

## BELIEFS ABOUT CHRIST IN SOUTH AFRICA'S LARGEST INDIGENOUS CHURCH

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With an estimated membership of around seven million people the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) is the largest church in southern Africa. ZCC members wearing their church badges – a five point metal star on a green piece of cloth – are a familiar sight in South African towns and cities, especially in the northern part of the country. Every year during the Good Friday / Easter weekend the ZCC is in the news because hundreds of thousands of members travel to the church's headquarters at Morija City for the Easter celebrations.

The ZCC is led by Bishop Barnabas Lekganyane. He plays a very important role in the life of the church and the faith of his followers. Wherever the bishop goes, he is followed by a large crowd of followers. His picture adorns the walls of many homes. His name is used in the prayers of his followers. His spiritual power is believed to be enormous.

Missiologists have long debated whether the ZCC's beliefs and practices constitute a legitimate form of Christianity. A core question concerns the Christology of the ZCC. Does the Lord Jesus Christ function as Lord and Saviour in the faith of ZCC members? Or has Bishop Lekganyane practically replaced Him as Messiah? If the latter were true the ZCC would, in missiological terms, be called a *messianic* church – a church in which the leader functions as a kind of present-day messiah.

Allan Anderson, author of various publications on African Independent Churches, has denied that this is the case. Although he concedes that Bishop Lekganyane is an extremely important figure in the church, he judges that the bishop does not in any sense replace or supersede Jesus Christ in the perceptions of ZCC members. He reports that during ZCC services "Jesus Christ was given pre-eminence as the universal Lord, both in singing and dancing."<sup>2</sup> He also states that in official ZCC literature Bishop Lekganyane is not given messianic titles or divine status.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Allan Anderson, *Zion and Pentecost: The Spirituality and Experience of Pentecostal and Zionist/Apostolic Churches in South Africa* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2000), 228.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, *Zion and Pentecost*, 227.

In this presentation I will challenge Anderson's statements. My methods of research are similar to Anderson's (interviews with ZCC people, studying ZCC publications), but I probably had access to more issues of the ZCC's official magazine, the *ZCC Messenger*. This magazine is published three times a year. Articles are written in various languages, mostly in Sepedi (Northern Sotho) and English. I should mention that I have learned to read and speak Sepedi during my work as a missionary in Soshanguve, South Africa, from 1989 to 2004. During that time I also did my initial research into the beliefs and practices of African churches, including those of the ZCC.<sup>4</sup> The present article uses some of that initial research but has been updated through analysis of articles that have been published in *The ZCC Messenger* during the last decade.<sup>5</sup>

### ZION CHRISTIAN CHURCH: INTRODUCTION

In 2010 the ZCC celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Official documents of the church claim that the church was founded in 1910 by Rev. Engenas Lekganyane, the grandfather of the current bishop.<sup>6</sup> It is believed that in that year Lekganyane had a spiritual experience which he interpreted as a divine call.<sup>7</sup> Afterwards he functioned as an evangelist, minister and bishop in various churches. In 1924 Lekganyane seceded and formed his own church, the Zion Christian Church.<sup>8</sup>

The word *Zion* needs some explanation. It has nothing to do with Zionism but rather reflects a connection to Zion City, Illinois. This town was established in 1901 by John Alexander Dowie who reigned as apostle over a movement called the Christian Catholic Church in Zion. Dowie's movement came out of the North American Holiness movement and emphasized divine healing and baptism of adult believers by triple immersion. In 1904 one of Dowie's associates, Daniel Bryant, arrived in South Africa. He baptized hundreds of converts and had a

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<sup>4</sup> See A.J. de Visser, *Kyrios and Morena: The Lordship of Christ and African Township Christianity* (Th.D. dissertation, University of Potchefstroom, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Copies of *The ZCC Messenger* are not for sale and are not made available to outsiders. Through informal contacts in Soshanguve I have been able to gather and collect 36 issues of the magazine.

<sup>6</sup> *The ZCC Messenger*, # 76 (Easter 2010), 5.

<sup>7</sup> The *ZCC Family Bible* (published by the ZCC in 1995) has a historical section which reports: "In 1910, the founder of ZCC had a vision and calling. He then went to Rev. Mahlangu of Zion Apostolic Church. In 1912 Rev. Engenas became a member of Zion Apostolic Church."

