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KAIROS-THEOLOGY IN LIGHT OF THE PANDEMIC: AN ANALYSIS OF THE  
ZIMBABWEAN CHURCHES' RESPONSE TO COVID-19

BY

BLESSMORE CHINHARA

STUDENT NUMBER 20780975

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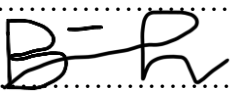
SUPERVISOR: Professor Stephan de Beer

May 2025

## Declaration

I, Blessmore Chinhara declare that this thesis titled: 'Kairos Theology in light of the pandemic: An analysis on the Zimbabwean Churches' response to COVID-19', is my own work and that all sources I have accessed or quoted have been acknowledged with a comprehensive list of references. In addition, apart from the acknowledged sources, there is an addendum listing pastoral letters and communiques from Zimbabwean churches.

Name of Student.....Blessmore Chinhara

Signature.....

Date: May 16, 2025.

## **Dedication**

I cordially dedicate this work to my mother Linah Chinhara, who was very instrumental in my upbringing. Through her being a prisoner of hope and endurance; life of suffering and tolerance has taught me that in the end goodness prevails over evil and love is stronger than hate. She is a peace-loving woman, very generous, and offered her entire life and home to orphans, the needy and the homeless. Crucially, I also dedicate this work to my late brother Brian Chinhara; a quiet, resilient, innovative, and visionary brother. In the same way this work is dedicated to all Christian communities and to the Zimbabwean ecclesiology who have, championed the fight against COVID-19, and cherished the cause of pastoral care, peace, justice, and human rights especially during COVID-19 period.

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Above all what else could I have done without God, the giver, and the sustainer of life. Truly, I can do all things through him who gives me strength.

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the response of contemporary Zimbabwean ecclesiology to the COVID-19 pandemic by utilizing the framework of the Kairos Document (1985). The objective of the study is to ascertain the factors that influenced the responses of churches in Zimbabwe, with a specific focus on the Catholic Church, Methodist Church, and Evangelism Fellowship. Furthermore, the research endeavours to develop a theological framework for Zimbabwean Liberation and Reconstruction that transcends the COVID-19 pandemic and encompasses forthcoming calamities and developments. This is essential now, as churches are reinstating their regular functions, due to the need for preparedness for analogous situations in the future. The framework of this study constitutes a liberationist perspective and is, thus, armed with tenets and insights from liberation paradigms and reconstruction paradigms. The significance of this broad paradigm of liberation and reconstruction must be understood within the context of the proposal to redirect African theological initiatives from liberation theologies and reconstruction theology to a new reality. Deliberately, this study adopted the view that reconstruction theology should be an addendum to liberation theology hence borrowing from Vellem (2007) the term “liberative reconstruction”. The research was analysed in light of the Kairos Document (1985), also referred to as Kairos theology, which asserts that the masses, the impoverished, oppressed, marginalized, powerless, vulnerable, and downtrodden, must rise up and advocate for their own liberation at such times. Therefore, in this study, the above said groups occupy the central epistemological space in this ecclesiological discourse.

This practical theology study, focused on Kairos theology, used the praxis cycle as its research methodology. The research attempted to relate theory and practice together in such a way that both are changed and enriched. The understanding of the spread of COVID-19, the treatment and mitigating factors were left in the hands of scientists and health practitioners ignoring the contribution and perception of the church. Furthermore, the government of Zimbabwe did not consider the Church as an essential organization in the fight against the pandemic. This study, therefore, considered the models on Church and State relationship as some parts of the Church interpreted the position of the government as the continuation of trying to remove the Church from the public space and creating the myth that the church should not be involved in politics, yet the Church considers herself as the voice of the voiceless. In addition to this perspective, the church perceived that the government of Zimbabwe was weaponising COVID-19 against the church.

Moreover, Zimbabwe was already a frail society in social, economic, and political dimensions prior to the emergence of COVID-19, therefore the pandemic intensified the issue. This thesis is formulated within the context of selected Zimbabwean ecclesiology to assess the actions undertaken by the Church in response to the Zimbabwean crisis. The circumstances in Zimbabwe necessitated an unavoidable confrontation between political and ecclesiological discourses as proposed by the Kairos Document (1985). Hence, this study sought to develop a theology based on liberation to reconstruction post-COVID-19 and to determine how Zimbabwean ecclesiology could benefit from a spiritual foundation based on Kairos theology.

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

|            |                                                                |
|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|
| AACC       | All Africa Conference of Churches                              |
| ACCZ       | Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe                        |
| AICs       | African Independent/Indigenous Churches                        |
| AIDS       | Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome                            |
| CCC        | Citizens Coalition for Change                                  |
| CCJP       | Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace                      |
| CCK        | Christ Church Kenilworth                                       |
| CIO        | Central Intelligence Organization                              |
| COVID-19   | Coronavirus Disease 2019                                       |
| EFZ        | Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe                             |
| ESAP       | Economic Structural Adjustment Program                         |
| GAPWUZ     | General Agricultural Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe      |
| GNU        | Government of National Unity                                   |
| GPA        | Global Political Agreement                                     |
| HIM        | Heartfelt International Ministry                               |
| HIV        | Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus                                  |
| ICU        | Intensive Care Unit                                            |
| ICESCR     | International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights |
| IMF        | International Monetary Fund                                    |
| LMS        | London Missionary Society                                      |
| RCCG       | Redeemed Christian Church of God                               |
| MDC        | Movement for Democratic Change                                 |
| PPE        | Personal Protective Equipment                                  |
| PUZ        | Pentecostal Union of Zimbabwe                                  |
| SACC       | Southern Africa Council of Churches                            |
| SADC       | Southern African Development Community                         |
| SARS-CoV-2 | severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2                |

|         |                                                                     |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| SI      | Statutory Instrument                                                |
| UDACIZA | Union for Development of Apostolic and Zionist Churches in Zimbabwe |
| UDI     | Unilateral Declaration of Independence                              |
| UFI     | United Family International Church                                  |
| UNEP    | United Nations Environmental Program                                |
| UNICEF  | United Nations International Children's Fund                        |
| WCC     | World Council of Churches                                           |
| WHO     | World Health Organization                                           |
| ZACH    | Zimbabwe Association of Church-Related Hospitals                    |
| ZANU PF | Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front                     |
| ZAOGA   | Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa                                   |
| ZCTU    | Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions                                   |
| ZDF     | Zimbabwe Defence Forces                                             |
| ZESA    | Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority                               |
| ZCBC    | Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference                                |
| ZCC     | Zimbabwe Council of Churches                                        |
| ZIICC   | Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-Denominational Council of Churches        |

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Introduction

Numerous organisations, enterprises, industries, commercial sectors, state-owned institutions, and members of civil society responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in a variety of ways, as the global community was taken aback by its unprecedented nature. The global calamity that shook societies and economies of the world, did not spare the religious sector from its repercussions. The objective of this thesis is to offer historical perspectives on the reaction of certain civic organizations, particularly Zimbabwean churches, to the seismic upheaval caused by COVID-19. The study is justified by the possibility of similar future occurrences. The purpose of this study is to establish church's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe. This section delves into the research problem, objectives, queries, and proposed research methodology that will be implemented in the study.

### 1.1 Background of the study

The world is currently facing challenges from the battle it fought in the last three years since 2019 after a virus which was initially discovered in the Chinese province of Hubei in Wuhan (Shereen et al., 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the situation a pandemic on 11 March 2020 (Shereen et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2020; Zu et al., 2020). Subsequent to that day, all governments and organizations responded by implementing numerous procedures and guidelines, aimed at effectively curbing the transmission of the virus and mitigating its consequences. This development brought with it the necessity for the general population to adhere to social distancing measures, mandatory lockdowns, vaccinations, and other related measures. However, these measures were adhered to as much as WHO announced depending on how tight the country's enforcement on the restrictions were, which in turn is also affected by the cultural, religious beliefs among others (McKenna, 2021). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that pandemics are not a novel occurrence in human history. The only factors that may differ between pandemics are the level of preparedness and the severity of the outbreak. An in-depth analysis of the ancient era reveals historical pandemics documented in world history, along with the corresponding responses of churches and Christians. Alternatively, the profound insight of Ecclesiastes 1:9 has already alluded to the universal truth that life operates in a cyclical manner and death is an inevitable occurrence (Pluss, 2020). New generations emerge as the current ones pass away and that is the natural life cycle.

The Old Testament supports the view that famines, wars and viral diseases are God's punishments (Lev. 26:25-26; Jeremiah 24:10; Eze. 14:21). In a way, COVID-19 could also be likened to such a perspective. An examination of how the world was affected in the biblical as well as the Christians ages show that millions of people have lost their lives due to these pandemics. Examples may be the horsemen of the Apocalypse (Revelation 6:3-8), Plague of Cyprian which devastated the Roman Empire, Bubonic Plague of Byzantine Empire, the Black Death of Europe, the smallpox of England, the Spanish flue, all saves as classical examples of cause of massive death, economic harm, societal disruptions, and religious disturbances (Pluss, 2020). The interesting part of these highlighted cases presents a more incredible insight on how the organisations and churches pastorally responded to the pandemics. For this reason, the study pays more attention to responses given by church bodies and organisations, as well as an empirical inquiry or examination on how particular local churches have reacted to the current novel corona virus.

