

# The Nicene Creed, the Church, and Christian Mission

A Creative Tension

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## Abstract

*This article critically examines the significance of the Nicene Creed for mission within the evolving missional context of 2025, particularly in Southern Africa. In an era defined by the globalized nature of mission, the church is no longer viewed as the sender but as the one being sent, reflecting the missio Dei framework. The article explores the role of the Nicene Creed in light of current shifts in mission: the dissolution of a binary view of Christian and non-Christian worlds, the inherently missionary nature of the church, and the importance of partnerships in mission. From a decolonized perspective, the author questions the ongoing relevance of the trinitarian God as professed in the creed, particularly within the diverse ecclesiastical landscape of Southern Africa, where independent churches are prominent. The article argues that the Nicene Creed, while not explicitly missional, remains foundational to the church's mission as it affirms the church's unity, catholicity, and apostolicity. In conclusion, the article advocates for a continued reflection on the Nicene Creed, recognizing its central role in shaping the mission, faith, and unity of the church, particularly in a decolonized and ecumenical context.*

## Keywords

*Nicene Creed, missio Dei, decolonized mission, trinitarian theology, Southern Africa*

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The year 2025 will mark 1,700 years since the establishment of the Nicene Creed in 325. This article explores the potential role of the Nicene Creed within the evolving mission context of today. Several key shifts define this context. The first is the realization that mission belongs to the being of God – *missio Dei* – where the church is no longer the sender but the one being sent. The second is that mission is now a global movement, from everywhere to everywhere, dissolving the notion of a “Christian world” versus a “non-Christian world.” The third shift is that the church, by its very nature, is missionary, meaning that mission is essentially ecclesiastical. And the fourth is that mission increasingly takes place through partnerships and collaboration.

In this evolving mission context, we are faced with a critical question: What are the implications of the Nicene Creed for the church’s mission in 2025? Does the confession of the trinitarian God, as articulated in the Nicene Creed, still hold relevance, or do we require new or alternative ways to express our belief in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? To properly address this question, we must consider the Nicene Creed’s understanding of the church, a topic I will explore further in this article.

Before doing so, however, I feel it is essential to acknowledge the personal context from which I write, as it inevitably shapes my interpretation of the Nicene Creed. I am a white, Afrikaans-speaking male from South Africa, a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, and a lecturer in mission studies at an ecumenical faculty of theology and religion. In this position, I am continually challenged to decolonize not only my theology but also my entire way of thinking.

The specific question this article seeks to address is the following: What is the importance of the Nicene Creed for a decolonized mission in Southern Africa, a region that has many independent churches? From an ecumenical perspective, what is the significance of the trinitarian understanding of one God in the Nicene Creed for our faith, unity, and mission?

## **Background to Understanding the Nicene Creed**

In 324 CE, Emperor Constantine reunified the Roman Empire under one rule. Having recently converted to Christianity, he had already issued a decree in 313 CE to (temporarily) cease the persecution of Christians, claiming divine intervention in a victorious battle. Constantine played a key role in convening the first fully representative and universally recognized council of the Christian church. While his influence on Christianity is often exaggerated – he neither proclaimed Jesus as divine nor determined the books of the New Testament – this period undoubtedly represents a turning point in Christian history.

What we now call the Nicene Creed is the product of two major ecumenical councils: the first held in Nicaea (modern-day Iznik, Turkey) in 325 CE, and the second in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 381 CE. These councils were convened to resolve a century-long debate on the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

When engaging with a historical text like the Nicene Creed, we need to listen carefully and be aware of the context in which it developed. Looking at this brief description of the role of Constantine, one can understand why some theologians – especially from the South – connect the confession with colonization.

The Nicene Creed was created by the church as a statement of witness, mainly used within the liturgy. Although it opposed Arianism<sup>1</sup> from a missionary perspective, its primary function was liturgical, not apologetic. As a confession accepted in 325 by both Eastern and Western churches, it stands as a testimony to the core beliefs of the universal church, encapsulating its theological identity. The Lima document affirms this, stating that “it is impossible to disregard the special place of the Nicene Creed. It is the one common creed which is most universally accepted, as formation of the apostolic faith by churches in all parts of the world, where it primarily serves as the confession of faith in the eucharistic liturgy.”<sup>2</sup> In this way, the Nicene Creed serves as both a formation and affirmation of the apostolic faith, emphasizing a communal confession – “we believe” – in contrast to the Apostles’ Creed, which begins with the personal statement “I believe.”