<sup>8</sup> This must be the reason that 1924 is mentioned as the founding year of the ZCC as well, e.g. on pictures of bishop Edward Lekganyane (father of the current bishop) which are still hanging on the walls of many older ZCC members. The text under the picture says: "With compliments from Zion Christian Church. Founded in 1924 by Rev. E.B. Lekganyane. Successor: E.E. Lekganyane." Overviews of the history of the ZCC are offered in various sources, e.g. E.K. Lukhaimane, "The Zion Christian Church of Ignatius (Engenas) Lekganyane, 1924-1948: an African experiment with Christianity" (M.A. thesis, University of the North, Pietersburg, 1980), and Allan Anderson, *Zion and Pentecost*, 68-72.

significant influence on leaders of young African churches. Many of these churches added the designation 'Zion' to their names and continued to focus on healing rituals.

Another significant influence on the early African churches was the Pentecostal movement. In 1908, soon after the beginning of the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, Pentecostal missionaries arrived in South Africa. They introduced speaking in tongues and prophesying. These practices have been retained in modified form in African Zionist churches. With the passing of time various African churches developed and moved in slightly different directions. Opinions are divided on the question whether these churches may be called Pentecostal churches.

Under Lekganyane's leadership the Zion Christian Church grew at an amazing pace. The main attraction of his ministry was the miracles he performed, mostly healing miracles. The centenary issue of *The ZCC Messenger* (Easter 2010) contains a number of reports by elderly members of the ZCC who remember miracles that were performed by Lekganyane in the 1940s. Most of these miracles were healings but there are a few reports of rain-making and raising dead animals back to life as well. An example:

"One day bishop Engenas Lekganyane did a miracle in the presence of Mr. Ngobeza and his friends. They had found a dead dove, and it was confirmed that it was really dead. Engenas told them to bring the dove to him so that he could bring it back to life. He prayed for the dove, it came back to life and sat down in the top of a tree. Engenas preached to them about the things of heaven."<sup>9</sup>

Engenas Lekganyane died in 1948. A leadership struggle between his two sons Edward and Joseph resulted in the church being split in two parts. Edward's church became the largest and is today called the Zion Christian Church. Under Edward's leadership the church continued to grow remarkably.<sup>10</sup> This continued after Edward's death (1967) when his son Barnabas (also called Ramarumo) took over. In 1995 the ZCC claimed that its membership stood at 7 million, spread over various countries in southern Africa.<sup>11</sup> According to the South African population census of 2001 Zionist Christian churches had just under four million members.<sup>12</sup> Adding to this the membership in other countries in southern Africa and ten more years of growth, the total membership of the ZCC today could indeed be around seven million.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *The ZCC Messenger*, # 76 (Easter 2010), 8. Translated from Sepedi.

<sup>10</sup> Numbers vary considerably. The *ZCC Family Bible* says that by 1955 the ZCC had a membership of 20,000. Anderson says that by 1954 the membership was already some 80,000 (*Zion and Pentecost*, 71).

<sup>11</sup> *ZCC Family Bible* (1995), historical section (no pages).

<sup>12</sup> Statistics South Africa: Census 2001 report (p. 25), <http://www.statssa.gov.za/census01/html/RSAPrimary.pdf> (accessed Sept. 5, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> An indication of the ZCC's growth outside South Africa is the opening of a new church building in Harare, Zimbabwe, by bishop Lekganyane, November 4-6, 2011 (<http://relzim.org/news/3186>; accessed Nov. 12, 2011)

## PRACTICES AND BELIEFS

ZCC members are easily recognizable in South African society. During the week they wear the church badge: a silver star on a green piece of cloth. On Sundays they wear a church uniform. The women wear green, yellow, or blue, depending on their role in church activities (women's prayer group, choir). Many men wear a green suit. Others wear a khaki uniform.<sup>14</sup>

ZCC members typically gather for worship on Sunday afternoons. I have attended several ZCC worship services personally. It was always a fascinating experience. A beautiful aspect of ZCC worship is the singing, with several choirs performing both before and during the service. The preaching I have heard was usually disappointing: Several lay-ministers would preach short sermons and they would usually twist their text passage in such a way that it became a doxology on the power of the ZCC and its bishop, Barnabas Lekganyane. Another aspect of ZCC worship is the activity of the *mabone* (lit. lights), the church prophets. While the ministers are preaching, these "seers" walk among the crowd and call certain people aside so that they can give them their personal "revelation."

