these two questions, let us briefly examine ubuntu's application within the TRC and consider what it offered both to those who benefited from apartheid and to those who suffered from apartheid. Here, Barnard-Naudé's analysis in *Spectres of Reparation* is helpful. As he discusses in depth, what the TRC offered to its two primary foci — oppressor and oppressed — was not equitable. Both received an opportunity for speech: the oppressor received the opportunity for confession, and the oppressed received the opportunity for telling the story of their oppression. However, only one group received a tangible benefit. Though the interim constitution which empowered the TRC itself noted the need for tangible benefit to both parties, it only granted the TRC the authority to tangibly benefit one of the groups: the oppressor, who received amnesty for the harms they had perpetrated and confessed. Though the interim constitution acknowledged the simultaneous need for reparation to the oppressed, it failed to empower the TRC to offer that reparation.<sup>11</sup> The TRC itself acknowledged this failure, stating “reparation is ‘essential to counterbalance amnesty’ in that amnesty denies the victims the right to institute juridical claims against the perpetrators.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, instead of offering amends to those who had been harmed, the TRC further injured them by removing their right to seek legal redress. From this, we can see that when ubuntu has not been applied equitably and without exceptions, when the focus of ubuntu's force becomes the needs and fears of the powerful oppressors over the needs and fears of the vulnerable oppressed, it fails to secure the flourishing of all its members and instead perpetuates suffering.

Jesus offered ubuntu compassion without exceptions toward the vulnerable crowds, whom he characterized as helpless sheep — wandering and leaderless, uncared-for and unwell (Matt 9:36).<sup>13</sup> He recognized the humanity in the oppressed people who were harassed, helpless, and defenseless. It is easy for the traumas of individual members of a crowd to be overlooked and unknown, even to other members of the crowd. However, as Matthew's narrative highlights, Christ continually draws the attention of his listeners, which includes both the crowd situated in his own moment in time and us, who are listening two millennia onward, to the particularities of suffering experienced by individual

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<sup>11</sup> Jaco Barnard-Naudé, *Spectres of Reparation in South Africa: Re-Encountering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. The author discusses this theme throughout the book, see especially the Introduction, pp. 1–32.

<sup>12</sup> Barnard-Naudé, *Spectres of Reparation*, 2; citing “Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa,” in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, volumes 1–7 (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1998), 170 (available at: <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/>).

<sup>13</sup> J. R. C. Cousland, *The Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew*, 86–94.

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members of the crowd. As Kingsbury emphatically states, “time and again, Jesus touches on matters that are alien to the immediate situation of the crowds or the disciples.”<sup>14</sup> That Christ’s ubuntu had no exceptions is highlighted when we contrast his interactions with the crowds with their leaders’ interactions with those same crowds. In Matthew the crowds are depicted within the context of their relationship with their wicked shepherds — the scribes, Pharisees, chief priests, and elders — who mistreat the sheepish crowds,<sup>15</sup> and who criticize Christ precisely *for* offering compassion to the vulnerable. Jesus condemns them for their failure to offer compassion to the vulnerable, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Matt 12:11–12, NIV<sup>16</sup>). They treated their own literal sheep, which enriched them, better than the figurative sheep of the crowds whom God had entrusted to their care as shepherds. The suffering people were exceptions to the leaders’ ubuntu. Verse 14 tells us that Christ’s choice to offer compassion to a suffering man on the Sabbath led the leaders to begin scheming to kill Jesus. Christ had compassion, a vital component of ubuntu, on the vulnerable, which contrasts with and highlights their leaders’ lack of compassion, exposing their wickedness to public scrutiny, and it was this exposure which led them to kill Christ.

Offenders lack the qualities of the “ideal person” that Lesiba Teffo describes “according to the African worldview”: someone who “has the virtue of compassion ... [and can be] judged in terms of [their] relationship with others, for example, [their] record in terms of kindness and good character, generosity, hard work, discipline, honour and respect, and living in harmony.”<sup>17</sup> As the waHangaza of northwestern Tanzania<sup>18</sup> say, *Umuntu niwe yih’ubuntu* [kiHangaza: literally, ‘a human person is the source of humanity’].<sup>19</sup> This proverb teaches that an individual person should first of all offer respect to others in the community before the community offers respect to them. The community will judge each person based on his or her qualities of listening to and affirming others, level of trust and fairness, desire to build a caring

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<sup>14</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story*, 107.

<sup>15</sup> Cousland, *The Crowds in the Gospel of Matthew*, 92. Cf. Sjeff van Tilborg, *The Jewish Leaders in Matthew*, 142–160; and David E. Garland, *The Intention of Matthew* 23, 36–41.

<sup>16</sup> All scripture quotations are taken from NIV-2011.

<sup>17</sup> L. J. Teffo, “The other in African experience,” 103.

<sup>18</sup> The waHangaza are based in Ngara District of Kagera Region in northwestern Tanzania.

<sup>19</sup> In the kiHangaza language, *umuntu* is ‘a human person’; *niwe yih’* can mean ‘is a source’, ‘should be a source’, ‘must give himself or herself’, or ‘how we ought to be’; and *ubuntu* is the state of ‘being human and humane especially in terms of its radical possibility of finding a way of living in the waHangaza society’.

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community, capacity to embody communal responsiveness, and commitment to live together with respect, compassion, and dignity. Ubuntu, then, starts from a person showing that he or she is an *umuntu* with *ubuntu* qualities. Nussbaum explains that ubuntu “is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community.”<sup>20</sup> Broodryk emphasizes “the ‘core’ and ‘associated’ ubuntu values” as “Humanness: warmth, tolerance, understanding, peace, humanity; Caring: empathy, sympathy, helpfulness, charitable, friendliness; Sharing: giving (unconditionally), redistribution, open-handedness; Respect: commitment, dignity, obedience, order; Compassion: love, cohesion, informality, forgiving and spontaneity.”<sup>21</sup> Christ’s ministry in Matthew highlights the offenders’ lack of these qualities and their callousness toward suffering individuals.