This is what the church has confessed to believe from the 4th century to the present day. As a confession, the Nicene Creed has been, and continues to be, used during the eucharist. In many liturgies, it is introduced with the words “We confess with the churches of all times and places our Christian faith ...” This prompts an important question: How seriously does the church, and the local faith community, take its confessions, not only in liturgy but in daily life? How does this confession shape our understanding and response to a secular and constantly evolving society? Every confession of faith must be seen as “a ‘dialogue’ between God, God’s world, and God’s church, between what we affirm to be the divine origin of mission and the praxis we encounter today.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arianism was a Christian heresy that declared that Christ is not truly divine but a created being.

<sup>2</sup> Hans-George Link, *Bekken und Bekenntnis* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 216.

<sup>3</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 509.

According to Santoso, three key issues were resolved in the Western church's opposition to Arianism, and these remain crucial for understanding the church today<sup>4</sup>: “the deity of the Son was established at Nicaea in 325 AD, the deity of the Holy Spirit at Constantinople in 381 AD and the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son (filioque) at the Council of Toledo in Spain in 589 AD.”

Timiadis argues that the Nicene Creed moves from creation to Christ's incarnation to emphasize the profound love of God for humanity, as Christ became incarnate for our salvation. This moment represents the pinnacle of divine *synkatabasis* – the condescension of Christ to restore fallen humanity. His redemptive work is closely tied to the establishment of the church, which continues Christ's mission by leading people to the blessings of the Holy Trinity and fostering *koinonia* (community).<sup>5</sup> This connection unveils the mystery of the church's mission on earth, where Christology is deeply intertwined with ecclesiology and soteriology. Recognizing potential deviations, the church fathers treated the relationship between Christ and the church – head and body – as inseparable. In a secular society, this inseparable relationship must be emphasized in any mission endeavour.

## Faith

Timiadis explains, “Confessions, being normative expressions of the church's faith, also serve as a basis for theological thought.”<sup>6</sup> As a result, the worship of the church – in other words, the glorification of God as obedient homage – is the spring and source of systematic theology. In this regard, the church fathers of the 4th century, with the Nicene Creed, emphasize that it is through the life of the church that one gains access to the ultimate truth, which is central to all genuine Christian theology – namely, the reality of the risen Christ.<sup>7</sup> Alongside others, Naude describes the *Sitz im Leben* of the earliest confessions as liturgy, while he later states that the confessions during the Reformation developed a strong “teaching” character.<sup>8</sup>

The heart of authentic Christian faith has always been grounded in the question of Christology. In my view, the Nicene Creed seeks to answer the question “What is authentic Christianity?” In the African context, many African theologians have sought to

<sup>4</sup> A. Santoso, “‘In the Spirit’: A Triune Reformulation,” *Acta Theologica* 43:1 (2023), 153.

<sup>5</sup> Emilianos Timiadis, *The Nicene Creed: Our Common Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Timiadis, *The Nicene Creed*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Ross, *Here Comes Your King! Christ, Church and Nation in Malawi* (Mzuzu: Luviri Press, 2020), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Piet Naude, “Confessing Nicea Today? Critical Questions from a South African Perspective,” *Scriptura* 79 (2002), 48.

interpret and understand Christ through the lens of their traditional African worldview. Ross observes that for many Africans, Christ has been presented within “alien categories,” answering questions that were never asked by African Christians.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, some African theologians have endeavoured to rethink the “the identity of Jesus Christ in terms of African categories and in response to African realities.”<sup>10</sup> Common themes in this approach include depicting Jesus as ancestor, chief, *nganga*, and others.

However, Nyamiti concedes that “none of the existing African Christologies has had any appreciable influence in the life of the African churches.”<sup>11</sup> Ross further critiques the approach, noting that the motives and methods are questionable: “Since their communities cannot name Christ personally without going to the Bible and the catechisms ...”<sup>12</sup> It appears that efforts to “Africanize” Christology have, ironically, led to further alienation. Benezet Bujo asks, “What are we to say of an African theology which never gets beyond the lecture halls of universities and congresses, mostly outside Africa? ... African theologians can easily turn into eager proselytizers whom you keep meeting in international gatherings but whom you never see in the bush.”<sup>13</sup>

It is important to recognize the potential gap between “academic theology” in Africa and the “theology of the Church.”<sup>14</sup> In this context, the collective “we believe” of the Nicene Creed, in contrast to the Apostles’ Creed’s personal “I believe,” holds significant relevance for how we understand, interpret, and apply the confession in mission today. This is not merely an individual statement of faith but the confession of the church, including many African churches. The “we” refers to those who believe in the one trinitarian God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is this shared belief in the trinitarian God that defines and unites the Christian church.