In terms of sacraments, the ZCC practices adult baptism. Baptisms are typically performed in a river. The Lord's Supper is largely ignored. One of the reasons may be that the ZCC prohibits the use of alcohol.

Healing from sickness is very important to the ZCC. It is believed that the prophets of the church receive revelations about illnesses and healing, and that the ministers of the church use the power of the Holy Spirit to perform healings. Members who struggle with illness need to go and see the minister at church. They will be prayed for and receive specific healing instructions from the minister. They must carry out these instructions exactly as they have been told. For example, members may be given "holy water" (*meetse a makgethwa*), take it home and sprinkle it as a ritual of purification or protection. Or they may have to drink it or use it for washing. Alternatively, members may be told to drink a certain kind of coffee or tea.

In an article entitled "No illness is too difficult for the Zion Christian Church"<sup>15</sup> Rev. J.R.L. Rafapa refers to the command of Christ to his disciples that they should heal the sick, raise the dead, and cleanse those who have leprosy (with a reference to Mat. 10:8). Just like the disciples were called to obey the word of Christ and heal the sick, so ZCC ministers are called to be diligent in giving people their healing instructions because, Rev. Rafapa argues, "this is what the ministry of the ZCC is all about." The author goes on to say that faithful ZCC ministers "cook or

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<sup>14</sup> On YouTube one can find videos of ZCC Mukhukhu (male choir) singing, for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEwGlrYoUOU> singing "A reyeng ko Moria" (Let's go to Moria) (accessed March 3, 2017)

<sup>15</sup> *The ZCC Messenger*, # 57 (December 2003), 39-42. Original title in Sepedi: "Ga go na bolwetsi bjo bo palelago ditaelo tsa Zion Christian Church."

prepare tea, coffee, cocoa, inhalation, or Hamburg tea, as the instruction directs for each individual.”<sup>16</sup>

The church prophets or seers are believed to receive revelations from the Holy Spirit and/or the ancestor spirits which enable them to predict events, know the cause of illnesses, and prescribe instructions for healing.<sup>17</sup> During the course of my own field research I attended a ZCC worship service and was called aside by one of the prophets to receive “my revelation.” The prophet told me that during the past week there had been contact between my ancestor spirits and those of bishop Lekganyane, so he knew that I was coming. He also told me that my church would experience significant growth if I asked the ministers of the ZCC to pray for me. It had also had been revealed to him, he said, that I was suffering from pain somewhere in my body (which was not the case.) I needed to go to a natural well, draw water from it and take it to a ZCC minister so that he could pray over it. This would restore my health.<sup>18</sup>

As illustrated by this event, ancestor spirits still play an important role in the faith life of many ZCC members,<sup>19</sup> even though ancestor veneration is not officially encouraged. The *ZCC Messenger* is often critical about the practice. Jabulani Calvin Makhubela writes: “You cannot follow the servant of Christ, Ramarumo, if you have not thrown and/or burnt your traditional bones and muti,<sup>20</sup> still stealing, venerating ancestors, consulting traditional headers and diagelo surgeons.<sup>21</sup> We need to leave everything, which was of help to us, and follow Jesus.”<sup>22</sup> Yet, information gathered in personal conversations indicates that ancestor veneration is definitely found at the grass roots level. During my field research in Soshanguve I was more than once told that ZCC members wish each other well by saying “may your ancestors and Lekganyane’s ancestors meet and work together.”<sup>23</sup> I have also personally spoken to ZCC members who insisted that Lekganyane’s ancestor spirits do communicate with ancestor spirits of other people, and that this is the reason why people find help in the ZCC.

The ZCC is a church with many rules and regulations. As much as possible such rules are based on Biblical commands, often from the Old Testament. A few examples: It is forbidden to eat pork (Deut 14:8), it is forbidden to drink alcohol (Lev 10:8-11), it is forbidden to eat mopani

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<sup>16</sup> *The ZCC Messenger*, # 57 (December 2003), 42. The word “inhalation” (Sepedi: *mogabolo*) refers to the inhalation of mixed spices (chilli etc.).