The leaders’ inability to look with compassion on the suffering crowds leads them to act in dehumanizing ways towards the sufferers without any recognition that their actions are shameful, but Jesus confronts them with the truth of that shame. Shame<sup>22</sup> is regularly anathematized or ignored in the aftermath of

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Nussbaum, “*Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on Our Common Humanity*,” 21.

<sup>21</sup> Johann Broodryk, *Ubuntu: Life lessons from Africa*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> It is important to discuss Brené Brown here. In her 2010 Ted Talk, “The Power of Vulnerability,” Brené Brown’s definition of the concept of shame vs guilt went viral. Brown argues, “Based on my research and the research of other shame researchers, I believe that there is a profound difference between shame and guilt. I believe that guilt is adaptive and helpful—it’s holding something we’ve done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.

“I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.” Brown, “Shame vs. Guilt.”

Here Brené Brown implies that her findings on shame are universally agreed upon by shame researchers, yet she elides the work of many shame researchers who disagree with her conclusions, as Christopher L. Flanders notes: “such approaches as Brown’s typically overlook the extensive philosophical, theological, and biblical resources that authorize distinct types of constructive shame and ways that moral commitments push against shamelessness.” Flanders, “About-face transformation: Learning to embrace honor, shame, and face,” 317. For example, Brené Brown’s definitions differ from the usage of the words shame and guilt as employed in the criminal justice community and in the abuse community as well as in Barnard-Naudé’s reflections on the TRC. Within the realm of criminal justice, guilt is whether a person has committed actions defined as criminal, not how they feel about such actions. Thus, a person can admit guilt without displaying any remorse or other negative emotion. In fact, some will even convey pride in and/or offer justifications of their actions as

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violence, but a failure to recognize the importance of shame deprives ubuntu of its transformative power for abusers. Bystanders urge victims to be silent about their abuse so as not to shame their abusers yet themselves shame the victims for speaking up. Both Barnard-Naudé and Judith Herman cite Braithwaite's concept of "reintegrative shaming" as a vital component of our response to violence. "In the same way as the TRC, perhaps unwittingly, stigmatized the anger of victims, its ideological context of forgiveness also occluded the value of what the literature refers to as 'reintegrative shaming' ...."<sup>23</sup> This critique of the TRC's "ideological context of forgiveness" is especially relevant for the church as we wrestle with our failure to address abuse. The church has elevated forgiveness to such a degree that it completely overpowers accountability in the context of abuse. Paul himself engaged in what we now call *reintegrative shaming* with the Corinthian church regarding their failure to hold an offender accountable and celebrated its positive effects:

... yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. (2 Cor 7:9-10)<sup>24</sup>

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they acknowledge their guilt. This phenomenon also occurs within the abuse community; for example, my father acknowledged to me that he had had sexual contact with me (Ruth) as a child, but he stated that he did not believe God forbids such actions and deflected blame unto me for behavior he felt justified his actions and unto the "world" for ungodly standards which condemn his actions. Reflecting this, the criminal justice and abuse communities use *guilt* and *shame* differently and use the terms *reintegrative shame* vs *stigmatizing* or *disintegrative shame* or *healthy* vs *toxic shame* where Brené Brown uses the terms *guilt* and *shame*.

It is also important to note that the stigmatization of shame itself has roots in cultural supremacy, as noted by Thomas J. Scheff: "Reflecting the ageism, sexism, and racism of his time, Freud seemed to think that shame was the emotion of children, women, and savages." Scheff, "Shame in Self and Society," 251. Similarly, Flanders notes, "Dividing the world into realms of 'honor-shame' and 'guilt-justice' ultimately proves to be an unfortunate type of Saidian Orientalism, a sophisticated and exoticized form of 'othering.'" Flanders, "About-face transformation," 316.

<sup>23</sup> Barnard-Naudé, *Spectres of Reparation*, 74-76; quote on p. 75; citing John Braithwaite, *Crime, Shame and Reintegration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Braithwaite, "Shame and criminal justice," *Canadian Journal of Criminology* 42, no. 3 (2000): 281-298. See also Judith L. Herman, *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice*, 100-103.

<sup>24</sup> For more Biblical examples of reintegrative shaming, consider the stories of Tamar and Abigail and Nathan (Gen 38; 1 Sam 25; 2 Sam 12). See also Zechariah 12:10, "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn



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This reintegrative shaming should, in the context of “*Ubuntu Justice*,” motivate the perpetrator of abuse to “genuinely commit to treating the victim as an equal, affirming both the humanity and the dignity of the victim.”<sup>25</sup> Jesus calling attention to the shameful of the leaders’ callousness toward the crowds and Paul making space for godly sorrow contrasts sharply with Christian responses which silence and shame victims’ righteous exposure of abuse but which rush to soothe the abusers’ godly sorrow with instant expressions of forgiveness, leaving no space for shame to work.