This leads to another point of contention: the concept of the trinitarian God as the Christian God.<sup>15</sup> For many African theologians, this understanding is problematic, as it is often associated with Western missionaries, exploitation, and oppression. Some

<sup>9</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> C. Nyamiti, “African Christologies Today,” in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter (London, SCM: 1992), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> It is very difficult to discuss the church in Africa as if it is homogenous; it is not. Even within a group like the African independent churches (AICs), some are very reformed and biblical, while others are very traditional and syncretistic.

<sup>15</sup> Anné H. Verhoef, “Decolonising the Concept of the Trinity to Decolonise the Religious Education Curriculum,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77:4 (2021), 1.

theologians argue for identifying the Christian God with the African traditional belief in a supreme being. As a result, there is a growing call among certain African theologians to decolonize trinitarian theology.

Naude, quoting Hood, illustrates this critique when he writes, “The agenda to talk about God, Christ and the Spirit from the NC assumptions ... threatens the survival and integrity of Christian identity in this world of many and varied cultures.”<sup>16</sup> While Naude’s perspective may hold some validity from an ecumenical viewpoint, I would argue that it falls short from a missiological standpoint. The “NC assumptions” that Naude refers to involve the exclusion of intellectual contributions from Africans and other cultures. In his view, the Nicene Creed represents a form of neo-colonialism imposed by Eurocentric and American churches. However, the “grassroots” influence of the Nicene Creed within the African church will be demonstrated and explored in the next section.

Naude makes a clear distinction between reading the Bible as *norma normans* and the Nicene Creed as *norma normata*, and then pleads that “one should be far more open to ongoing, varied expressions of faith in different contexts and different thought forms.”<sup>17</sup> I completely agree with the idea of different expressions of faith in various contexts, and I would even contend that God is experienced differently in diverse situations; however, God remains the trinitarian God as revealed in nature and scripture and known through the word and the Spirit (Belgic Confession). Naude argues that we need confessions with “fresh and contextual language” for new contexts, such as the Belhar Confession, which addresses specific issues from the South African context while remaining globally relevant. In my view, while the Belhar Confession is a complete and standalone confession, it is best understood when read and interpreted alongside the confession of the trinitarian God as articulated in the Nicene Creed. My appeal is not to prioritize one over the other but for both to co-exist.

I agree with Conradie and Sakupapa, who argue that the doctrine of the Trinity should be seen as a decolonizing force rather than an oppressive or colonizing one.<sup>18</sup> They challenge the idea of a singular, authoritative interpretation of the Trinity, asserting that the formulation in the Nicene Creed should not be viewed as rigid dogma. They critique African and other evangelical theologians for mistakenly assuming that ecumenical Christianity has a “fixed doctrinal identity” based on creeds that must be

<sup>16</sup> Naude, “Confessing Nicea Today?” 49.

<sup>17</sup> Naude, “Confessing Nicea Today?” 49.

<sup>18</sup> Ernst M. Conradie and Teddy C. Sakupapa, “Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity’ or ‘The Decolonising Doctrine of the Trinity?’” *Journal of Theology in Southern Africa* 161:1 (2018), 51.

safeguarded from heretical deviations.<sup>19</sup> Instead, Conradie and Sakupapa propose that we recognize the “counter-hegemonic implications” of the symbols of Spirit, cross, and Father. This more flexible and symbolic approach enables the Trinity to be understood not as a static doctrine but as a dynamic representation that can challenge imperial and capitalist power structures, embodying a unified, decolonizing Christian faith.<sup>20</sup>

From the very beginning, the Christian faith has been lived and experienced within the life and calling of the church.

## Church and Church Unity

Timiadis makes the following bold statement: “It is impossible to understand Christ’s salvation without the church ... A Christian feels the power of the divine grace acting upon him through the sacraments, the liturgical setting, and the whole spiritual order of ecclesial life.”<sup>21</sup> The church is essentially a confessional community. In the New Testament, we already find basic forms of early Christian confessions that express the fundamental content of preaching and teaching. We find examples of faith confessions in passages such as Romans 4:24, 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 8:6, 15:3-4; Philippians 2:6-11, 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; and 1 Timothy 2:5-6 and 3:16.