<sup>17</sup> M. West, “People of the Spirit: the Charismatic Movement among African Independent Churches.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* No. 7 (1974), 23-29.

<sup>18</sup> This was at the ZCC church at Soshanguve, north of Pretoria, in 1997. For a full account of this experience, see A.J. de Visser, *Kyrios and Morena*, 90-93.

<sup>19</sup> See also Anderson, *Zion and Pentecost*, 180-184.

<sup>20</sup> Muti is the name for traditional medicine in southern Africa.

<sup>21</sup> “Diagelo surgeons,” according to one of my informants, are healers who perform healing rituals at their homes. This practice is frowned upon by the church leadership.

<sup>22</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 55 (Easter 2003), 31-32.

<sup>23</sup> In Sepedi: “Badimo ba gago le badimo ba Lekganyane ba kopane ba be ntho e tee.”

worms (Deut 14:19). Polygamy is allowed (with a reference to Isaiah 4:1!!). The custom of wearing church badges is based on the OT command to wear tassles (Num 15:37-40).<sup>24</sup>

Three times a year ZCC members are expected to travel to the headquarters of the church at Moria City, 50 km's east of the town of Polokwane. This custom is based on Deut. 16:16: "Three times a year all your men must appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose."<sup>25</sup> As a result, ZCC men and women come to the bishop's headquarters three times a year: at Christmas, at Good Friday/Easter, and the *Pulo ya Ngwaga* (opening of the year) festival in September. The largest gathering is the annual Good Friday/Easter celebration with hundreds of thousands of ZCC members visiting Moria City.

In the minds of ZCC people present day Moria City is comparable to Jerusalem of old. Bishop Lekganyane reinforces this understanding in his sermons. In a sermon on Psalm 122, preached during the 2009 Easter festival, he drew a parallel between the words of the Psalmist "Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem," and the experience of ZCC members meeting at Moria City. The words of the Psalmist "Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together" were given the following application: "I liken these closely congested houses to the buses, cars and tents which are here at Moria to worship and praise the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>26</sup>

#### BELIEFS REGARDING CHRIST

With respect to the ZCC's doctrinal beliefs it is hard to find official statements. I am not aware of the existence of a publication or confession in which the ZCC sets forth its doctrinal beliefs in a systematic way. Interestingly, many years ago the ZCC published a translation of Luther's *Small Catechism* with some additions, but it appears that this document does not function in ZCC beliefs anymore.<sup>27</sup> It is never referred to in the church magazine.

Current doctrinal beliefs of the ZCC can be gleaned from sermons by Bishop Lekganyane and articles written by various authors, as published in *The ZCC Messenger*. Many sermons and speeches of Bishop Lekganyane are exhortations to his followers to live morally upright lives. He often expresses concern about evils in the society such as the rampant crime, the decline of good neighbourliness, and the threats of racism and xenophobia.<sup>28</sup> He often warns against indulging in alcohol, drugs and immorality,<sup>29</sup> and he regularly speaks out against same-sex

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<sup>24</sup> *The ZCC Messenger* # 23 (September 1992), 26.

<sup>25</sup> *The ZCC Messenger* # 23 (September 1992), 26.

<sup>26</sup> *The ZCC Messenger* # 74 (September 2009), 12.

<sup>27</sup> The title of this publication was *Katekesima e nyane* (Small Catechism). It contains the main parts of Luther's *Small Catechism*, translated in Sepedi, with additions regarding forbidden foods and drinks (pork, alcohol). The reason that Lutheran material was used must be that the Lutheran mission was historically prominent among Sepedi speakers. Among the older generation of ZCC members many came out of the Lutheran church.

<sup>28</sup> Message delivered Sept. 9, 2009, at Moria City, *The ZCC Messenger* # 75 (Dec. 2009), 5.