**Ubuntu versus Bias: two foci**

As we consider how to apply ubuntu within the context of abuse, we must begin with the two-fold question, *Currently, where is the focus of our compassion in the context of abuse, and where should that focus be?* The second is like it: *Where is the focus of our shaming in the context of abuse, and where should that focus be?* Both questions point to the issue of bias. Nicole Bedera’s research is particularly relevant and highlights the obstacle of bias to addressing abuse.<sup>26</sup> Twenty years before the TRC and the Fourth UN Conference on Women cited above, the United States enacted Title IX, a federal civil rights law which prohibits sex-based discrimination and sexual harassment within any educational institution which receives federal funding. Under Title IX, US educational institutions are mandated to investigate and to address claims of sexual harassment and violence against female students and staff and to offer support to those harmed, yet, as Bedera starkly highlights, “It is well-established fact that sexual assault survivors who report the violence they endured are retraumatized by the reporting process.”<sup>27</sup>

Over the course of 12 months, Bedera observed one US university’s Title IX administrators and, through later interviews, established their rationalizations for their decisions. There are two key elements to note. First is that Title IX administrators have a federal mandate to administer justice regarding sexual violence and to support victims, which differs from the TRC, which was

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for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.” A Davidic Psalm declares, “Let a righteous man strike me — that is a kindness; / let him rebuke me — that is oil on my head. / My head will not refuse it, / for my prayer will still be against the deeds of evildoers” (141:5). Proverbs also calls for reintegrative shaming: “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, / but an enemy multiplies kisses” and “Whoever rebukes a person will in the end gain favor / rather than one who has a flattering tongue” (27:6 and 28:23)

<sup>25</sup> Headman S. Ntlapo and Peter White, “*Ubuntu Justice and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission: An African missiological response*,” 1.

<sup>26</sup> While Bedera’s research was undertaken in North American contexts, her findings are relative to contexts here in Africa.

<sup>27</sup> Nicole Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped: Himpathy and Hysteria in Administrator Rationalizations of Institutional Betrayal,” 30.

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empowered only to offer tangible help to oppressors, yet they continue to support perpetrators of sexual violence and to fail to support victims, resulting in “Title IX outcomes that undermine the very goals of Title IX,”<sup>28</sup> “in nearly every case.”<sup>29</sup> Second is that though universities are often centers for gender research and the dismantling of gender myths, those same universities’ administrators employ gender myths in their rationalizations. In every arena, there remains a sharp contradiction between stated beliefs/values and actions in response to abuse. As Bedera noted, “gendered stereotypes can persist and adapt in an environment even when they are stigmatized.”<sup>30</sup> She further explained,

Beyond the university context, gendered biases are central in how we understand (or deny) the realities of sexual violence. Most notably, men’s violence against women is normalized as “not that bad”, while an allegation of sexual assault is considered a threat to a man’s reputation that could “ruin his life.” In this framing, it is men — in the role of perpetrator — who receive society’s sympathy at the expense of survivors’ well-being, a phenomenon Manne calls “himpathy.”<sup>31</sup>

Bedera found that Title IX administrators “manufactured ignorance” of the victims’ perspective, both perpetuated by and resulting in a failure to empathize with the victims, while seeking the perpetrators’ perspective, motivated by and resulting in an empathetic alignment with the abusers. Practically, although a just Title IX decision was “crucial for survivors’ recovery and academic success,” the university perpetrated a near total betrayal of victims and a failure to address gender-based violence on their campus.<sup>32</sup> This not only harms past and current women students and staff, but also will, inevitably, lead to the continuation of gender-based violence and to more women being victimized. This stands in sharp contrast with Jesus, who drew the attention of his listeners to the particularities of the sufferers’ stories, leading to his compassionate engagement. Thus, bias plays a pivotal role in the failure to offer compassionate action in response to abuse.

Often communities fail to acknowledge abuse at all, but many times when they *do* acknowledge abuse, they do immensely more harm than good. Singha and Kanna’s article “Physical Abuse in the Absence of Ubuntu” recognizes that the presence of abuse indicates the absence of ubuntu, and the authors appropriately call for ubuntu in addressing the global abuse crisis: “Ubuntu has not been put into practice to its full potential. It can be successfully applied in

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<sup>28</sup> Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped,” 48.

<sup>29</sup> Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped,” 44.

<sup>30</sup> Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped,” 33.

<sup>31</sup> Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped,” 32; citing Kate Manne, *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women* (New York: Crown, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> Bedera, “I Can Protect His Future, but She Can’t Be Helped,” 49.

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theology, philosophy, management, and other domains.”<sup>33</sup> We join them in this call. However, the authors write in extremely dehumanizing ways about victims of abuse, describing them and abusers as “wild creatures” and claiming that victims will become abusers unless professionals intervene. Ironically, they recognize that a refusal to listen to victims is a failure to respond to them with humanity and thus with ubuntu and yet they advocate against listening to victims’ stories, prefacing this advice by claiming, “Being human, for example, may not be necessary for every situation.”<sup>34</sup> Their assertion that victims will necessarily become abusers themselves and perpetuate a cycle of abuse is a common but deeply harmful victim-blaming myth.<sup>35</sup> The logic of this myth is

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<sup>33</sup> Ranjit Singha and Yogesh S. Kanna, “Physical Abuse in the Absence of Ubuntu,” 1–2. They further correctly note that “if *ubuntu* begins to be practiced, the hegemonic masculinity that considers it normal for women to be treated as objects will be broken;” p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Singha and Kanna, “Physical Abuse in the Absence of Ubuntu,” 3. This assertion is so horrendous that context should be provided: “Being human, for example, may not be necessary for every situation. Narrating abuse-based stories is a form of emotionally abusing someone with the same intensity as when the incident occurred; it is an emotional release for the abused person, but they transfer the same emotion with which they were abused. When an abused person tells the same story to multiple people on occasion, they enjoy sharing the same feeling with others. It is not recommended to listen to abuse stories if you are not trained to do so. As a human, there is a possibility that you might want to hear and give advice, but it’s not a good idea because if you are not a professional, it could make you feel the same way as the other person who experienced the abuse when it occurred to them.” Singha and Kanna, “Physical Abuse in the Absence of Ubuntu,” 3. This is incredibly harmful in multiple ways. They, like many others, say that sharing the story of abuse is itself emotional abuse and that victims “enjoy sharing” their feelings “with” others (with the strong implication not of *sharing with* but of *inflicting on*). Have they asked victims if they “enjoy” sharing their stories? Victims share their stories not to inflict their pain on others but rather to plead for help . . . and for empathy. Victims’ sharing their stories is *not* emotional abuse and labeling it as abuse is horrifying. In addition, telling people not to listen to victims unless they are professionals is immensely stigmatizing, communicating that victims are “unclean” and will contaminate others. Jesus refused to comply with such stigmas, as seen in his willingness to touch lepers (ref. Matt 8:2–3, Mark 1:40–42). Finally, arguing that there is no need to “be human” with victims who are sharing their stories is exactly the kind of exception to ubuntu that we are arguing against. We absolutely *must* “be human” with victims of abuse who are themselves humans and not “wild creatures” as they argue.