It is noticeable that Christ, as the resurrected Lord and mediator, occupies a prominent place throughout these confessions, always in connection with God and the Spirit. The trinitarian formulas that appear in various places in the New Testament provide a fixed expression of this trinitarian connectedness (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:13, etc.). It is this trinitarian connectedness and its determination of the church that is captured in the Nicene Creed.

For Athanasius and the other Nicene fathers, the Bible held paramount importance in shaping their theological understanding. According to Ross, Athanasius stated that “the sacred and divinely inspired Scriptures are sufficient for the exposition of the truth.”<sup>22</sup> Although it was the importance of the reading of the biblical text in the first place, there is a second important reference “to the ‘read’ Bible ... as absorbed and believed in the community.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Conradie and Sakupapa, “Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity,” 51.

<sup>20</sup> Conradie and Sakupapa, “Decolonising the Doctrine of the Trinity,” 52.

<sup>21</sup> Timiadis, *The Nicene Creed*, 112–13.

<sup>22</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 21.

In the early centuries of the church, theology emerged as a response to the urgent challenges faced by the missionary church rather than as a luxury.<sup>24</sup> Theology – sometimes articulated in confessions – was developed from the church’s need to make sense of its mission in a world where Christianity was not yet established. However, as Christianity gained ground in Europe and became the dominant religion, the church’s theological reflection began to lose its missionary focus. Thus, at the first mission conference in Edinburgh in 1910, “a major concern was the absence of missionary enthusiasm in the churches of the West.”<sup>25</sup> This relationship between church and mission was also discussed at the mission conference in Tambaran in 1938. I would argue that the Nicene Confession, with the words “We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” played an important role in keeping the discussion about the church as being “apostolic” – the one being sent – alive in its understanding of mission.

In confessing the church as “catholic,” we also confess the church as holistic and universal, as restored in Christ. The restoration in Christ is twofold: “personal and universal or catholic” through the work of the life-giving Spirit.<sup>26</sup> An African perspective such as that of Pobee emphasizes that theology is not merely an intellectual pursuit but a rational effort to comprehend and articulate the faith of a specific community, rather than just individuals.<sup>27</sup> Theology, Pobee adds, is a process of expressing the content of faith communities clearly and coherently within a context.<sup>28</sup> Rooted in the gospel, theological reflections offer different portraits of God’s engagement with humanity, much like the four gospels provide varied perspectives on the Christ event.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the universal church is represented in the local congregations of different denominations and in diverse geographical, socio-political, and cultural contexts. Consequently, the “apostolic” church is not only represented in local congregations, each with its differences, but it also addresses various contexts of the one church with an appropriate mission paradigm.<sup>30</sup>

This brings us to the question of whether the genre of a formal faith confession might help with, for example, greater church unity. The church fathers of the Nicene Creed stressed the continuity of Christian culture with the Greek heritage, viewing the emergence of the new culture – marked by the epiphany of the Logos – as the culmination

<sup>24</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 501.

<sup>25</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 378.

<sup>26</sup> Timiadis, *The Nicene Creed*, 110.

<sup>27</sup> John S. Pobee, *Giving Account of Faith and Hope in Africa* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 60.

<sup>28</sup> Pobee, *Giving Account of Faith*, 71.

<sup>29</sup> Pobee, *Giving Account of Faith*, 73.

<sup>30</sup> See Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 377–523.

of a long historical process within God's plan. God, who is always present, reveals himself through new circumstances and uses fitting means to manifest his presence<sup>31</sup> in creation through the church. As a result, the triune God serves as the foundation of both unity and diversity within creation and the church. The Trinity exemplifies a model where diversity does not undermine unity, and unity does not suppress diversity in favour of uniformity. Thus, God can be actively and creatively present among the vast variety of his creatures while remaining a singular being, distinct from all other creations.<sup>32</sup> What are the implications of this belief for church unity, since this trinitarian expression is integral to the church's mission, shaping its confession and outreach?

Writing from the perspective of a divided South African society, Naude concluded that within the Dutch Reformed Church family, "the NC [Nicene Creed] has been and is – to say the least – not of any help in fostering greater unity."<sup>33</sup> In this specific case, unity refers to visible structural unity. Regarding the mission of the church, I will concur with Naude that structural unity within the Dutch Reformed Church family will enhance the witness – the apostolic character – of the church. However, my question would be whether a confession can be blamed as outdated or irrelevant, or is it rather the church that no longer lives up to its confession as the "catholic church"?