It is noteworthy to emphasise that whereas organisations addressed the pandemic in both instances, the COVID-19 was distinct in its global reach and exhibited distinct morbidity and mortality rates compared to previous outbreaks. Again, families in those days used to have much bigger spaces than families of today. One more thing that caused the diseases to be more deadly could be the fact that people lived together in cramped spaces like cities, fortresses, monasteries, and convents (Pluss, 2020). It is also worth mentioning and highlight some of the strategies that were employed by churches in the biblical times. During the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918-1920, the Swiss government reportedly implemented emergency measures in 1918 to restrict public gatherings as a means of controlling the spread of Influenza. Festivities, church services, concerts, theatre performances, and visits to the sick were forbidden. Additionally, heavy fines were imposed on people who were caught breaking the decree (Pluss, 2020). This analogy demonstrates that during the biblical era, Christians not only relied on prayer but also developed various measures to address pandemics. The following section (1.2.1) examines the global church's response to COVID-19 and outlines several strategies implemented worldwide in reaction to the unprecedented situation arising from the outbreak that began in Wuhan in 2019.

For instance, many churches in Zimbabwe adopted innovative approaches to cope with COVID-19. Some congregations shifted to virtual services via social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Live, and Zoom to maintain worship and community support while observing lockdown restrictions. Others distributed food parcels and hygiene supplies to

vulnerable members, set up telephone helplines for pastoral care, and encouraged health education within their communities. These efforts reflect a broader trend among Zimbabwean churches to balance faith practices with practical solutions during the pandemic.

### **1.1.1 Global Perspective**

The initial cases were officially reported in Wuhan province, China, in early December 2019 (WHO, 2020a). The virus subsequently spread from Wuhan to many provinces across mainland China, including Guangdong, Zhejiang, Tianjin, and Heilongjiang. The first case outside of China was confirmed in Thailand on January 13, 2020 (WHO, 2020a). From there, it spread to other parts of the world, including several African countries such as Nigeria (WHO, 2020b). Therefore, on January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially recognized the virus epidemic as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Subsequently, on March 11, 2020, it was classified as a pandemic (WHO, 2020c). From December 2019 to March 11, 2020, there were almost 270 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 in 222 countries, resulting in 5 million deaths (WHO, 2020c).

Covid-19 pandemic significantly altered a variety of aspects on a global scale (Djalante et al, 2020). It appears that every sector, including education, business, society, and religion, has been impacted. Nevertheless, the virus disseminated and caused damage in numerous countries, adhering to a multifaceted and interconnected pattern. This is apparent in the diverse economic and social implications of the infection, which led to deterioration of systems. The pandemic also had a profound effect on the religious sector. It is anticipated that the coronavirus pandemic will require over a decade for countries to undergo a complete social and economic recovery (Abidah et al., 2020; Bisong, 2020; Djalante et al, 2020; Onyema et al., 2020; Sumarni & Utomo, 2021). It is then imperative to evaluate the degree to which the virus has impacted religion, particularly in the context of on-going economic and societal recovery efforts, given the historical significance of churches that date back to BC (Bisong, 2020).

In response to the World Health Organisation's designation of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, the Bishop of the Church of England swiftly dispatched a letter to clergy across all dioceses, directing them to close all church premises. (McKenna, 2021). Weddings were banned, and funerals were highly discouraged from occurring within the church premises. Only establishments that offered food were permitted to remain operational, facilitating restricted access (McKenna, 2021). In the United Kingdom, numerous churches and religious organizations collaborated to create "The UK Blessing," a video that garnered millions of views. During their time in India, Churches performed the "blessing song" in 31 different

languages across the sub-continent (Pluss, 2021). In March 2020, the Roman Catholic Church formed a COVID-19 working team to handle issues related to the virus. This declaration aimed to express the Church's concern and vigilance during this period. Churches with a strong sacramental tradition were significantly affected as they faced the difficulty of obtaining the Eucharist, an essential component of their worship. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has published a 36-page literature entitled "Resuming Care-Filled Worship and Sacramental Life during a Pandemic" (Pluss 2020). This statement is the outcome of an ecumenical conversation with representatives from the Methodist, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic denominations. Numerous churches reacted by adopting techniques to convene in small groups, and others proactively offered online programs (Pluss, *ibid*). Pluss (*ibid*) further indicates that specific churches designated resources to assist families significantly impacted by the catastrophic effects of the novel coronavirus. On a global scale, the Anglican Communion proceeded to organize and combine resources following a request made by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Anglican Alliance (2020) established a comprehensive repository of knowledge on COVID-19, including strategies for churches to effectively address the pandemic, particularly in terms of aiding the most susceptible individuals. At the core of their efforts was the slogan and initiative "Together in Unity," which also demonstrated unity. The World Health Organisation then delineated the responsibilities that religious leaders were expected to fulfil in order to prevent the transmission of the virus inside their communities. These roles encompassed fostering social unity, alleviating individuals' anxieties, upholding trustworthy connections, implementing tangible service provisions, advocating for others, and safeguarding the most disadvantaged and impoverished (WHO, 2020d). The impact on different nations, institutions, and organisations seems to vary. Considering several elements such as the organisation's historical background, its affiliation with the church, leadership, financial situation, and the state of the nation, it is highly probable that their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and their rates of recovery will vary (WHO, 2020d).

Several religious organisations and associations moved beyond their traditional role as a church (Gutu and Carm, 2021). For instance, organisations such as the World Council of Churches, the Evangelical World Alliance, and the Pentecostal World Fellowship serve as examples. All these groups promptly responded to the impacts of COVID-19 to preserve lives. These actions were undertaken through various means, such as gathering resources, aiding healthcare workers, and offering financial help to affected families. The World Council of Churches (WCC) (2024) comprises a fellowship of 250 churches, which collectively represent over 500

million Christians. This organisation offers significant global assistance which encompassed addressing the surge in domestic violence resulting from incarceration and providing support to individuals with mental illness. The World Evangelical Alliance, which operates in 129 countries, has released digital materials for church leaders, national alliances, business leaders, health experts, and families (WCC, 2024). Each component includes links, papers, videos, and applications for quick solutions and support within the given time. The Pentecostal World Fellowship, an alliance of traditional Pentecostal churches, deserves recognition for its significant efforts. It is estimated to have a loose connection with approximately 120 million people (WCC *ibid*). In addition to the expected information on its website, there is a webinar available that discusses the medical, pastoral, social, and spiritual dimensions of responding as followers of Christ to the problems presented by the coronavirus (WCC, 2024). The 54-minute movie is not only interesting due to its wide breadth of concern and broad application, but it also provides benefits to both church leaders and regular church members. After examining multiple religious entities, groups, and fellowships, one observation stands out prominently. Without their digital initiatives, it would have been arduous to promptly and effectively address the impact of such a serious pandemic on numerous churches. When it comes to the IT specialists in control, one could rephrase Winston Churchill's statement as follows: "Never before has there been such a significant debt owed by a large number of people to a small number of individuals in the realm of urgent human communication" (Pluss 2020). It became evident that being a member of God's church encompasses more than what is seen on a typical Sunday. Before exploring the impact of these new initiatives on the global Christian church, we will review insights from local and national churches for a broader perspective.

### **1.1.2 Regional Perspective**

Various factors influenced the way institutions reacted to COVID-19, and it was possible that the speed, manner, and nature of those responses varied greatly. Likewise, various religious denominations have exhibited diverse responses within their own ranks. The initial incidence of COVID-19 in Nigeria was documented in Lagos on around 27 February 2020 (Nche and Agbo, 2021). In response to COVID-19, Nigeria implemented measures to raise awareness, including official requests for widespread dissemination of information. This was accompanied by the implementation of lockdowns, resulting in the closure of schools, churches, and the entire country (Nche and Agbo, 2021). The significance of religion was evident and underscored in Nigeria with regards to the church's participation during the pandemic. Prof. Dr. Azza Karam, Secretary General of Religions for Peace (RfP), has stressed the importance

of religious communities working together to address the COVID-19 pandemic, as stated in a review by Nche and Agbo (2021). Odeboye, the leader of Redemption College in Nigeria and a prominent figure in the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), expressed his disapproval of the Nigerian government's exclusion of churches from its COVID-19 response plans during his sermon on April 19, 2020 (Wild-Wood, 2022). The government promptly incorporated churches into the battle against COVID-19, recognising their role in the spiritual aspect of the campaign.

In addition, church buildings and centres were committed to being utilised as screening centres in the country. The RCCG demonstrated compliance with the COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the government, thereby showing their support for the government's measures (Wild-Wood, 2022). Odeboye's church made substantial contributions to the government's health initiatives, which involved distributing food nationwide. Additionally, they employed video calls, text messages, and phone calls to provide spiritual support and pastoral care (Wild-Wood, 2022). The RCCG played a crucial role in supporting the government's efforts to enhance the utilisation of health services. It proficiently distributed information via its communication channels and websites, together with its pastoral messages and sermons, which demonstrated the capacity to impact individuals' behaviour and motivate them to pursue health care (Adeboye, 2020). In Nigeria, financial assistance and resources were organized to support families significantly affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. The church was obligated to offer therapy to persons suffering spiritual grief after the loss of their loved ones. Furthermore, the church sought to enhance global awareness of the pandemic and to inform others regarding the situation. Religion in Nigeria played a pivotal role in bolstering the government's initiatives to manage COVID-19, prior to the government's contemplation of soliciting aid from churches. The primary inquiry that necessitates resolution could be formulated as follows: What factors influenced the church's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic? Is it possible that the influence of culture, the role of government and politics in supporting churches, historical instances of churches being involved in biblical issues, the political affiliations of church leaders, church culture, and the compatibility of technology within the country or among church members are factors to consider? Several factors need to be examined to determine churches' future roles in pandemics.