<sup>35</sup> Singha and Kanna, “Physical Abuse in the Absence of Ubuntu,” 2. This stigma deeply impacted me, Ruth. It convinced me that I was destined to either become an abuser or to marry an abuser simply because I had been a victim of abuse. I focused my undergraduate and graduate studies on Literature, Psychology, and Christian Doctrine, specifically and solely because I was desperately searching for a way to escape

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completely belied by the abuses of colonization and apartheid. Did abusive white colonizers start their lives as oppressed and colonized Africans and was it their pain at being colonized that made them become colonizers? Of course not. To suggest that victims of abuse become abusers unless a professional helps them stop abusing is illogical, offensive, and harmful to victims. Ironically, it serves to stigmatize victims while serving to excuse and minimize the brutality of the abusers by suggesting they are only abusive because they themselves had been victimized. This article is of especial concern because it was the first article listed on a Google Scholar search of *ubuntu* and *abuse*. In a context where scholars have limited resources and better papers are behind a high paywall, open-access articles such as this will have an undue influence.<sup>36</sup> The article, unfortunately, accurately reflects deeply-rooted and wide-spread biases.

**Navigating a Correlation Between Ubuntu and Christological Compassion for the Abused**

Ubuntu enriched by christological compassion has value for undermining bias where biases are recognized and actively dismantled in every aspect of human engagement. God's heart always overflows with compassion for all his people, and that compassion is especially embodied in God's care for those who are suffering. Compassion, in its literal sense, means 'to suffer with.' This is demonstrated in the compassion of Jesus himself. In a third Matthean sheep passage, 25:31–46, Jesus tells his listeners that their treatment of the most vulnerable *is* their treatment of himself. Thus, when they cause or fail to alleviate the suffering of the most vulnerable, they are causing or continuing Christ's own suffering. God's intention is to establish Jesus as the climax of his compassion for mankind. Christ's radical compassion generated an imperative to act. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus's miracles extended to the lame, the lost, and the helpless. He manifested compassion through word and deed, as ultimately seen in him becoming a sacrifice on the hill of Golgotha. Unfortunately, the idea of acting on behalf of the abused and traumatized, a clear mandate of both ubuntu and the Christian gospel, has been watered down within the church. It is fading away as churches continually fail to faithfully engage the issue of abuse. Our responses to abuse must move beyond words to include deeds. Zylla's words are

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that destiny. Often, when I have experienced interpersonal conflict and sought help from pastors or other mentors, including trained counselors, they have automatically believed I was the cause of the conflict simply because I was an abuse victim and therefore destined to become an abuser, and no amount of evidence to the contrary changed their biased and unfounded view of me. This has greatly hindered my flourishing. People must stop perpetuating this stigma.

<sup>36</sup> As of March 2025, according to Google Scholar, this article has been cited twelve times. We can only hope that it has been cited critically and not used to support dangerous stigmas.

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well-timed for both the ubuntu-embracing communities and the church in Africa:

Telling people that they are not alone in their suffering is not enough. We must demonstrate our care through the act of showing up in their lives. At its core, ministry to the suffering means coming near in their time of grave concern and anguish. The activity that we must generate as the compassionate community of God is the capacity to discern where the greatest needs are and simply to show up. In this way we dispel the dark cloud of abandonment and rejection, enabling suffering persons to experience themselves as loved and cared for by others.<sup>37</sup>

McNeill, Morrison, and Nouwen emphasize that compassion is “the center of Christian life” and “is not a gesture of sympathy or pity for those who fail to make it in the upward pull. On the contrary, compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there.”<sup>38</sup> The church is called to *enact* Christlike compassion for the vulnerable.

Our intentions shape the actions we choose, so we must ensure that our intention in responding to abuse is rooted in compassion, a desire to alleviate the suffering of the abused and traumatized, and not in bias. A longing for compassion stands at the base of the radical cry for justice. Therefore, as ubuntu informs us, our intention should arise from a recognition of the essence of human dignity in our common humanity. As Davies asserts, “an analysis of the intentionality of compassion gives access to the very structure of consciousness itself, and thus provides a resource for articulating a new language of being.”<sup>39</sup> This language of *being human* brings ubuntu to the fore, drawing a parallel to the larger christological compassion, reminding us that all humanity is made in the image of God. God is the source of our humanity and the power of the gospel. This offers a deeper perspective on being human and necessitates a fresh look at ubuntu as a theological and moral virtue an individual possesses. Ubuntu’s theological connotations are supported by the African worldview which affirms that “life, relationships, participation and community are holistic realities, blending the spiritual and the material organically.”<sup>40</sup> As we care for the abused and traumatized in Africa, we must apply ubuntu not merely as a humanitarian principle but as a reflection of the image of God. As Magesa reminds us, Christian compassion

makes explicit the absolute value of the individual person. Created

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<sup>37</sup> Phil C. Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow: A pastoral theology of suffering*, 173.

<sup>38</sup> Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison, and Henri J. Nouwen, *Compassion: A reflection on the Christian life*, 8, 27.

<sup>39</sup> Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition*, 20.

<sup>40</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, 182.