<sup>29</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 75 (Dec. 2009), 6.

marriage, abortion, and the abuse of women and children.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes the bishop discusses the economical situation of the time and even admonishes the politicians about their behaviour. An example: “The noise that we hear and mudslinging and character assassination should come to a stop. This country deserves better.”<sup>31</sup>

While Bishop Lekganyane’s sermons cannot be characterized as expository sermons and the theological content is mostly shallow, he does at times speak highly of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. During his Easter sermon in 2009 the bishop spoke about justice and peace and stated: “Peace and Justice were brought to us by the coming of the Messiah when He died for our sins on the cross.”<sup>32</sup> The bishop then proceeded to explain the importance of the cross of Christ by reflecting on the fact that the cross has a vertical beam (pointing to peace with God) and a horizontal beam (pointing to peaceful relationships between humans). The application was that it is impossible to have peace with God if you don’t have peace with your neighbours or relatives. The bishop continued: “I am hopeful that we have come here to worship the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and to give thanks to the gifts that He has given to us, to ask for his blessings and increased lifespan because the works of God are clearly visible.”<sup>33</sup>

As for other articles published in the ZCC’s official magazine, articles that discuss the person and work of Jesus Christ are rare but there are notable exceptions. In an article entitled “This same Jesus!”<sup>34</sup> Mashudu A. Ramarumo offered the following reflections on the meaning of Christmas: “The entire world is celebrating the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. It felt appropriate for me to pay tribute to the Son of God, who sacrificed Himself on the cross in order to save us from the evils of the devil.” The author emphasizes that the Lord Jesus never changes: “Fellow ZCC members, this Jesus Christ is the same today as He was 2000 years ago when He walked the streets of Jerusalem. He still has the same heart of compassion, care and empathy. He is as easily moved now as He was then.” The author also suggests that “the reason why marriages are crumbling, church and communities are being destabilised is that people want to try to live without our Lord Jesus Christ.”

An article like this would suggest that the ZCC is in line with classic Christological views in the Christian tradition. However, we need to look further. It is striking that most references to Jesus Christ do not say much more than the basics: Jesus Christ has died for our sins and he has gained the victory over evil forces. I have not found a substantial exposition regarding the present work of the exalted Christ as Head of the church, Intercessor at God’s throne, and Lord of the life of individual believers. In other words, while positive things are being said about what Christ did in the past, things are vague with respect to what He is doing in the present. In

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<sup>30</sup> *The ZCC Messenger* # 75 (Dec. 2009), 13

<sup>31</sup> Speech during visit to king Zanele Langasiki in Bizana, *The ZCC Messenger* # 66 (Dec. 2006), 15

<sup>32</sup> Easter sermon 2009, *The ZCC Messenger* # 74 (Sept. 2009), 11.

<sup>33</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 74 (Sept. 2009), 11.

<sup>34</sup> *The ZCC Messenger* # 57 (Dec. 2003), 6-9.

this context, it becomes important to take note of beliefs regarding the role which Bishop Lekganyane plays in the faith of his followers. To this aspect we turn next.

#### BELIEFS REGARDING BISHOP LEKGANYANE

In his sermons Bishop Lekganyane regularly refers to himself as the spiritual leader of the ZCC.<sup>35</sup> Although the bishop seems careful not to exalt himself too much, he speaks highly of the role his grandfather Engenas, his father Edward, and he himself have played as leaders of the church and preachers of the gospel of peace in southern Africa.<sup>36</sup>

By his followers bishop Lekganyane is highly exalted, even to a messianic level. *The ZCC Messenger* offers many illustrations. The ZCC's bishop is often portrayed as a successor of Jesus Christ. Lebogang J. Mathopa argues that "history repeated itself" when Engenas Lekganyane started to minister to the multitudes in 1910. Mathopa: "The man of God was simply continuing where his direct predecessor, our Lord Jesus Christ left off..."<sup>37</sup> Referring to the current bishop (Barnabas, also called Ramarumo) the author goes on to state that "the very same Messiah we read about in the Bible operates within the man" like He did in his father and grandfather (Edward and Engenas). His conclusion and appeal is: "How do you then start drawing differences between Bishop Edward Lekganyane and Bishop Engenas Lekganyane? Worse still, how do you then differentiate the three B's – Bishop Engenas, Bishop Edward, and Bishop Ramarumo from the Messiah himself? You cannot, for the credentials speak for themselves, they heal the sick, cast out demons, they possess prophetic powers, they travel extensively, sowing, watering and spreading the message of peace."<sup>38</sup> The article concludes by saying that it is undeniable that our Lord Jesus Christ "is currently in our midst in the Mighty ZCC."