In Congo, after the president declared lockdown measures, the bishops endorsed them. Some expressed doubt about how social, moral, and sorrowful matters should be shared, given the importance of physical distancing and greetings in Congolese societies. It has been reported

that pastors collected tithes and offerings via postal envelopes and radios, while some requested congregants to use M-Pesa mobile services. Despite concerns regarding the transparency and management of these proceeds, the adoption of these technologies allowed congregants to continue giving to God (Wild-Wood, 2022). Kenya's President William Ruto, a devout Catholic, is one of several world leaders who quickly turned to prayer, leading many supplications (Wild-Wood, 2022). In July 2020, churches were established in Kenya, permitting a maximum of 200 individuals to gather for a single prayer service (Wild-Wood, 2022). In contrast to the situations in Nigeria, Congo, and Kenya, where churches were instrumental in mitigating the spread of COVID-19, reports suggest that churches in Egypt, Rwanda, and specific areas of South Africa adopted a contrary position to the measures aimed at curbing the transmission of COVID-19 (Wild-Wood et al., 2022). Some religious institutions chose to hold prayer meetings in small groups, close their physical locations, or transmit their services through online platforms or radio, while others allegedly witnessed a decrease in their faith in God and abstained from seeking government intervention in the management of COVID-19.

Consequently, religious institutions provided resources, facilitated compliance with WHO regulations, offered counselling services to the most impacted members of the communities, and supported governments in their efforts to swiftly disseminate awareness-raising information throughout the nation and continent. A church member, educator, and medical practitioner in South Africa documented the inequities present in Cape Town. The report further explored the existence of diverse church denominations and their respective responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The South African church community promptly extended its assistance to the government as it endeavoured to address the repercussions of the pandemic (Wild-Wood, 2022). Christ Church, Kenilworth (CCK), one of the oldest churches in Cape Town, implemented three primary strategies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, it extended a theological ministry by means of an online platform for Sunday worship and promoted the virtual gathering of smaller groups for fellowship, teaching, and prayer. Secondly, it directed pastoral care towards two specific demographics—adolescents and young adults—acknowledging the persistent anxiety associated with resuming academic and collegiate pursuits. Lastly, CCK implemented a mercy ministry (Wild-Wood, 2022). The above examples share similar features with Zimbabwe's context (discussed below). However, there have been rare instances of state-led denial of WHO recommendations, such as Tanzania under

President Magufuli, who viewed COVID-19 as misinformation (Mawerenga and Knoetze 2022; Mawerenga 2024).

### **1.1.3 Motivations for the Research**

The research draws on my experience as Mission Director and Minister of Religion for the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe during the pandemic. As acting General Secretary, I advised on and communicated the church's response to the crisis. My participation has highlighted both the challenges facing the church and the potential for bias due to my insider perspective. To address this, I will apply principles from Phenomenology of Religion by suspending judgment and navigating insider/outsider dynamics.

### **1.1.4 Church – Essential or non-Essential.**

Assembling for the purposes of devotion and fellowship within a church structure is regarded as a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith. Prior to the emergence of COVID-19 and the subsequent global lockdowns, Christians engaged in and continue to observe specific practices as a means of expressing affection, sorrow, and concern for one another, to name a few. In Zimbabwe, these practices encompassed physical church gatherings, handshakes during greetings, mutual kisses (as exemplified by Johannes Marange church), sermons, rituals, the application of hands to the sick, hymnals, prayers, and liturgies, among numerous others. All of these were prohibited by the WHO (2020) as a measure to contain the virus. Some churches provided their buildings for use as treatment centres, vaccine clinics, or quarantine facilities during the pandemic. As a result of COVID-19, the Christian church was in a state of crisis, and a faith in peril necessitates a re-evaluation. In addition to being a crisis, the pandemic may present the church with an opportunity to reacquaint itself with the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith and reassert what the church is or ought to be. As opposed to perceiving obstacles as opportunities, the church ought to develop the mind-set of perceiving opportunities within each challenge (Mbada 2008).

The initial 21-day nationwide curfew was declared on March 30, 2020, by Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa. The conditions governing this closure encompassed the cessation of all non-essential operations, the mandatory donning of masks by essential personnel, and the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline workers. In accordance with the Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment, and Treatment National Lockdown Order (2020), Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 provided comprehensive guidelines and instructions for the duration of the lockdowns. The statutory instrument banned assemblies and restricted public movement, except for essential service providers. Hospital or

healthcare services, state security services, emergency services such as ambulance and fire department services, water and electrical services, and grocery stores were all considered essential. The church's status as a state-affiliated institution in Zimbabwe has generated suspicion regarding the persistence of animosity between the two entities.

### **1.1.5 History of church-state relationship.**

The church and state have had a relationship dating back to 1890 when missionaries first arrived in a settler state of Rhodesia. But Maenzanise (2008) acknowledges the presents of missionaries in present day Zimbabwe prior to the 1890 colonial occupation. Missionary activities were noted and established at Hope Fountain and Inyathi. However, for history purposes, the church in Zimbabwe since the colonial government demonstrated its solidarity with the people's struggle for justice and liberation; consequently, it played a crucial role in the liberation war. The church developed a heightened awareness of the black struggle and racial discrimination in Rhodesia during the early 1970s (Banana 1996:363). The name Rhodesia is used in this thesis as the colonial name for the present-day Zimbabwe. The relationship between the Zimbabwean government and the church is currently extremely tense. Since their all-time low in the mid-1980s, when the church openly disapproved of the government's management of the dissidents' issue, relations had significantly improved (Chitando 2021:32). Subsequently, a mass slaughter of primarily isiNdebele-speaking citizens in the Matabeleland and Midlands Provinces of Zimbabwe by military personnel who spoke ChiShona predominated; this was referred to as the 'Gukurahundi' (Chitando 2021:44). The church criticised the government openly for committing the genocide.

Since the beginning of 1999, the Zimbabwean government has employed state-sponsored torture and political violence in a barbaric effort to suppress political opposition. Thus, egregious human rights violations have ensued. Pastoral letters were intermittently dispatched by the church in Zimbabwe to the government, imploring it to cease human rights violations. The historical record of human rights violations in Zimbabwe was documented in the shadow report submitted to the African Commission on Human and People's Rights in May 2007 and the 2020 report on Human Rights from the U.S. Embassy in Zimbabwe (US Embassy in Zimbabwe 2020). The church-state relationship in Zimbabwe was already strained prior to the arrival of COVID-19.

Notably, the church was polarised during the presidency of Robert Mugabe, who ensured that African Independent Churches (AICs), also referred to as 'white garment' churches (Vapositioni), and ZANU PF developed a friendly relationship. Consequently, the state through

the ruling political party considered every other church that declined matrimony with it to be an enemy of the state (Musoni 2019). Under the new political dispensation of President Emmerson Mnangagwa, this union with African Independent Churches was strengthened further. Instances of statutory instruments pertaining to COVID-19 being selectively applied to churches began to be noticeable and these developments have been documented (Musoni 2019).

It is crucial to acknowledge that the foundation for this study was laid by the political elite in Zimbabwe, which delegated the responsibility of addressing spiritual and humanitarian issues to churches. As a result, its function was constrained to what the ruling political elite considered to be the critical undertakings of praying fervently, perusing the Bible, and proclaiming the message from heaven (Chitando 2011:44). There was a call for churches to refrain from political interference and instead focus on matters of a spiritual nature. "The church must perpetually abstain from sin," said Chitando (2011:44). "In their opinion, the gravest sin is when the church speaks out on political matters." In this context, COVID-19 brought to the fore politics on state and the church which is the centrality of this discussion.

In contrast, the Christian Churches in Zimbabwe, as articulated in their visionary document *The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe* (2006), regard their mission as that of a divine institution entrusted with the active pursuit of global societal change in service of God and all humanity. Zimbabwean society places the church in an extremely central position (Chitando 2011:43). As a result, it is unavoidable that the Christian church, confronted with the nation's complete economic, social, and political crisis that ensued after the year 2000, would intervene in a variety of ways in a bid to discover a lasting peaceful resolution to the political impasse (Chitando 2011:45).

The government's endeavour to suppress the church was intensified with the introduction of C-19. This was accomplished methodically by designating the church to have no function in combating the pandemic and, as such, to be non-essential. Considering this, a document from 1985 assumes critical importance in elucidating the present-day obstacles. The document is titled *Kairos*, referring to the biblical term "Kairos" (Luke 19:14), which signifies the arrival of "the hour of truth" for the Christian community (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1992:22). The document was characterised as an opportune moment of grace and opportunity during which God posed a challenge to a critical juncture (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1992:23).

### **1.1.6. COVID-19 and Suffering**

Zimbabwean authorities initiated the implementation of a three-week closure on March 30, 2020, as part of their efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19. On routes leading to the central business district of Harare, police established checkpoints, where they directed unauthorized pedestrians and stopped vehicles (Veritas Zimbabwe, 2021). Baton-wielding metropolitan and national police trucks were patrolling in other areas, issuing directives for individuals to return to their residences. Many of the nation's sixteen million inhabitants, who are already enduring a severe economic downturn, were placed under additional hardships by the closure. Certain individuals in Harare were endeavouring to migrate to rural villages. The closure of informal markets had the greatest impact on informal traders (Wiley Online Library, 2021). Zimbabwean churches composed pastoral letters to their congregations at this juncture, in which they provided interpretations of the President's proclamation and Statutory Instrument 2020-83.

In the context of COVID-19, an examination of Zimbabwean ecclesiology may be initiated with an examination of pastoral letters from congregations in Zimbabwe. The responses appropriately situate the church in relation to its Christian Social Responsibility obligation. A prophetic document titled "The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe" was authored by the Christian Churches in Zimbabwe in 2006. According to the CIZ document (2006:14-15), the church is entrusted with three mandates, which are as follows:

- (1) The theological mandate asserts that the Church's active involvement in transforming the social, economic, and political environment in which God's people live is imperative. The Church's commitment to justice, harmony, and effective governance reflects God's concern for humanity.
- (2) Historical mandate: The Church possesses a substantial history of tackling the social challenges faced by both the Zimbabwean and worldwide societies.
- (3) Representative mandate: The Church acts as a proponent for the voiceless.