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in the image and likeness of God and imbued with divine breath, a person has value in and for him — or herself. One's value and dignity as a human person are not given by nor do they flow from one's community. They originate from God's own self. . . . People cannot begin to grow toward the full stature of their dignity as the image of God unless it leads them to community.<sup>41</sup>

Ubuntu is rooted in each person's value as a unique embodiment of the image of God and is expressed through the interconnectedness of community.

This sense of community God intends for his people resonates well with what is expected of the community which embraces ubuntu. A Christian can love relationally and be moved by compassion grounded on the virtues of ubuntu. In both the Christian theological perspective and the ubuntu community, a person (*umuntu*) is expected to move towards the suffering of others with active help. This active help is meant to be a unique engagement of personal encounter rather than a shallow transaction. The *umuntu's* compassion must bear lasting fruits, in our case, for the abused and traumatized. As Mayeroff writes,

When the other [*umuntu*] is with me, I feel I am not alone, I feel understood, not in some detached way but because I feel [*umuntu*] knows what it is like to be me. I realize that [the caring *umuntu*] wants to see me as I am, not in order to pass judgment on me, but to help me. I do not have to conceal myself by trying to appear better than I am; instead I can open myself up [allowing *umuntu* to] get close to me, and thereby [offer assistance] for [the caring *umuntu*] to help me.<sup>42</sup>

We can see the sharp contrast here between this description and Beder's description above of the biased response to women victims of sexual assault and with Singha and Kanna's warnings against interacting with victims as humans. From Mayeroff's testimony, the picture drawn from 'the other' is that *umuntu's* unwavering decision to act arises from ubuntu itself which expresses that a human person is a person through other persons. We all need each other. No one exists in isolation; rather, we hold together our diversity and care for each other. Similarly, Mayeroff's description speaks to the human capacity, under God's help, to act on behalf of the abused and to commit to sustained support for the sufferers until their suffering is alleviated. It also speaks to the Christian's respect for God, who is the beginning of our humanity. As Grenz aptly suggests, "the affirmation that God is the origin of our essential humanity means that God is the source of value for all creation. Neither other human beings nor the human community has the ultimate prerogative to determine the value of

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<sup>41</sup> Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 194.

<sup>42</sup> Milton Mayeroff, *On Caring*, 31; recall that *umuntu* means 'human person' in many Bantu languages and shares a common root with *ubuntu*.

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anyone or anything that God has made.”<sup>43</sup> Thus as Christians, we should base our actions in response to abuse on God’s affirmation of the humanity of the victims and not on human biases.

**Exploring the Impact of Bias**

An examination of the Church’s responses to abuse reveals biases toward abusers and against victims, leading to her failure to act compassionately on the victims’ behalf — ubuntu is withheld from victims but an incomplete ubuntu stripped of shame is offered to abusers. This is a global phenomenon<sup>44</sup> which is evident in Christian responses to various forms of abuse from the breaking of abuse allegations against Christian leaders to the acknowledgement of wrongdoing by those same Christian leaders.<sup>45</sup> Churches quickly dismiss

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<sup>43</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 131.

<sup>44</sup> For example, in a conversation with scholars in West Africa, I (Ruth) asked what churches were doing to address child molestations. One of the responses was that they encourage wives to give husbands more sex. This shows a lack of empathy for wives who, for example, could naturally be expected to feel disgust rather than desire in response to their husband’s sexual interest in children, while aligning empathetically with the flawed perspective that male sexual desire is an intrinsic need which cannot be mediated with self-control but must be satisfied. Similarly, many sayings reveal a bias against women, as in the Tsonga proverb, “*Ku teka nsati I ku hoxa nyoka exinkwameni* [‘to marry is to put a snake in one’s handbag’]” which depicts women as seductresses/serpents who are the enemy of men, such that it becomes natural for men to perpetrate violence against women; Magezi E. Baloyi, “Wife beating amongst Africans as a challenge to pastoral care,” 4; citing Henri Phillippe Junod, *The Wisdom of Tsonga* (Braamfontein: South Africa: Sasavona Publishers, 1990), 181.

<sup>45</sup> Christian responses to perpetrators’ ‘apologies’, which are usually vague and misleading, demonstrate this bias. These apologies are prioritized and celebrated over victim revelations of abuse, which, by contrast, face intense condemnation. This prioritizing of abuser apologies was poignantly captured in a video released on social media in which even after a victim confronted the pastor who raped her, interrupting his misleading apology, and even after the pastor acknowledged the truth of her allegations, many church members gathered around the pastor to pray for him, while they largely ignored the victim. (See, e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ax-FK2KWpks>). This bias is also seen in the common sympathetic response from male Christian leaders to a revelation that another male Christian leader perpetrated clergy sexual abuse, ‘There but for the grace of God go I.’ This communicates to victims that other Christian leaders empathize with the perpetrator and could even envision themselves as the perpetrator. As Kyle Howard notes, “A healthy response from someone who has been made aware of abuse is not a consideration of how they could be like the abuser, but rather a connection with the abused.” He adds, “Connecting the refrain “it could’ve been me” with the abuser rather than with the victim is a massive red flag to the vulnerable and is a profoundly unhealthy outlook on the part of those with power. Howard, “Ministry leaders’ rush to empathize with Ravi Zacharias is beyond alarming.”