There are also instances where Bishop Lekganyane is literally referred to as Messiah or Mediator. P.M. Kubayi writes: "Besides what I have stated above, there are still some more examples which can be given to prove that the Right Reverend Bishop B.E. Lekganyane is the present-day Messiah."<sup>39</sup> Kubayi offers three arguments to prove that Lekganyane is the present-day Messiah: He is not a political Messiah but a religious Messiah, he heals the sick, and he travels from place to place to perform miracles.

In the same article P.M. Kubayi writes that bishop Lekganyane is the Mediator, the only way to God: "I publicly proclaim that the Right Reverend Bishop of the mighty Zion Christian Church is the Mediator between the people and God. He is the way to God. No one can

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<sup>35</sup> Example: "I, as the spiritual leader of this church, endorsed the ZCC's craving and thirst for peace to prevail in the Republic of South Africa." *The ZCC Messenger* # 35 (Sept. 1996), 13.

<sup>36</sup> Example in sermon on Psalm 46:9 "He breaks the bow and shatters the spear), *The ZCC Messenger* # 37 (Easter 1997), 4.

<sup>37</sup> *The ZCC Messenger* # 67 (Easter 2007), 10.

<sup>38</sup> *The ZCC Messenger* # 67 (Easter 2007), 12.

<sup>39</sup> *The ZCC Messenger* # 16 (Easter 1990), 27.



communicate with God except through him. He is the only person who reveals God's will to human beings. He is the only person who can communicate with our gods. Through His message, the prophets and the ministers of Zion Christian Church, God's will is proclaimed to the people. My fellow Zionists, you are fortunate, because you have the Mediator or Spokesman."<sup>40</sup>

Bishop Lekganyane is also proclaimed to be the present-day Counselor of John 14:16. A. Rammutla explains that the promise of the Counsellor was initially fulfilled with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit but there was a subsequent fulfillment: "Behold, the Jesus whom we are waiting for, has sent the Counsellor to the church of Zion: His Grace the Right Rev. B.E. Lekganyane, whom the world will not have recognized nor received at the time that Jesus comes to judge the world."<sup>41</sup>

Scripture passages that are proclaiming the work of Jesus as Messiah are applied to bishop Lekganyane as well. In an article entitled "Had it not been for Him!"<sup>42</sup> Jabulani Calvin Makhubele states that bishop Lekganyane is "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but for the sins of the whole world." This is a startling claim. Is the author really suggesting that bishop Lekganyane died for the sins of mankind? Probably not. Yet, it is clear that Jesus and Lekganyane are to a certain extent identified with each other. In the same article the author recalls the story of the bronze snake (Num 21:4-9) and comments: "The snake on the pole represented Christ on the Cross and whoever looks at Him would be saved. Beloved Zionists, there is a Man on the Mountain and whoever looks at Him is saved. I am talking of the servant of Christ the Right Reverend Bishop B.E. Lekganyane."

Another illustration of the high position of the bishop is the fact that ZCC members are encouraged to pray in the name of the Lekganyanes. L.J. Mathopa writes: "It is common practice in the whole of Christianity to pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Quite frankly, and to the best of my knowledge, we in the ZCC also pray in these names. However, in addition to these three names, we also pray in the name of Engenas, Edward, and Barnabas. We do not pray to Engenas, Edward and/or Barnabas, but we pray to the Almighty God *in the names* of these three leaders! Put another way, we basically believe in the God of Engenas, Edward and Barnabas."<sup>43</sup>

Various messianic titles are used to refer to bishop Lekganyane. Apart from the ones already discussed (Mediator, Messiah, Comforter) there are many more: King of kings,<sup>44</sup> Lion of Judah, descendant of the House of David,<sup>45</sup> our Father, Healer, Comforter,<sup>46</sup> beloved Son of

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<sup>40</sup> *The ZCC Messenger* # 16 (Easter 1990), 26-27.

<sup>41</sup> *The ZCC Messenger* # 34 (Easter 1996), 20.

<sup>42</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 55 (Easter 2003), 30-32.

<sup>43</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 37 (Easter 1997), 6.

<sup>44</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 11 (Sept. 1988), 7.

<sup>45</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 11 (Sept, 1988), 25.