The document titled "The Zimbabwe we want" serves as a liberation discourse and proposes an ecclesiological framework that emphasizes the socio-cultural, political, and economic circumstances of individuals as fundamental concerns and the primary focus of Zimbabwean ecclesiology. The emergence of COVID-19 and the subsequent containment measures inflicted significant hardship, particularly on the impoverished and marginalized populations in Zimbabwe. Those who depend on vending on urban and suburban street corners were

compelled to remain indoors throughout the closure. The Zimbabwean government failed to implement safety netting or devise a provisional feeding strategy for the affected population.

#### **1.1.7. The Kairos Document (1985)**

Described in terms of Kairos theology, "The Kairos Document" (1985) inspired the researcher to conduct this investigation. In this study, the justification for revisiting the Kairos Theology is articulated in detail. Sometimes, churches need to address political oppression even if it is outside their usual scope. Such actions fall under the purview of the government and its agencies, including the security sector, that is, the army, police, prisons, defence, foreign affairs, and home affairs. Kairos Theology highlights the Church's essential role during critical times like apartheid, which present both challenges and opportunities. Such circumstances demand a radical response, and the literature indicates that churches are indispensable during such conflicts. The global landscape in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic was marked by periods of adversity, and the involvement or reaction of religious institutions was anticipated. Analogous to the circumstances surrounding the creation of the Kairos document is the function of churches and prophetic labour. The document appears to be highly pertinent as it provides the justification for Church intervention during periods of global turmoil experienced by all societies. Zimbabwe, in particular, is among the most vulnerable nations due to its perceived deficiency of essential resources that serve as shock absorbers during crises, in comparison to other countries. The proposal is to examine COVID-19 through the lens of Kairos' Theology, which originates from the experience of a "situation of death" and seeks to develop a biblical and theological alternative that signifies a genuine opportunity. The Kairos Document elucidates the necessity of the Gospel during periods of profound political turmoil, wherein Christianity was employed to rationalise an intolerable system of oppression. The document was described as an opportune moment and an occasion for success, during which God issued a challenge to a critical juncture. The theologians were constrained to conduct a more thorough examination of the prevalent theologies in South Africa, namely state theology, white church theology, and prophetic theology, during this "moment of truth" (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1992:23).

The Kairos Document (1985) calls on churches and the Christian community to reflect on the country's situation and determine the best response. This study highlights the necessity for church involvement in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The writers recognise the collective or individual responsibility of churches to contribute to the demolition of apartheid and the establishment of a society based on democracy, peace, and justice, without endorsing

any denominational stance. This establishes the framework for the anticipated response of the churches following the pandemic. The authors of the Kairos Document (1985) contend that, given the crisis, churches must recognise their obligation. The current situation entails a crisis that transcends the socio-political realm and includes belief systems as well. It parallels the apartheid reality in South Africa that prompted the creation of the document. The perspectives articulated in the document are anticipated to successfully inform the reactions of churches and their expectations post-COVID-19. This positions it at the nexus of the research.

### **1.2 Problem Statement**

According to the Kairos Theology (Kairos Document 1985), which asserts that churches should cooperate with the government during times of adversity, the global conditions that arose following the COVID-19 pandemic were undeniably difficult due to the imminent threat to human life. Conversely, in Zimbabwe, churches were classified as non-essential services. Consequently, the government classified the role of churches as non-essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Kairos Theology literature (Kairos Document 1985) asserts that during crises, the relationship between the government and the church is profoundly close. A lack of comprehension seems to prevail concerning the relationship between church involvement during crises and the observations recorded in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 pandemic. The existing comprehension of Zimbabwean churches' viewpoints on the COVID-19 virus is constrained. The record concerning their responses to the outbreak, both during and subsequent to its peak, is insufficient. The extent to which the responsibilities of Zimbabwean churches were analogous or divergent from those in other African regions and worldwide remains uncertain (Wild-Wood, 2022; McKenna, 2021; Pluss, 2020; Nche, 2020a; Nche and Agbo, 2021). Historically, followers of the Christian faith supported governments in their endeavours to manage pandemics. Unlike other nations, Zimbabwe lacks research focused on the role of the church and religion in general in the containment of pandemic. With a few notable exceptions, the historical practice of the Christian faith demonstrated a commitment to altruism and functioned as a commendable paradigm. The objective of this research is to ascertain the response of churches in Zimbabwe to the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, whether they attributed the novel virus to the natural sciences or the social sciences, and how this impression may have affected their approach compared to other churches' management of the infection.

### **1.3 Research Question**

How did churches respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe?

### **1.3.1 Specific Research Questions**

1. What obstacles did Zimbabwean churches encounter in managing the pandemic, and what accounted for the varied responses among these churches?
2. In what ways did the COVID-19 experience shape the theology of the church in Zimbabwe?
3. How did the church and state engage with each other during COVID-19?
4. What were the insights gain from COVID-19 in Zimbabwe as a church enhance ecclesial, social, and health activities during and after the pandemic?

## **1.4 Research Objective**

To examine the response of the churches in Zimbabwe to the COVID-19 pandemic developing an appreciation of how that shaped the theology of the church in Zimbabwe.

### **1.4.1 Specific Research Objectives**

1. To interrogate experiences of churches in Zimbabwe in managing the COVID-19 epidemic.
2. To analyse how the COVID-19 experience influenced the theology and practices of the church in Zimbabwe.
3. To examine the interaction between the church and state during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. To analyse the insights gained from COVID-19 by churches in Zimbabwe for enhanced ecclesiastical, social, and health activities during and after the epidemic.

## **1.5 Research Methodology**

Based on the nature of the investigation, the selected research paradigm is the pragmatic approach. This is defined by Allemang et al. (2022) as the combination of practical decision-making and adaptability in resolving real-world challenges. The approach is founded on the principle of employing optimal methodologies to examine practical issues, enabling the utilisation of diverse data sources and information to address research inquiries. The philosophical school of pragmatism emerged in the United States around 1870. Classical pragmatists, which included Peirce, James, and Dewey, were the most influential pragmatists. Richard Rorty is among the notable academics who have contributed to and advocated for pragmatism throughout the years and are referred to as neo-pragmatists (Allemang et al., 2022). It emerged as a response to the prevailing and contradictory perspectives on reality put forth by the positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Pragmatism, a philosophical doctrine with roots

in the academic sceptics of classical antiquity, advocated for the acceptance of plausible information sufficient for practical purposes and rejected the notion of attaining authentic knowledge of the true nature of things.

Pragmatic research is distinct from efficacy research (Allemang et al., 2022). The approach is as demanding, however more comprehensive, and serves a distinct objective: it addresses significant inquiries regarding the practical use of an intervention in clinical care or community contexts. Regarding the research, it allows incorporation of the different responses from the different churches in the development or rather reconstruction and liberalization of the current theology. Approaching the issue at hand through these lenses would allow for practical resolutions to the theology of the church after the COVID-19 era.

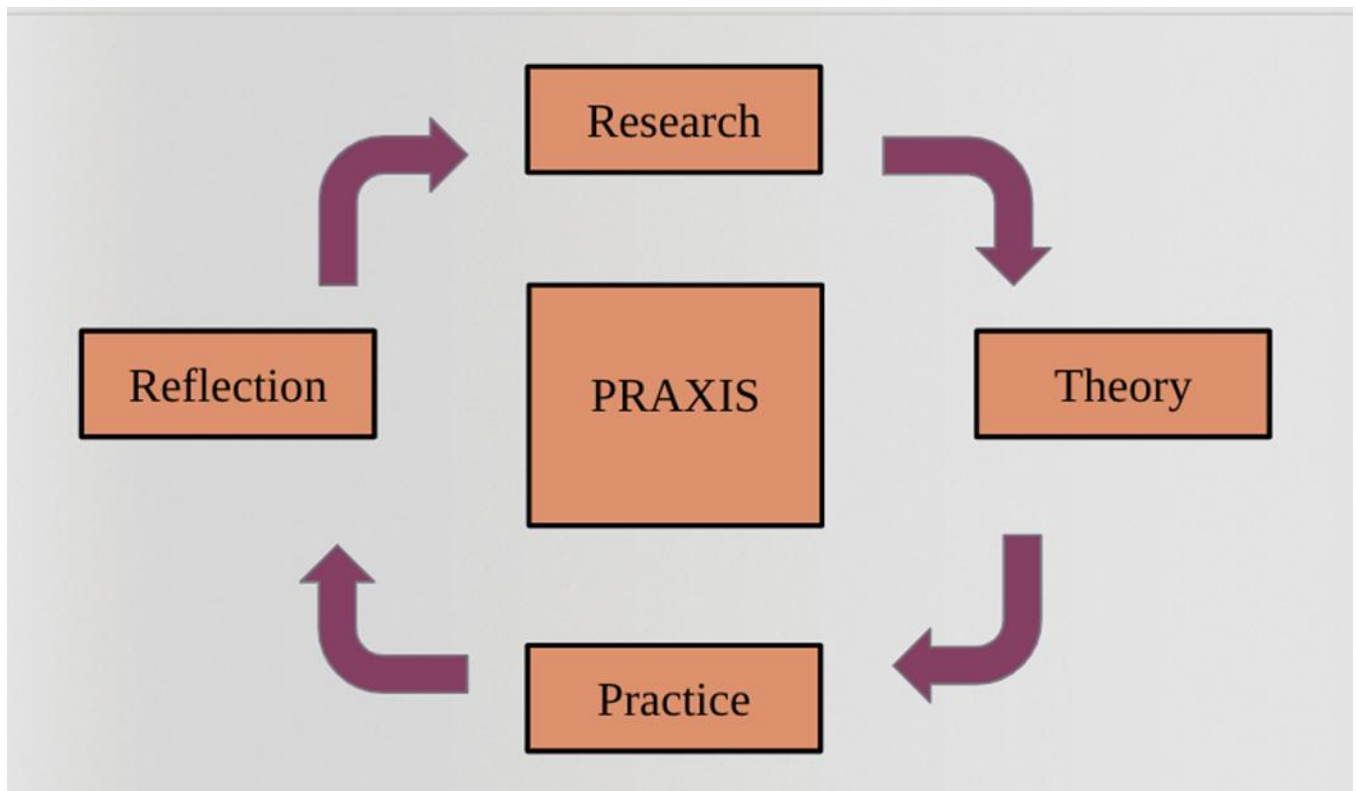
### **1.5.1 Specific Research Methodology: The Praxis Cycle.**