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allegations of abuse by leaders and fail in their responsibility to investigate those allegations, as in the case of Ravi Zacharias. By contrast, churches are quick to believe allegations against the vulnerable among us. For example, the leaders of a Kenyan church I, Ruth, attended immediately removed a young woman from her role as a Sunday School teacher after she became pregnant. In addition, the church excluded her from dedicating her baby to God alongside the other new parents. However, when I spoke to her about what happened, she told me she had been date-raped. Because the church acted to remove her from her position without ever asking her what had happened, she never had the opportunity to reveal the rape, and she felt they would not have believed her even had she tried to tell them. They had already decided what they believed had happened. That betrayal deeply harmed her, and she left the church. The church failed to view her through the perspective of ubuntu, instead viewing her through bias, and thus failed to act toward her suffering with Christian compassion. By contrast, that same church failed to remove a battering husband from his role as a greeter and MC even after he broke his wife's ribs. Both in our failure to acknowledge and investigate the allegations of abuse by Christian men, especially leaders, and in our quick condemnation without investigation of vulnerable women, we are displaying bias and are failing to display ubuntu and to embody Christ's compassionate alignment with sufferers.

Our bias toward abusers has an impact on victims. As Judith Herman notes, "The wounds of trauma are not merely those caused by the perpetrators of violence and exploitation; the actions or inactions of bystanders — all those who are complicit in or who prefer not to know about the abuse or who blame the victims — often cause even deeper wounds."<sup>46</sup> Thus, it is not only the offender's violent injustice but also the bystander's callous and unjust indifference which must be repaired in the aftermath of abuse. Herman's initial work looking at complex trauma proposed three stages of trauma recovery for victims:<sup>47</sup>

1. Establishing safety, which includes recovering their agency.
2. Mourning and making meaning of the past.
3. Refocusing on the present and regaining a vision for the future.

In her later work, she writes that she began to envision a fourth and final stage of trauma recovery:

4. Justice.

She explores this final stage in *Truth and Repair*, asking victims of abuse what justice looks like to them. Often, victims are perceived as bitter and vindictive,

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<sup>46</sup> Judith L. Herman, *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 8–9. Herman uses the common phrases "establishing safety" and "making meaning."



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yet Herman found that most victims had little desire for retribution.<sup>48</sup> Instead, what victims most longed for was acknowledgement of the wrongdoing *from their communities*.<sup>49</sup> Instead of vindictiveness, Herman found a deep desire for vindication: “They want bystanders to take a stand, recognize that a wrong has been done, and unambiguously denounce the crime,” to offer “assurances ... that they did not deserve to be abused.”<sup>50</sup> Although bystanding communities often assure victims with their words that the victims are not to blame for their own abuse, the bystanders’ thoughts and their actions continue to place the entire weight of shame on the victims. The deep longing of victims of abuse is for their communities to see them through the lens of ubuntu and to be moved by a deep christological compassion to alleviate their suffering and to shift the target of shaming from the victims of the abuse to the perpetrators of the abuse. In short, victims “want the burden of shame lifted from their shoulders and placed on the shoulders of the perpetrators, where it belongs.”<sup>51</sup> As a mantra of the MeToo movement declares, *Shame must change sides*.<sup>52</sup>

Although victims rarely pursue legal justice, their reasons when they do are significant to this discussion. Herman found that the motivation is rarely to see the perpetrator suffer but rather to see potential future victims protected. This is ubuntu. Victims of abuse recognize other vulnerable people as potential future victims who must be protected by their act of compassionate accountability toward the abuser,<sup>53</sup> and they seek legal justice from a desire to prevent suffering, not from a desire to inflict suffering. Yet as Herman explored, judicial responses to gender-based violence ignore the legitimate needs of victims, instead focusing on the perceived needs of the perpetrator. Thus, victims often become mere witnesses and even targets of attack in judicial cases about their own abuse rather than the central figures.<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, this focus on perpetrators of abuse is seen in both retributive justice responses and in

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<sup>48</sup> Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 97.

<sup>49</sup> Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 69.

<sup>50</sup> Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 76.

<sup>51</sup> Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 76.

<sup>52</sup> The French motto *La honte doit changer de camp* (‘Shame must change sides’), first used in the 1970s, emphasizes that it is abusers and rapists, and not their victims, who should be ashamed. At least as early as 2013, protesters in Paris carried placards declaring that “La honte doit changer de camp [French: ‘Shame must change sides’];” e.g., see “Des marches pour que « la honte change de camp » [‘Marches so that ‘shame changes sides’].” This motto, in both English and French, has since been frequently adopted across social media, journalistic news reports, and academia.

<sup>53</sup> Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 97.

<sup>54</sup> This is starkly evidenced in cases involving domestic violence, where protective mothers who were themselves battered by their husbands can lose their parental rights to their children in favor of their abusers through the very process of trying to protect their children from their abusive father.

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restorative justice efforts inspired by the TRC's enactment of the ubuntu principle. Herman cites Howard Zehr's reflections upon his restorative justice work, "In my earlier work with prisoner defendants, I had not understood the perspectives of victims. Indeed, I did not want to, for they served primarily as interference in the process of finding "justice" for the offender."<sup>55</sup> This echoes Bedera's research, which found that both Title IX administrators *and* victim advocates ignored and minimized the needs of the victims themselves, with administrators insisting victims were so broken they could not be helped, and victim advocates insisting victims were so strong they needed no help, and neither acknowledging that help would be transformative and healing for victims.<sup>56</sup> This was also seen in South Africa when Mbeki depicted freedom as the full embodiment of reparation for the victims, even though it was clear that the victims were continuing to suffer the effects of the violence perpetrated against them within the apartheid system. Barnard-Naudé quotes Saleci, "the discourse of universal human rights *strives to produce the impression that the object has already been attained,*"<sup>57</sup> implying that nothing more is needed and thus failing to recognize the more which *is* needed. In applying ubuntu and Christian compassion in response to abuse, we must not only ensure that the immediate abuse stops but also that the on-going needs of the present victims are met and that potential future victims are protected.