In addressing this question, it is crucial to recognize the methodology employed by the Nicene fathers, who "constructed their theology out of a committed engagement with the life of the church of their time."<sup>34</sup> Ross highlights the importance of local congregations in their experience of salvation in Christ, arguing that this experiential faith is what "tilted the balance in the struggle between 'orthodoxy' and Arianism."<sup>35</sup> Alexandria, for example, spent the first six years of his episcopate among distant faith communities in the deserts, along the Nile, and near the Libyan border, ultimately reaching Upper Egypt near modern Sudan. During this time, he listened to and experienced their lived faith.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it is important not to view the Nicene Creed as disconnected from grassroots African Christianity or as something needing decolonization. The importance of relationships, as illustrated by the one trinitarian God, as well as the African worldview of *ubuntu*, is clearly visible in this description by Ross.

<sup>31</sup> Timiadis, *The Nicene Creed*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Timiadis, *The Nicene Creed*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Naude, "Confessing Nicea Today?" 49.

<sup>34</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 18.

Our ecclesiological thinking and reflections on the unity of the church risk becoming abstract intellectual exercises if disconnected from the everyday lives and concerns of ordinary people. As Ross notes, “Arianism ... ‘revealed more than anything else the deepest cause of crisis in Alexandrian Christianity: a century-long estrangement between learned theology and the Christian self-consciousness of the man in the street.’”<sup>37</sup> In this context, Kwame Bediako emphasizes the importance of a “grassroots” or “oral theology” in Africa, rooted in the lived experience of faith within communities. He argues that this form of theology helps academic theologians recognize that their task is not to independently construct an African theology but rather to engage with the theology as experienced by ordinary believers.<sup>38</sup> The (African) theologian, then, must bridge the gap between scholarly theology and the lived faith of the masses, acknowledging that Christ is already deeply apprehended and lived out in the faith of millions.<sup>39</sup> This unity between academic and grassroots theology is essential for the church’s confession to effectively serve its mission.

As the church came to be understood not as separate from the world but as being in the world and sent to the world, existing for the benefit of the world, mission can no longer be seen merely as an activity of the church. Instead, it must be recognized as an integral expression of the church’s very essence.<sup>40</sup> The church has been chosen for the purpose of mission, and through this calling, it has become “God’s own people.”<sup>41</sup> With this in mind, let us now turn our attention to mission.

## Mission

Mission has a twofold task: one concerns theology, and the other pertains to missionary praxis. This article will focus primarily on the theological dimension of missiology. Since mission involves the dynamic relationship between God and humanity, missiology intentionally approaches its task from a faith-based perspective. The faith base of mission is so vital that Bosch asserts: “Within the broad field of missiology, every viewpoint is debatable; the faith perspective, however, is not negotiable.” In this regard, the Nicene Confession plays a crucial role in the mission of the church, as the church’s mission is fundamentally the mission of the trinitarian God – *missio trinitatis Dei*. From

<sup>37</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 59–60.

<sup>39</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 26.

<sup>40</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 504.

<sup>41</sup> 1 Peter 2:9; Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 505.

this faith-based perspective, we recognize the contextual nature of mission praxis. Since context is constantly evolving, mission praxis must always remain “in creative tension with mission’s origins, with the biblical text, and the history of the church’s missionary involvement.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, we must be cautious not to allow context to become the sole criterion for determining the relevance of a confession.

The bold project the Nicene fathers undertook was to articulate a radically new understanding of God and the world, emerging from a new mission context within the Christian community.<sup>43</sup> The question that remains is whether this “new understanding” from the 4th century can still guide us in a world that is post-Christendom, postcolonial, post-apartheid, and postmodern. The key principle we can draw from the faith community responsible for the Nicene Creed is that “the discipline to which they subjected themselves was one where their theology had to be rooted and grounded in the objective reality with which they were concerned, namely the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.”<sup>44</sup> In this regard, Ross quotes Torrance, observing,

The incarnation and resurrection of Christ, to which the church bore witness, “forced themselves upon the minds of Christians from their own empirical and theoretical ground in sharp antithesis to what they had believed about God and in genuine conflict with the framework of the secular thought or the world view of their age . . .” They took root within the Church only through a seismic restructuring of religious and intellectual belief.<sup>45</sup>

In today’s modern, postmodern, and even artificial intelligence–driven world, I would argue that the Nicene Confession remains as crucial to the mission of the church as ever. It affirms faith in the trinitarian God, who is not only the content of the church’s mission but also its sender and fulfilment. Since God is, by nature, a missional God, the Nicene Confession provides a clear understanding of the church’s identity, while a confession like Belhar helps clarify the church’s calling in the world.