<sup>46</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 30 (Dec. 1994), 28

man,<sup>47</sup> Son of God,<sup>48</sup> Light of the nations, Head of everything,<sup>49</sup> *Rrago ditshaba* (Father of the nations).<sup>50</sup> Some of this terminology should perhaps be understood within the African context where leaders are often highly elevated in praise songs. At the same time, the application of messianic nomenclature to Bishop Lekganyane results in him being portrayed as a present-day Messiah.

If this is what is presented in the official magazine of the ZCC, there will be consequences for the church's worship as well. I vividly remember listening to a sermon preached by Bishop Lekganyane in the ZCC church of Atteridgeville, close to Pretoria.<sup>51</sup> Immediately after the bishop had finished his sermon with the traditional exclamation "*Pula! Pula! Pula!*" (Rain! Rain! Rain!), the congregation responded by singing the chorus *Re a mo leboga* (We thank him) and *Mong wa rena, oa re lwela* (Our Lord fights for us). Originally, the "him" in these hymns refers to the Lord Jesus Christ, but on that occasion I had the distinct feeling that the ZCC believers were actually singing these hymns in praise of Lekganyane.

My conclusion is that Bishop Lekganyane does indeed have messianic status in the faith life of his followers. While he calls himself a servant of Christ, his followers elevate him to such a high level that in their faith life he practically eclipses Christ. This does not mean that anything negative is said or stated about Christ. The idea is rather that Lekganyane is seen as the present-day incarnation of the Messiah, protecting his people against evil, healing them from every kind of disease, teaching them how they ought to live in order to have a blessed life. Jesus is perhaps seen as historically foundational, but not savingly and practically operational in the life of church members. That role is played by the bishop.

#### FRAMEWORK OF SALVATION

I would like to offer some reflections on the question how this situation might be explained. I suggest that here we need to take into account the larger framework of beliefs regarding evil and salvation that is prevalent in the ZCC. Views regarding the *Saviour* correspond to views regarding the kind of evil that people want to be *saved from*. In theological terminology: Christology is informed by soteriology. That Bishop Lekganyane eclipses Jesus Christ in the faith life of ZCC members is not because there is a wilful disrespect of Biblical revelation. Rather, it is because traditional African concepts of evil and salvation still play a dominant role in the beliefs of ZCC members.

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<sup>47</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 33 (Dec. 1995), 18.

<sup>48</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 32 (Sept. 1995), 19

<sup>49</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 4 (Easter 1987), 16.

<sup>50</sup> *ZCC Messenger* # 11 (Sept. 1988), 26.

<sup>51</sup> May 23, 1999. For full account, see De Visser, *Kyrios and Morena*, 93-95.

Philip Steyne has described the African worldview by identifying four basic concepts: Holism (the human world, nature and the spirit world are seen as an integrated whole), spiritualism (the world is replete with impersonal powers, spirit beings, and gods), dynamism (it is essential to have life-force; this life-force can be obtained by various means such as performing rituals and manipulating the gods), and communalism (human beings live in a community with other human beings; the social group is very important).<sup>52</sup>

In line with these basic concepts, the traditional African view of salvation focuses on having a good measure of life-force as experienced in harmonious relationships. Many books have been written about the African concept of salvation. Magesa offers a helpful description: "If the family, lineage, and clan enjoy good health and relative prosperity, particularly when the birth rate is good and the children survive to adulthood, it is believed that there is a good rapport in the network of relationships. The ancestors are happy, the vital force is strong, and there is harmony in the land and in creation. Such abundance of life is a clear indication that the population is upright with regard to the ancestors. Abundance of life indicates in clear terms that the norms essential for its preservation have not been disregarded or broken."<sup>53</sup>

If this is the traditional African understanding of salvation, the understanding of evil and misery will, of course, be the opposite. If man's greatest joy is to experience life-force, man's greatest misery is to lose life-force and to experience a break-down of harmonious relationships. Against this background, sin will be seen as anything that causes this kind of misery to happen. In the traditional African worldview there are various explanations for misery, suffering, and the loss of life-force. One explanation might be that the anger of the ancestor spirits has been aroused. Another explanation could be witchcraft: Someone has used sorcery to cause harm to someone else. Fear of witchcraft is still strong in modern day Africa. Teffo & Roux, describing the situation during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, state: "We can safely say that the belief in witchcraft is intense in most African societies and that people conduct their daily activities under tension, suspicion, and fears of bewitchment."<sup>54</sup>