**African Church – Called to Live as The Image-Bearers of God, Modeling Christ's Compassion**

The church is called to embody the gospel model of compassion through a radical orientation of care for those who are abused and suffering, and only in fulfilling this calling will she be a city on a hill in our different African cultures in our time. When the Church in Africa fully embraces ubuntu and christological compassion to meet the abuse crisis within and around her, this will dynamically transform society. Christ has called the church as an institution to respond to the needs of both its own members and the world, to respond "in Christian mission to the realities of our own generation."<sup>58</sup> The church must do so faithfully, serving as a passionate and compassionate witness to Christ's love. Unfortunately, this is contrary to what is happening today whereby the Church has tended to close her eyes even to relatively simple matters like, from my, Alfred's, experience, the abuse of domestic servants by church members. This is contrary to Matthew's christological compassion which shows how sending Jesus into the world formed the climax of God's compassion. When the church

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<sup>55</sup> Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 104.

<sup>56</sup> Bedera, "I Can Protect His Future, but She Can't Be Helped," 41–44.

<sup>57</sup> Barnard-Naudé, *Spectres of Reparation*, 211; emphasis original.

<sup>58</sup> *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action: The Third Lausanne Congress*, 8.

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in Africa, which should be an ubuntu-embracing community, fails to value ubuntu as a resource for meeting the needs of the abused, it fails to “underscore the values of God’s sovereign rule, namely truth and truthfulness, peace and reconciliation, with dignity of each and all, and justice, compassion-mercy-sacrificial love.”<sup>59</sup> This indicates a limited sense of compassion, an ubuntu with exceptions, and a failure to hold a vision for an abuse-free Africa. George Kinoti quotes John Stott to help us understand what this vision should be:

Vision is a deep dissatisfaction with what is and a clear grasp of what could be. Vision begins with indignation over the status quo, and it grows into the earnest quest for an alternative. This combination we find in Jesus who was indignant over disease and death, and the hunger of the people, for he perceived these things as alien to the purpose of God.<sup>60</sup>

Without such a vision, the church cannot enable believers to see Christ within vulnerable others nor inspire them to actively care for these vulnerable people.

Jesus was an active, participatory, and compassionate bystander to sufferers, in contrast to the church’s common stance as a passive, disinterested, and callous bystander to abuse in her midst and in the world around her. The church’s failure to address abuse stems from her failure to hold a vision for the complete deliverance of the abused. Bystanders falsely envision the ending of the initial abuse or the separation of the victim and abuser as the terminus of the victim’s suffering. When victims assert that the abuse itself and/or the effects of the abuse are still ongoing and seek community support, bystanders see this as victims maintaining a ‘victim mentality’. Yet victims continue to face many challenges after the formal ending of abusive relationships, which may include harm to their sense of self, loss of support, and ongoing abuse.<sup>61</sup> Seeking counseling to repair the harm adds to the burden with significant financial and time requirements, and often counseling is simply inaccessible for victims. Many victims also carry an ongoing burden of concern and grief for potential future victims when perpetrators remain or even advance in positions which give them access to other vulnerable people. Thus, churches must hold a vision not only for the severing of abusive relationships, but also for the alleviation of the current victim’s suffering and the prevention of future victims. In addition, the Church must do the work to dismantle its biases and victim stigmatization and become an environment in which victims are able to fully develop or repair

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<sup>59</sup> John S. Pobee, “Good news Turned by Native hands, Turned by Native Hatchet and Tended with Native Earth — A History of Theological Education in Africa,” 24.

<sup>60</sup> George Kinoti, *Hope for Africa and What the Christian Can Do*, 68.

<sup>61</sup> For example, battering husbands often continue to threaten and harass and even physically harm or kill their former wives and children after divorce. Churches contribute to the ongoing abuse when they shame and/or retaliate against a battered woman for divorcing her husband.

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their sense of self. According to Desmond Tutu, “in ubuntu theology, personhood is formed ultimately through the church as the church witnesses to the world that God is the one who loves human identities into being.”<sup>62</sup> Looking back toward the TRC, we see how the TRC’s vision and intention for particular sufferers did not extend beyond the ending of the abuse itself, which left the sufferers without the help they desperately needed to recover. Significantly, the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) begins only after the violence has ended. The Church must offer compassionate support to victims even after the abuse has ended, lest Jesus condemn us as he condemned the leaders who passed by the wounded man.<sup>63</sup>

Churches as bystanding communities also fail to respond appropriately to abusers. Jesus communicated to the Jewish leaders that he found their failure to compassionately care for the needs of the suffering people shameful, yet churches fail to communicate that abuse is shameful and repulsive to us. As Herman says, reintegrative shaming “embraces an apparent contradiction; it envisions public rebuke and disgrace as a means not to humiliate and stigmatize harm-doers but rather to recognize their humanity and invite them to engage in repair.”<sup>64</sup> This is ubuntu in action. For us to fully recognize ourselves in the other, to recognize our own humanity in the humanity of those around us, we must recognize the ethical and moral failures that are part of our shared humanity and face the specific manifestations of those failures. Our expressions of ubuntu must make space for godly sorrow through our reintegrative shaming of abusers and our comforting of victims. Reflecting on the TRC, Barnard-Naudé writes, “Shame as an ethical orientation towards the Other was never really properly dealt with in the amnesty process and thus remains part of the unfinished business of the TRC.”<sup>65</sup> He asserts, “First, it is crucial that shame felt by the *victim* in connection with the offence must be removed,” and “second, the victim’s shame can only be removed if ‘all the shame connected with the crime is accepted by the offender’.”<sup>66</sup> It is vital to understand this also in the context of abuse. The victim’s shame is a shame which *cannot* accomplish the

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 44.

<sup>63</sup> Psalm 40:2–3 says “He lifted me out of the slimy pit, / out of the mud and mire; / he set my feet on a rock / and gave me a firm place to stand. / He put a new song in my mouth, / a hymn of praise to our God. / Many will see and fear the LORD / and put their trust in him.” It is not enough to lift the victim from the slimy pit. We must ensure that they have a firm place to stand and that their legs are not still shaky from their struggle to escape. We must walk alongside them until their tears of suffering truly transform into spontaneous songs of praise.