The pragmatic paradigm is deployed in this study utilising the praxis cycle as the designated research approach. The suggested study methodology is a modified version of the historical approach developed by Wesley in 1784, as documented by many researchers (Hey and Roux 2012; Kritzinger 2008; Karecki, 2005; Holland and Henriot 1984). The origins of its history can be traced back to the era of Aristotle. According to Hey and Roux (2012), the term "praxis" has its origins in the Ancient Greek language and refer to the behaviours and pursuits carried out by those who were not restricted by limitations or responsibilities. Aristotle, the philosopher, proposed that humans partake in three primary endeavours: contemplation (thinking), creation, and action. The activities were linked to three distinct forms of knowledge: which is theoretical knowledge, which seeks to attain truth; combination knowledge, which seeks to achieve production; and practical knowledge, which wants to achieve action. Aristotle classified the knowledge acquired from practical experience into the domains of ethics, economy, and politics. Praxis may then be viewed as an academic concept that describes a continuous process of learning through experience, as explained and made popular by Kritzinger (2008) and Karecki (2005). The benefit of this technique is that it enables an examination of societal issues and reality, such as the circumstances caused by COVID-19. Theology can function as a framework that facilitates discussion, enabling an ongoing process of involvement and problem-solving.

The rationale for adopting the praxis philosophy is based on the researcher being a pastor who is personally involved in the subject being investigated. Praxis enables the researcher to utilise their own experiences and integrate them with traditions and biblical teachings. In 1784,

Wesley created a biblical approach that aims to examine biblical studies through the lenses of experience, tradition, and the Bible. Several authors, including Hey and Roux (2012), Kritzinger (2008), Karecki (2005), and Holland and Henriot (1984), have further developed the Wesley's quadrilateral model methodology by integrating it with the Praxis Cycle. Hence, this study will utilize the quadrilateral model of Wesley, in conjunction with the Praxis Cycle (Pastoral Cycle) as amended by Holland and Henriot in 1984. The research technique is based on the following concept (see Fig 1.1 below). In short, the praxis cycle method is developed below.

Fig. 1.1 The Praxis Cycle; Source (Holland and Henriot 1984)



According to Weber and De Beer (2016), the praxis cycle is a research method which allows the researcher to study theology within the space in which the researcher is part of the studied population. The research methodology requires one to contextualise the research using four distinct moments of insertion/immersion, socio-ecclesial analysis, theological reflection, and planning for action. The Praxis Cycle was implemented on the grounds that by actively engaging the researcher in the population under study, it enables them to collectively comprehend their own realities. This is achieved through participation in small communities, contextual reading of the Bible, and the identification of potential actions that could transform

those realities. (Weber and De Beer, 2016). The Praxis Cycle is a rich methodology as it is a process that is very deep and grounded on the 'spirituality' of people, biblically and practically from within their own faith experiences, which COVID-19 posed to the World but in the direction of transformation and justice aimed to save the societal interests by both the government, politics, and churches.

### **1.5.2. Data Collection and Analysis**

This research employed two approaches of data collection: documentary analysis and literature review. The primary method of data collecting utilised in this research is documentary analysis, supplemented by a literature review. A multitude of papers on COVID-19 is now accessible for utilisation in this research as part of the literature review. Documentary analysis is a qualitative research method wherein the researcher interprets documents to provide insight or significance regarding a specific assessment issue (Bowen 2020). The process entails assessing electronic and physical documents to evaluate their content, comprehend their significance, and expand upon the information they provide. The principal data for study comprises Statutory Instruments promulgated by the government of Zimbabwe. Statutory Instruments prompted responses from churches and civic organizations, resulting in the release of pastoral letters and communiqués. The pastoral letters constitute a facet of the church's responses to COVID-19, highlighting the intricate dynamics between the church and the state, which oscillated between antagonism and collaboration, contingent upon points of consensus and contention. Alongside Statutory Instruments and pastoral letters, the research employed documents from the security sector, particularly those concerning curfews, as well as data from the Ministry of Health and Childcare. The decision to utilise virtual and ecclesiastical documents was dictated by the circumstances prevailing during the study, which precluded physical interactions, hence necessitating the reliance on these papers. Dalglish et al. (2021) endorses the utilisation of various sources, highlighting their provision of reliable, precise, and economic data. It is also asserted that it is devoid of prejudice resulting from the physical presence of researchers and complications arising from participation. The decision for a non-physical interaction with research interlocutors was also reached in concurrence with Crean et al (2024) and Townsend et al (2025) who argued that research that avoided physical contact with research participants during COVID-19 was a way of reducing risk exposure to health hazards of COVID-19 virus.

The researcher recognises that most materials lack clearly defined research objectives, thus requiring the application of investigative skills. An effort is underway to extract hidden information from available documents and literature. Supplementary documents may be

deficient in information or contain erroneous or contradictory facts. Bowen (2009) emphasises the importance of performing a thorough evaluation and analysis of the subjectivity of documents due to the potential presence of biases. Thus, there is an endeavour to meticulously and critically scrutinise the articles to collect material pertinent to the study questions and research aims.

Part of the pastoral letters (see addendum for information) and church communiques to be studied as primary data and evidence of the church's response to COVID-19 are: COVID-19, Sunday Services and other gatherings by the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe 25 March 2020, Ecumenical Response on COVID-19 Pandemic by the Zimbabwe Council of Churches 3 April 2020, Pastoral Reflections and Exhortations in the Context of covid-19 by the Catholic Church news 16 July 2020, The March is not ended by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference 14 August 2020, A pastoral letter to the churches and the people of Zimbabwe by the World council of churches 17 August 2020, Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe Response to COVID-19 Pandemic by Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe 01 May 2020, see addendum on page 33. The collected data from these documents and the literature review was analysed using thematic data analysis, a widely used method in social sciences and humanities. Naeem et al. (2023) explain that this approach helps identify patterns, develop themes, and interpret even large datasets.

## **1.6. Literature Review**

This part of the study reviews relevant literature pertaining to Kairos theology, COVID-19 and the Zimbabwean ecclesiology's response to COVID-19. The pandemic revealed a theological problem on the relevance of the church in a world of such a crisis and so, the literature review makes a cross examination of literature highlighting areas of divergence and agreement with authors of literature being reviewed. This part of literature review is carried under three sub-topics. The first part covers literature on the framework of Kairos theology, the second part covers literature on COVID-19, and the third part covers literature on the church's response to COVID-19 and its relationship with the state.

### **1.6.1. Kairos-Theology**

The Kairos Document (1985) is a theological discourse that embodies Kairos Theology and serves as a political commentary on the crises occurring in South Africa. The declaration was written by distinguished theologians in South Africa, including both clergy and laity. Theology was authored by 152 theologians, including Chikane, Maimela, Smith, and Setiloane, among others (The Kairos Document 1985:31). Kairos Theology originated in response to the

oppressive racial policies of Apartheid, which caused deep political conflict and division within South African society (The Kairos Document 1985:2).

The Kairos Document (KD) is a theological declaration released in 1985 by a predominately black group of South African theologians, primarily located in the townships of Soweto, South Africa (The Kairos Document 1985:2). The writers of the document criticised the churches' reaction to the harsh practices of the apartheid administration during the nationwide state of emergency that was announced on July 21, 1985. The KD exemplifies theological context and theology of freedom in South Africa, serving as a model for analogous critical literature in various countries and contexts. The document is organised into five concise chapters, which discuss subjects such as the criticism of 'state theology,' 'church theology,' and a plea for action. This event marked a crucial turning point in South Africa's fight against apartheid, highlighting the need of hope and prophecy theology for the country.

The Kairos Document (KD), published in 1985 by theologians from South Africa, presented several crucial arguments. The statement highlighted the importance of grounding theology in the circumstances of apartheid South Africa, instead of depending on theoretical or universal concepts. It supported theological beliefs that actively participated in the fight against apartheid, supporting principles of equal treatment, equity, and human dignity. The Kairos Document of 1985 denounced the churches' collaboration with the apartheid system and advocated for a prophetic position against injustice. The statement prompted the church to go beyond simply adapting and remaining impartial, instead advocating for active support and unity with the oppressed. The Kairos Document instilled optimism and motivated tangible efforts towards achieving justice, peace, and transformation.

A Kairos Moment: We will rise and rebuild, a document by Anono (2003), presented at the All for Africa Conference of Churches, asserts that HIV and AIDS are not solely medical issues and are not exclusively caused by sexual promiscuity and drug addiction. It emphasizes that poverty is directly interconnected with these diseases. In Africa, HIV and AIDS frequently result in death, although in the western world, it is considered a chronic illness that can be managed with medical intervention, and its treatment options are progressively improving. Poor countries generally have a high prevalence rate of HIV and AIDS. The journal promotes the principles of reconstruction theology, theology of development, and the revitalization of Africa. Contrary to expectations, COVID-19 has been found to be more deadly in affluent and developing nations than in impoverished African countries.