To this day, Christians confess belief in one God, a declaration that remains vital for the mission of the church in a pluralistic world filled with various gods and spiritualities. Understanding the one trinitarian God and giving proper attention to all three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – are essential. Santoso points out a potential reductionist view of God in the Nicene Creed, where more emphasis is placed on the Son, Jesus

<sup>42</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 509.

<sup>43</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Ross, *Here Comes Your King*, 22.

Christ, while the Father and the Spirit are given less focus.<sup>46</sup> In today's context, we see various reductionist views of the trinitarian God in mission activities. One such example is an "evangelical view" that suggests God is solely concerned with the salvation of souls, disregarding people's lived circumstances, as long as their souls are saved. Another example is the prosperity gospel, which implies that God is only concerned with individual prosperity, neglecting the well-being of creation as a whole.

More generally, if we do not worship the Father, we might think that God cares more about the church than about his creation. If we do not worship Jesus as the Christ and Lord, the complete content and truth of the gospel is in jeopardy. If we forget about the Holy Spirit, it becomes difficult to believe in a living and life-giving God who is present among us, working in and through us every day. I would not necessarily agree with Santoso's argument regarding the underplaying of the role of the Father and the Spirit, especially when considering the context.

However, the important role of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour in the identity of the church can hardly be overemphasized. It needs to be highlighted that the Nicene Creed is a confession in a living God who is active in creating and calling believers to become transformed people of the way. As a result, discipleship is not merely about the church's own spiritual comfort but is rather a matter of being gripped by the transformation God promises in Jesus Christ.<sup>47</sup> Mission is thus inherently a matter of transformation: transformation of the disciple, transformation of the context, transformation of culture, and transformation toward the kingdom of God. Since the kingdom of God is already among us but is also still coming, the church may never settle for the status quo. In light of this, the Nicene Confession may be described as a transforming document, as the transforming quality comes not from ourselves or the confession but from the trinitarian God. We only discover the Father's love and care, as well as the Spirit's transforming power, as we follow Jesus.

Confessing and participating in the *missio trinitatis Dei*,

missiology performs a critical function by continuously challenging theology to be *theologia viatorum*; that is, in reflecting on the faith theology is to accompany the gospel on its journey through the nations through the times ... In this role, missiology acts as a gadfly in the house of theology [and in the Church], creating unrest and resisting complacency, opposing every ecclesiastical impulse of self-preservation, every desire to stay what we are, every inclination toward provincialism and parochialism, every fragmentation of humanity into regional or theological blocs, every exploitation of

<sup>46</sup> Santoso, "In the Spirit."

<sup>47</sup> Kenneth Ross, *Mission Rediscovered: Transforming Disciples – A Commentary on the Arusha Call to Discipleship* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2020), 19.

some sectors of humanity by the powerful, every religious, ideological, or cultural imperialism and every exaltation of self-sufficiency of the individual over other people or over other parts of creation.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

This article sought to address the following central question: What is the importance of the Nicene Creed for a decolonized mission in Southern Africa, which has many independent churches? From an ecumenical perspective, what is the significance of the trinitarian understanding of one God in the Nicene Creed for our faith, unity, and mission?

To answer this question, this article explored the relevance and influence of the Nicene Creed within the changing mission context of 2025. While the Nicene Creed was not explicitly crafted as a missional document (or was it?), it can nonetheless be seen as foundational to the *missio Dei*, as it confesses God as a sending God, from whom both the Son and the Spirit proceed. Additionally, the creed affirmed the church as one, “catholic and apostolic.” In today’s evolving contexts, it is crucial to recognize that the church is no longer merely the sender but is now the one being sent.

The article also argued that the Nicene Confession, which originated from the church and was written for the church, continues to be used in the liturgy. It embodies the faith of the church, particularly when congregations gather around the eucharistic table in their specific contexts. Thus, unity and diversity are encapsulated in the very essence of the trinitarian God and reflected in his body – the church.

If we confess the church as “apostolic,” then by its very nature the church is inherently missionary, meaning that mission is intrinsically ecclesiastical. This demonstrates the ongoing importance of the Nicene Creed in the present context: it invites us to continuously reflect on the nature of the church and to rediscover the church’s calling from the one life-giving God in a constantly changing world.

May our confession, “We believe in One God” and “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church,” influence and determine the mission of the church (including all independent churches). May our faith, unity, and mission work together toward the kingdom of God.

<sup>48</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 508.