<sup>64</sup> Herman, *Truth and Repair*, 102.

<sup>65</sup> Barnard-Naudé, *Spectres of Reparation*, 64.

<sup>66</sup> Barnard-Naudé, *Spectres of Reparation*, 76; emphasis original; quoting Thomas J. Scheff, “Community Conferences: Shame and Anger in Therapeutic Jurisprudence,” *Revista Juridica Universidad de Puerto Rico* 67, no. 1 (1998): 97–120, 105.

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purpose of godly sorrow: repentance that leads to different choices and the discontinuation of the offense, *because it was never the victim's choice nor their offense*. The shame that is placed on the victim is, therefore, an impotent shame. It cannot produce its purpose.<sup>67</sup> However, when we remove the shame from the victim and place the shame on the perpetrator through the process of reintegrative shaming and not disintegrative shaming, that shame *can* accomplish its purpose, *because it was the perpetrator's choice and their offense*. The shame that is placed on the perpetrator is, therefore, a potent shame. It can produce within the perpetrator different choices and the discontinuation of the offense if we allow enough space for that shame to work before moving to forgiveness.

### **Conclusion**

The Church must pursue a robust understanding and application of ubuntu as a vital value for addressing abuse and trauma in Africa today. She must recover the dynamic and transformative link that exists between ubuntu and the call for believers to respond to the needs of the world, especially for the abused, harassed, and helpless — for all those experiencing trauma in our African communities. We have built toward this end by studying Matthew 9:35–36 and 12:11–13, observing the richness of ubuntu affirmed in the gospel. Living in the community that God has established and called us to — that is, living a common life woven together with Christ — requires us to embody an ubuntu without exceptions. If well interpreted, refined by the gospel, conformed to biblical truth, and redeemed by the church, ubuntu has the potential to create an impetus for caring for the abused.

The Church's starting point for our journey toward addressing abuse is bias. As Christians we prefer to assume we are starting from a place of concern for victims and condemnation of abuse, and it is difficult to acknowledge that this is *not* the Church's starting point. Zylla writes,

Dread, not compassion, is the natural response to the suffering of the afflicted. Our acknowledgment of the innate resistance to

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<sup>67</sup> Growing up in an abusive family, I (Ruth) remember asking my parents many times what I needed to change so that they would stop abusing me. I would listen and work hard to change what they told me to change, but none of that change stopped the abuse. That led me to a deep despair. Eventually, I came to recognize that changing myself could not change the abuse, because the abuse was rooted in my parents' choices and not my own. Only then did I begin to recognize how much shame the community itself placed on my shoulders and how resistant the community was to me trying to place the shame where it belonged. Victims face intense pressure to continue to carry the shame, and it can be very difficult for victims to withstand that pressure. I believe that this resistance is rooted in a rightful recognition that part of the shame belongs on the community for failing to respond well to abuse.

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suffering is an important step in reforming compassionate ministry. If we lull ourselves into the conviction that we are intuitively caring, we will miss much of the opportunity for compassion. In fact, suffering repels us and calls up an inner resistance that is a more natural response to suffering and affliction.”<sup>68</sup>

If anyone claims to be without the sin of bias regarding abuse, they deceive themselves and the truth is not in them. (1 John 1:8)<sup>69</sup> We must realize that we stand across a vast river from the victim. That river’s current rushes with myths, victim-blaming attitudes, and sympathy for the powerful which pull us away from the victim and toward the abuser. The current pulls us to seek out information which feeds these biases. Regarding victims, we look for reasons they deserved the abuse, but regarding abusers, we look for reasons to justify or minimize their choice to abuse. If we are not aware of the current and are not equipped to resist it, even though we start out with the intention of embodying ubuntu for victims, we *will* be pulled toward betraying victims “in almost every case” as Bedera found. We *will* convince ourselves that we *do* support victims of abuse, but each victim we encounter will become *the* exception who deserved the abuse. Instead, we must cling to the truth that nobody deserves abuse and nothing justifies abuse.

As Bedera demonstrated, this current pulls even those of us in academia, and that extends to theological academia. Though we have begun to center the voices of the marginalized in theological discussions regarding their specific contexts, we still regularly exclude victim voices when we engage in theological discussions regarding abuse. We must center victim voices and perspectives in our theological discussions about abuse, and our initiatives to address abuse in the church must be victim-led. Thus, to address the abuse crisis in the church, we, including those of us in academia, must first identify the exceptions to our ubuntu. We *are* being pulled to offer an ubuntu with exceptions, which fails to see ourselves in the vulnerable other, an ubuntu stripped of its Christological power to convict the powerful other.<sup>70</sup> In the rush of this current, we must find

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<sup>68</sup> Zylla, *The Roots of Sorrow*, 27.

<sup>69</sup> Even I, Ruth, as a victim myself, feel a strong pull to disbelieve other victims.

<sup>70</sup> Russell Meeks suggested two main causes of this failure, both of which speak to bias as well as to a failure of ubuntu and of Christian compassion. First, he suggests, we can’t believe that one of our own leaders could have committed such abuse, though we could see other’s leaders doing so. We are refusing to see the full humanity of our leaders by failing to see their ethical failures, and we are failing to see the full humanity of the other leaders by ascribing to them some quality which makes them inherently more susceptible to ethical failures. Second, he suggests that to recognize the ethical failures of our leaders would be to recognize that we ourselves are imperfect, because we did not spot signs of abuse in that leader. Instead, it becomes easier to see the victim as

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ways to hold onto an ubuntu without exceptions which retains its power to convict and transform the abuser while centering and empowering the victim.

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