Boesak's (2015) publication promotes the revival of the Kairos theological tradition. In this publication, Boesak (2015:2) suggests the importance of having a "humanity with a Kairos consciousness" that can analyse, react, and evaluate the conditions in which people live. Such a society should actively seek solutions to address diseases, poverty, and undergo transformation. The book also analyses the bible's potential as a historical account of steadfast opposition against oppression. The discussion on Kairos prompts deep contemplation by urging individuals of religious conviction to embody the role of prophetic figures who possess the bravery and fortitude to speak the truth during societal turmoil (Paradza 2019:23).

In an article titled 'A Kairos for the lowly? Reflections on Luke's story of a rejected fortune or Tyche and lessons for South Africa', Speckman (2016: 1) asserts that Jerusalem's inability to recognise or value its advantageous situation, as outlined in Luke 19:41-44, may stem from a divergence in expectations between the Temple authorities and the general populace who interacted with Jesus in a more accessible manner. In Speckman (2016: *ibid*). "Lowly" denotes persons who are marginalized or peripheral to society, including the impoverished, defenceless, and destitute, as well as those exhibiting humility and subservience. The article posits that the substance of a Kairos is dependent on the potential beneficiaries, however its mode of delivery and time (Kairos) are governed by divine authority. The capacity to recognize and accept the Kairos relies on a consensus among recipients over its substance (Speckman 2016:1). The study examines the viewpoint of perceiving COVID-19 through the concept of Kairos, underscoring that the solutions to the pandemic ought to be dictated by those most affected, specifically the impoverished and marginalised.

#### **1.6.1. 1. Liberation and Reconstruction**

The study is grounded around practical theology placing special emphasis on Kairos theology as articulated in the Kairos Document of 1985 armed with tenets and insights from liberation paradigm and reconstruction paradigm. The significance of this broad paradigm of liberation and reconstruction must be understood within the context of the proposal to redirect African theological initiatives from liberation theologies to reconstruction theology. The basis of this call was the end of colonialism in most African states, especially the end of Apartheid in South Africa, which signalled the independence of all countries in the African continent. The proposal for a shift from liberation to reconstruction or to regard reconstruction as a continuation of liberation sparked a lot of debate among scholars such as Maluleke (1994), Mugambi (1998), Vellem (2018), Gunda (2009), and Villa-Vicencio (1992) to mention but a few.

Mugambi is a prominent African theologian who advocates shifting from liberation to reconstruction theology. (Gathogo 2007:328). In the wider African context, this concept gained traction in 1987 during the Fifth General Assembly of the All-Africa Conference of Churches, where Mugambi emphasised reconstruction as the path ahead (Gathogo 2007:328). Reconstruction addresses the challenges that nations and cultures face following the alleviation of oppression, specifically concerning the repercussions of COVID-19. Significant disruption occurred in human society; numerous companies ceased operations, resulting in heightened unemployment rates, loss of livelihoods, familial bereavements, increased school dropouts, alterations in social life, and the exploitation of COVID-19 by certain dictators to suppress the populace, among other consequences.

Reconstruction stands high on a pedestal focusing on the constructive future rather than on the destructive past (Gothogo: 2006). Mugambi's proposal found support from Villa-Vicencio (1992:13) and what becomes clear from Villa-Vicencio's proposal for reconstruction is that some new kind of liberation theology is being pursued. The argument of this methodological framework is that reconstruction should be the new priority of the Zimbabwean churches considering COVID-19 which disrupted the usual way of worship and called for the rediscovery of the Christian essentials. Zimbabwean ecclesiology was put at the periphery by the state suggesting that the church had nothing to offer as regards combating COVID-19.

Taking the above-mentioned aspects by Mugambi into consideration, it becomes important to critically evaluate the proposal to replace liberation with reconstruction. Contextually, in most African states the liberators have become new dictators to the extent that the black people of many African States are yearning for freedom from the so-called liberators. Not only that, African nations which have peace and democracy suffer high levels of poverty and diseases and are also crying for liberation in terms of economic emancipation. Gunda (2009:85) argues that "It is apparent that Mugambi assumes that oppression ended with the 'systems of oppression' yet the common man in Africa may see things differently because more than a decade after these systems collapsed in Africa, the vicious of oppression has outlived these systems!".

In Vellem's (2007:167) critique of Mugambi's proposal he highlights the fact that Mugambi seems to perceive his views in a dogmatic manner. He further argued that the contextualizing of theological discourse in the understanding of liberation theology requires inspiration from

the context of the interlocutor; in this case the African context must be the starting point. Vellem is of the opinion that reconstruction should be an addendum to liberation theology.

According to Vellem (2007:80) the tension between liberation and reconstruction became clear when South African Theologians, Mofokeng and Maluleke, expressed their critique of the reconstruction motif. The major concern for them was that reconstruction as a new motif was downplaying the role of liberation for Africa's social transformation and development. According to Vellem (2007:205) the term, "liberative reconstruction" is more appropriate because one of the tenets of liberative reconstruction is that of acknowledging change and thus the responsibility to discern the signs of the times. Therefore, reconstruction is designated as an addendum of liberation theology. Liberation itself should shape the framework and content of reconstruction. Reconstruction must take the preferential option for the poor. The researcher informed by Vellem's proposal of liberative reconstruction will take a deliberate attempt to look at liberation and reconstruction as complementary therefore fused together and not only in oppositional terms.

Having established the need to fuse liberation paradigm and reconstruction paradigm and adopting Vellem's proposal of liberative reconstruction, the following tenets are deployed in this thesis. First, is Boff's assertion (1985:72) that liberation starts specifically from the bleeding open wound, the experience of pain, crying and suffering of humanity especially the poor. One would argue that the church was literally put in exile by COVID-19. Second, focuses on the employment of a "theology from below" (Boesak 2015:4). This implies that the victims of crisis occupy the central epistemological place in the framework analysis of the ecclesiological discourse. Third, the framework is hermeneutical on the thrust that the bible is a historical book of resistance and justice. In this case the understanding is that the Zimbabwean ecclesiology could resist any attempts to remove it from public space. Crucially, a thorough appraisal is raised on the ecclesiological pastoral letters and other communiques to critically establish the strengths and inadequacies of the responses. Fourth, is the principle of self-determination that the church and those it represents as it is the voice of the voiceless are masters of their destiny. This approach raises the symbol and appraisal of ecclesiology in public space, and this fuses well with reconstruction motif with its three levels of reconstruction as identified by Mugambi.

The researcher is interested in the second level and third level of reconstruction. The second is ecclesial reconstruction, dealing with all areas of church's life (Mugambi 1995:17). The third

is cultural reconstruction, which has five components, of which the researcher is interested in the first three, (i) *politics* dealing with the management of social influence; (ii) *economics* dealing in matters of values; (iii) *ethics* dealing with the reconstruction of the systems of values. COVID-19 affected at a larger extend the ethics, the economics and the church politics coupled with the way the Zimbabwean government handled the church during the peak period of COVID-19, liberation paradigm and reconstruction paradigm herein after is regarded as liberative reconstruction, a fuse of the two is best thought methodology for this research.

Gerdien Verstraelen-Gilhuis (1992), 'A New Look at Christianity in Africa' portrays black theology as a theology that aims to achieve emancipation. Black theology is characterised as a theology that is formulated by the oppressed and intended to liberate the downtrodden, as stated by Gilhuis (1992:26). Parratt (1998:36) argues that black theology emerges as a response to the racial discrimination, hardship, and oppression experienced by the black population in South Africa. The primary focus of this work is to explore the true essence of being both black and a Christian within the context of South Africa. The theological problems revolve around the concepts of liberation, reconciliation, and the attainment of genuine humanity. The notion of blackness, as employed by black consciousness and black theology, is aimed at achieving emancipation and, ultimately, freedom (Gilhuis 1992:28). Black theology and black consciousness align with Kairos theology due to their shared origins in South Africa and their shared opposition to racism and Apartheid.

In their book "Black Theology" (2012), Hopkins and Antonio documented the evolution of black theology and its goals within African society. When black individuals in South Africa use the term 'black', they are referring to two main concepts: firstly, the desire for self-assertion, and secondly, the experience of oppression (Gilhuis 1992:27). Buthelezi (1976:7) argues that blackness continues to represent oppression when it is attributed to an individual by someone other than themselves. However, when you personally declare 'I am black', it takes on the meaning of being a representation of freedom and asserting one's own identity. Boff (1985:30) argues that the Bible should be interpreted as a narrative of freedom. It narrates the tale of divine emancipation of individuals from various types of subjugation. Hence, the purpose of engaging with the Bible is not solely to comprehend the Gospel, but rather to implement its concept of emancipation.

The AACC (1991) conference paper titled, 'The Church in Africa: Towards a Theology of Reconstruction', argues that African people might be symbolically compared to the people of

Israel, who journeyed from slavery in Egypt to the promised land of Canaan. The metaphor posits that the Egyptian dictatorship signifies the colonial authority, whereas the 'Promised Land' denotes the liberated nation (Mugambi et al. 1991:32). To date, most prominent African Christian theologians have concentrated on the Exodus metaphor and underscored the concept of freedom. With all African states having attained independence, Africa now necessitates a thorough theology of reconstruction. The global ramifications of COVID-19 are far-reaching, influencing various domains like society, economy, politics, spirituality, and psychology. This necessitated the emergence of reconstruction theology.

### **1.6.2. Literature on COVID-19**

Mahiya and Murisi (2021) represent early scholarly literature on COVID-19 in Zimbabwe and examine selected Harare and Marondera churches' COVID-19 pandemic adaptation. They found out that COVID-19's global spread has changed human connection in unforeseen ways. As the state promoted social separation and isolation, religious activities were also questioned globally. The freedom of association that defines worshipping has ended. The research examines new forms of exclusivity brought by the pandemic and how the church dealt with the situation. The church also frowned upon the fact that the state did not consult the church and that it was side-lined in the process. Other scholars that published on COVID-19 focusing on Zimbabwe in the following years were Baloyi and Pali (2022), Tagwirei (2022), Makamure (2023) and Matsveru and Matsveru (2025) and brought out other dimensions.