It is important to note that in the traditional African worldview man is believed to be morally good. That is to say, *most* people are good. The problem is that there are a few people (witches), hidden among the crowd, who are bad and who are out there to harm others. This leads to a shallow understanding of sin. David J. Bosch commented: "People's misfortune is not due to their own incompetence, weakness or even sin, but to an enemy who is at the same time branded as enemy of the entire community. Belief in witchcraft produces self-vindication and self-justification. The witch is therefore, by definition, never I myself, but always someone

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<sup>52</sup> Philip M. Steyne, *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists*. Impact International Foundation, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1996. See also: Yusufu Turaki, *Christianity and African gods: A method in theology*. Potchefstroom: IRS, 1999.

<sup>53</sup> L. Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (New York: Orbis, 1997), 81.

<sup>54</sup> L.J. Teffo & A.P.J. Roux, "Metaphysical Thinking in Africa." In P.H. Coetzee & A.P.J. Roux (eds.), *The African Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 143.

else.”<sup>55</sup> At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century African theologians acknowledge that most African societies still believe in witchcraft.<sup>56</sup>

This is where divination comes in. African people used to go (and many still go) to the traditional healer whenever misfortune happened or when life-force was perceived to be diminishing. The traditional healer would then determine the cause of the problem and prescribe and provide means for restoration (for example: the ancestor spirits are not happy, you need to bring a sacrifice, or: this problem is caused by witchcraft, you need traditional medicine to protect yourself).

What is the relevance of all this for our evaluation of the beliefs and practices of the ZCC and its members? The point is that the ZCC’s form of Christianity is still very much informed by the traditional belief system. Biblical themes such as forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God and the coming of God’s kingdom are not denied (and sometimes even acknowledged), but they do not play an important role in the beliefs of the ZCC and its members. By and large, the emphasis in ZCC preaching and publications is on the church’s powers to heal and to protect against witchcraft. Thus, the ZCC’s view of salvation is still very much similar to the traditional African view of salvation. By implication, there is a greater need for a Lekganyane-kind-of-saviour than a Jesus Christ.

## CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions may be drawn: First, bishop Lekganyane enjoys near messianic status in the beliefs and faith life of his followers. Second, although Jesus Christ is formally recognized as Messiah and Son of God, for practical purposes He is a *Christus otiosus* (an idle Messiah) who does not play an important role in the faith life of ZCC members. Third, the main reason for this state of affairs is the influence of the traditional African worldview and its accompanying practices.

While the first conclusion is unique to the ZCC, the second and third conclusions are not. As recently as 2016 Kelvin Onongha came to similar conclusions regarding the situation in Yorubaland (Nigeria): “After a century of Christian evangelization... the influence of traditional religious practices is still compelling.”<sup>57</sup> Onongha’s conclusion with the respect to much of Yoruba Christianity applies to the ZCC as well: “the result is syncretism of a viral nature.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> David J. Bosch, “The problem of evil in Africa: A survey of African views on witchcraft and of the response of the Christian church” In: De Villiers, P.G.R. (ed.): *Like a roaring lion...: Essays on the Bible, the church and demonic powers* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1987), 46.

<sup>56</sup> Kelvin Okey Onongha, *Towards a missiological model for worldview transformation among adherents to African Traditional Religion in Yorubaland*, (Portland: EMS Press, 2016), 162.

<sup>57</sup> Onongha, 217.

<sup>58</sup> Onongha, 217.

In his letter to the Ephesians the apostle Paul describes the goal of the Christian life in terms of growing up into him who is the head, into Christ (Eph. 4:15). Hopefully, the leadership of the ZCC will have a desire to see their membership growing toward maturity in Christ. In order to make this happen, transformation will be needed from pre-Christian beliefs to a biblically shaped worldview.

In order for ZCC members to adopt a more Biblical view of salvation and to develop a stronger connection to the Lord Jesus Christ, bishop Lekganyane will need to have the same purpose that the apostle Paul had for his ministry: "Him [Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28). For now, however, the evidence suggests that the ZCC has lost its connection to the Head of the Christian church (Col. 2:19).

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