COVID-19 and Identity Politics (Gusha, 2020) critiques politicians' tendency to attribute blame during a crisis to identity politics. Zimbabwe's Defence Minister asserted that COVID-19 is divine retribution for European and American sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe. This research debates the Christian perspective of God in relation to COVID-19. Gusha (2020) additionally observed that former US President Trump referred to COVID-19 as a Chinese virus. The origins of COVID-19 are contentious. World Health Organization (2019) informed that COVID-19 is caused by a novel virus. COVID-19 stands for CO-Corona, VI-Virus, D-Disease, and 19-the year China reported its first occurrences. ECDC report (2020:1) states that COVID-19 appeared in December 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei province's capital. According to Demertzis (2020:2), a week after the Chinese notice, this virus was identified as a novel virus like the common cold and SARS, which killed thousands in 2002–2003. When it was identified in China, the world did not take it seriously because it was thought to be a Chinese problem like SARS. The virus spread, and on January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) (2019) declared the outbreak a global public health emergency.

As the virus proliferated, the globe experienced its intensity. Iran emerged as the subsequent virus hotspot beyond China, succeeded by Italy, Spain, England, the USA, and isolated instances in Africa (WHO 2020). On March 11, 2020, the WHO proclaimed COVID-19 a pandemic due to its widespread transmission, severity, and lack of effective response. Qui et al. (2017:3) define pandemics as predominantly illness outbreaks that have proliferated because to human-to-human transmission. Pandemics exhibit extensive geographical dissemination, characterized by elevated attack rates, population decline, reduced immunity, and heightened infectiousness and contagiousness. (Qui 2017:3). Egypt documented the inaugural African case on February 14, 2020, followed by South Africa's initial case on March 5, 2020 (WHO 2020). Zimbabweans subsequently recognised their peril, with the initial case reported on March 20, 2020 (Global Ministries 2020).

'Statutory Instrument' SI 2020-83 Public Health COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment National Lockdown Order 2020 was enacted on March 27, 2020. To stop the spread of Coronavirus disease, Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa ordered a nationwide lockdown from March 30 to April 19, 2020 (Statutory Instrument SI 2020-83). The announcement was followed by a "Statutory Instrument" that stated on page 447, sub section 5 on "Prohibition of Gatherings" that no gathering of more than two people in any public space is allowed, except at a funeral service, where no more than fifty people are allowed.

Statutory Instrument 93 of 2020 extended the first lockdown until May 3, 2020. The 2020 revision to Statutory Instrument 83 required everyone to wear a mask in public (Mavhunga 2020). That amendment defined "face mask" as a protective mask that covers the nose and mouth. Most WHO hygiene norms and regulations were observed, making it difficult for worshipers to congregate in church halls and other venues of worship.

### **1.6.3. Zimbabwean Ecclesiological Responses**

Christianity is the principal religion in Zimbabwe, with over 80% of the population practicing it (Mavhunga 2020). The on-going debate concerns the assertion that the Christian church has a rightful claim to exist in the public sphere. The church in Zimbabwe has actively partnered with the government to enhance the quality of life for several Zimbabweans. The church has founded educational institutions, including schools, universities, and colleges, as well as medical facilities, such as hospitals and clinics. These institutions were founded during Zimbabwe's Independence in 1980 and continue to exist now. Mavhunga (2020) provides examples such as the Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, St. Dominic Convent Schools, and Jesuit Arrupe University. Suppressing religion in public settings is difficult due to its

substantial impact on the formation and governance of the nation. Health professionals may regard COVID-19 as within their purview, whereas the church perceives the crisis as a Kairos Moment for a prophetic theology.

The church's prominent involvement in the public sphere consistently generates modern discussions. Some individuals, particularly politicians, believe that the church should not be involved in political processes. Some perspectives argue that the church has a crucial role in political processes and has consistently been seen as fulfilling its prophetic duty by advocating for the marginalised. This is what is depicted by the Praxis cycle as explained earlier. Therefore, the church's mission should focus on advancing social justice in society (Paradza 2021;29). The church should not rely on politics to provide it with space, but rather assert its own right to it and, if necessary, seize it forcefully. Muchena (2013: 2) in a book titled 'Critical Voices Emerging in Times of Crisis' emphasise the importance of the church in Zimbabwe comprehending its significance during a Kairos moment. The book urges the church to act, harness its vitality and innate wisdom, and contribute to resolving societal crises.

Gusha (2020) posits that the Christian faith is poised as having an extensive historical record of addressing pandemics. The previous actions have shown a strong inclination towards taking care of others. It provided commendable examples; however, there were a few instances that stood out (Gusha 2020:2). The predicament posed by COVID-19 is that the comprehension of viral transmission now rests solely within the domain of a specialized healthcare system. The clear danger, in this case, is the tendency towards religious quietism and the futility of efforts (Pearson 2020). Thus, it confined itself strictly to the activities that the governing political class deemed significant, namely, engaging in the study of the Bible, delivering lengthy prayers, and spreading the teachings of heaven. The closure of places of worship and the implementation of COVID-19 sanitary guidelines by the government resulted in the removal of the church from public space.

It is paradoxical that mission hospitals and clinics in Zimbabwe play a significant role in providing healthcare, yet they continue to face operational challenges that hinder them from expanding their reach. These facilities account for 68% of healthcare delivery in rural areas and 35% overall. They are managed by the Zimbabwe Association of Church-Related Hospitals, also known as ZACH (ZACH 2021). ZACH reports that there are twenty-two (22) hospitals owned by churches that have been classified as district hospitals. These hospitals offer national training for Primary Care Nurses and provide opportunities for up- skilling to

Midwives and State Registered Nurses. The contribution of these healthcare professionals to the national labour force is significant. Mission hospitals also offer community medical services and rural training opportunities for Government Medical Officers trainees from the University of Zimbabwe School of Medicine. This implies that the prophetic church has a crucial role to play in the public sphere and cannot just observe while COVID-19 poses a threat to human survival.

On the 14th of August 2020 the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop's Conference wrote a pastoral letter to the government of Zimbabwe titled, 'The March is Not Ended' which was a response to the July 31 movement. The movement was a demonstration which was earmarked to take place on 31 July 2020 which was met with brutality from state agencies during a national lockdown due to the pandemic and I quote part of the letter: -

“As your Bishops, we feel that this described situation is true of Zimbabwe. It feels as though the poor have no one to defend them. They don't seem to feature on the national agenda. Their cries for an improved health system go unheeded. Their plea for a transport system that meets their transport blues is met with promises and more promises and no action. The only time we see real action is when our leaders are jostling for power, to secure it or to ascend to offices of power. It is not clear to us as your Bishops that the national leadership we have has the knowledge, social skills, emotional stability, and social orientation to handle the issues that we face as a nation. All we hear from them is blame of our woes on foreigners, colonialism, white settlers, and the so-called internal detractors. When are we going to take responsibility for our own affairs?” (Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop's Conference, 2020).

In a book 'Doing Theology in a Society in Turmoil' Kadenge (2018) a clergyman from the Methodist church in Zimbabwe explore a wide range of difficulties now experienced by the people of Zimbabwe. Kadenge (2018) is perplexed by the notion expressed by certain politicians that politics is a domain from which other sections of society, like the church, should abstain. The book documents the Church-State interaction starting from the period of the liberation fight, during which the church served as a refuge for displaced individuals and offered escape routes for those who were endangered due to their resistance against colonialism. Kadenge (2018) asserts that the church played a pivotal role in facilitating the birth of freedom in Zimbabwe. Considering the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative

for the clergy to actively engage in addressing the social and political challenges faced by the nation, considering the imminent threat it poses to human survival.

White and Tiongco (1997) in “Doing Theology and Development, meeting the challenge of poverty”, posits that theology and development are intrinsically linked. The book's portrayal of the impoverished and their hardships aligns closely with the arguments made by Leonardo Boff. According to Boff (1985:72), the process of development or emancipation begins with the raw and painful sensation of an open wound, which leads to tears and human suffering. This study is predicated on the concept of the Christian church's receptiveness to the societal difficulties it encounters. Politicians must not marginalize the church's role in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chitando (2009), in his publication, informs that it is imperative for African theology to not remain stagnant in the past, but rather address contemporary challenges to remain relevant and ensure its future. The book recognizes the pain caused by HIV and AIDS and emphasizes the importance of ongoing theological reflection on the pandemic. Similarly, COVID-19 is a global epidemic that the church should have addressed using the knowledge gained from dealing with the HIV and AIDS crisis in the past. Chitando (2013) in “Prayers and Players: Religion and Politics in Zimbabwe”, examines the formation of the Heads of Christian Denominations in Zimbabwe (HOCD) in 2006, which brought together the umbrella organizations of Christian churches in Zimbabwe. It is important to observe a similar occurrence where churches unite to address the COVID-19 pandemic and the related concerns. Chitando (2006) further alludes that in the past, churches came up with a prophetic filled theological discourse called, “The Zimbabwe we want: Towards a national vision for Zimbabwe”. Through this book the church claimed its place in the public square as it addressed economic, social and political problems of the day. Since the advent of COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of pastoral letters were written as theological responses and practical responses to COVID-19 such as, ‘COVID-19- Sunday services and other gatherings’ by the Methodist church in Zimbabwe 25 March 2020, ‘Pastoral Reflections and Exhortations in the Context of COVID-19’, 16 July 2020 by The Zimbabwe Council of Churches, ‘The March is not ended’ by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference 14 August 2020, ‘Echoing the March’ by the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Solidarity Pastoral letter by the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe 17 August 2020, A Pastoral letter to the churches and the people of Zimbabwe by the World Council of Churches 17 August 2020. Since the time of the liberation struggle to this day, the Church in Zimbabwe

has radically indicated a fearless stance to identify itself with the struggle for justice and liberation of the people.

The Zimbabwe We Want (2006:28) document by the clergy says the political, social, and economic conditions in Zimbabwe over the past two decades have resulted in a climate characterized by poverty, injustice, dependency, exploitation, and disease, compelling the church to evaluate its fulfilment of the divine mandate of Jesus Christ in the context of theodicy. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation in Zimbabwe. Among urban individuals employed for wages or generating family business income prior to the COVID-19 epidemic, 23% were no longer engaged in such activities by July 2020. This figure stands at 19% in rural areas. The predominant cause of job and income loss was business shutdown resulting from the lockdown (Mavhunga 2020).

Theodicy, as articulated by Dryness (2008:883), is a theological discourse concerning the problem of evil and suffering. The veil addresses the dilemma of defining God amidst societal human suffering. Dryness (2008:881) asserts that the concept of theodicy is employed to justify the righteousness of God. The theological dimension of theodicy is founded on the Christian belief in God's inherent goodness. Nonetheless, the challenge emerges when contemplating why God does not intercede to safeguard innocent humans from enduring agony. The book of Job seeks to justify the existence of God amidst human suffering (Job 1:1-20) and clarifies that God retains sovereignty even throughout affliction (Job 2:1-10). Walker (1992:44) posits that this idea views pain as ephemeral and has a divinely ordained purpose. This theological viewpoint clarifies the significance of the Christian Church in Zimbabwean culture, especially during the persistent challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic arose in Zimbabwe during a period of economic decline, political turmoil, and social disruption. Should the church reassess the theology of hope, as articulated by Jurgen Moltmann, at this juncture?

In "The Theodicy of Suffering", Harper (1990) defines theodicy as a term introduced by Leibniz to describe a theoretical rationale for the goodness of God despite the existence of evil in the universe. According to Harper (1990), the Holocaust during World War Two is an instance of such malevolence that lacks any aim. He maintains that God does not interfere in the reprehensible actions of men. Harper's belief might be summarised as the notion that God does not play a role when individuals face the repercussions of their own choices. Harper's ideas align with the lab leak hypothesis, suggesting that the virus originated as an unintentional

error from the laboratory. Harper (1990) suggests that this may explain why God appears to be refraining from intervening.

According to Umair (2021), the term "lab leak" denotes the potential occurrence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus escaping from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which is located close to the initial epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak. However, this contradicts the theology of suffering. In his book, "The Gospel of Matthew" Green (2000:298) asserts that Jesus bore the weight and disgraceful burden of the crucifixion on Good Friday, motivated by the significance of Easter. Put simply, Easter cannot exist without Good Friday.

Theodicy, as described in the Catholic Encyclopaedia (2021), asserts that its objective is to demonstrate the presence of God. According to the article, evil is seen essential for the acquisition of knowledge about God. The crucial topic at hand is whether the pain of children, who have been orphaned due to their parents' demise in the epidemic, would lead to the revelation of God. The experience of innocent individuals enduring suffering tends to alienate people from God rather than attracting them towards God. The Catholic writers exhibited a greater inclination towards philosophy rather than theology. This position paper serves as an initial starting point for research on the Christian concept of God in relation to COVID-19.

Carter (2016)- "Inside the Whirlwind" is a remarkable depiction of an authentic experience with African Christianity. The narrative exemplifies the pinnacle of contextual theology. The book explores how African Christians interpret and comprehend theodicy and the concept of evil within their cultural context. The African notion of misfortune can be employed to interpret the adversities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, Hinson (1992) asserts that the book of Job confronts the dilemma of pain endured by righteous humans, commonly known as the problem of evil. The book fails to provide a thorough elucidation of the origins of suffering. The author of the Book of Job scrutinizes several theories provided by the Jews and finds that, although it is plausible for people to understand the origins of suffering, they can submit to God without fearing that their faith and obedience will be compromised. In the opening of the book, Hinson (1992) contends that suffering is depicted as a method to assess one's virtue. Applying this approach to the COVID-19 epidemic, which has caused over a million fatalities and considerable economic disruption, is complex. Many individuals have expressed scepticism and persist in questioning the existence of God.

Hinson (1992) contends that virtuous individuals do not act righteously for the pursuit of wealth, familial contentment, or health; rather, they do so due to their relationship with God, which persists through both adversity and prosperity. Ultimately, Job was recompensed for his patience and endurance in enduring adversity. The primary inquiry is what can be conveyed to individuals who have succumbed to COVID-19 without recompense, and to those who endure incessant pain devoid of redemption or reward? Some individuals endure suffering without any alleviation until their demise. Moreover, one could contend that Job's faith was subjected to scrutiny, yet his children fell prey to a violent demise. It might be contended that among those infected and impacted by COVID-19, as well as those who have succumbed, not all are individuals of faith requiring testing.

Waters (1997:4) asserts that attributing pain to the devil is a prevalent habit among several Christians. The book of Job examines the principle of "cause and effect" concerning the notion that all occurrences in our lives are ultimately regulated by God's knowledge, love, wisdom, and power. Waters contends that while Satan is the primary initiator of sin, evil, and suffering, it is crucial to recognize the relationship between Satan's objectives and God's permission for him to execute those intentions. Waters (1997) posits that God plays a role in permitting the emergence of COVID-19. Goldberg (2010) examines the potential for divine involvement in the process of allowance. He contemplates if the book of Job offers any insight into the grave question of God's presence throughout the Holocaust, which led to the extermination of approximately seven million Jews. The COVID-19 epidemic is indiscriminately resulting in the deaths of millions worldwide. Sande (2008:4) contends that the book of Job neither justifies suffering nor seeks to eradicate it; instead, it offers a framework for enduring suffering.

Banana (1990:77) entirely dissociates God from any role in the subjugation of humanity. He asserts that Christ exhibited his solidarity with the destitute, the downtrodden, and the incarcerated during his crucifixion. Banana asserts that the forces of tyranny were completely defeated upon confronting the crucifixion of Christ. The achievement of emancipation became possible when a being of considerably superior power to the dominant powers of this planet conquered death through resurrection (Banana 1990:78). Banana's primary aim is to offer a persuasive theological justification for the church's active involvement in Zimbabwe's national development. He asserted that the church should unequivocally be incorporated into the nation's civic sphere. In this context, it is essential for the church to participate in theological and prophetic discussions on the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **1.7. Delimitation of the Study**

This thesis encountered inherent limitations during the process of knowledge production. Consequently, the research centres on Practical Theology, which includes a diverse array of subjects and viewpoints. The study primarily focuses on analysing the ecclesial reaction via the lens of Kairos Theology. The analysis recognizes that the Kairos Document was formulated in 1985 with the explicit purpose of confronting the Apartheid situation in South Africa. Consequently, it is essential to determine its relevance within the context of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe.

The research took place in Zimbabwe, notably in the capital city of Harare, and primarily examined the theological contributions made by churches in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The thesis examines the measures employed by both major worldwide and local independent churches to aid the government, impacted church members, and the wider community in overcoming the issues posed by COVID-19. The study further analyses the level of innovation and creativity exhibited by churches in Zimbabwe, specifically in the city of Harare, from the onset of COVID-19 until the present time. This analysis will be conducted using a time series or longitudinal approach.

The research primarily examines the responses of churches to the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflexively, the researcher possesses a profound personal affiliation with the Church tradition and presently serves as the Mission Director for the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. The researcher is tasked for directing the church in issues pertaining to mission and ministry. Thus, the researcher actively engaged in addressing the issues presented by the epidemic. As a liberation theologian, I am particularly interested in the church's implementation of the ministry of presence for individuals infected and afflicted by the pandemic, considering the regulations set forth by the government and the Ministry of Health and Childcare, especially during the closure of churches and the emphasis on social distancing. The essay examines the church's response to political decisions, economic recessions, declining healthcare systems, and the diminishing livelihoods of individuals. Nonetheless, these limitations will not compromise the quality and expertise of the research.

## **1.8 Chapter outline**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters.

### **1.8.1 Chapter One: Introduction.**

Chapter one serves as an introduction to the study, presenting the background information, research problem, research aim, questions and objectives, research paradigm, methodology, research techniques, literature evaluation, limitations of the study, scope of the study, and bibliography. This chapter examines the relationship between Kairos-theology and religious quietism during the epidemic, as well as the response of Zimbabwean ecclesiology to the COVID-19 crisis.

### **1.8.2. Chapter Two: COVID-19 and the State-Church Relationship in Zimbabwe**

Chapter two provides an examination of the churches' responses and the impact of government policies on both the church and the general population. The upcoming chapter will provide a more in-depth examination of the relationship between the Church and the State within the specific context of the COVID-19 controversy. COVID-19 poses a challenge to ecclesiology in terms of spatial considerations. The pandemic has resulted in a rebirth of authoritarianism, particularly during periods of city and town lockdowns and the closure of houses of worship. This has occurred with the active agreement or passive approval of religious leaders. Legally, governments are required by international law to protect individual rights, including religious freedom, while taking measures to ensure public health, even in times of crisis. This chapter conducts a comprehensive analysis of the notion that COVID-19 is deliberately employed as a weapon against the church.

### **1.8.3. Chapter three: The Christian picture of God in COVID-19**

Chapter three address the subject of theodicy. During times of suffering, a common question that arises is, "Where does God manifest Himself when the pain is most intense?" This chapter provides a detailed account of the history of theodicy and examine if COVID-19 may be considered a theodicy in the present era. This chapter provides a critical analysis of the reciprocal relationship between Kairos-theology and theodicy. Specifically, it examines how theodicy is understood within the framework of Kairos theology, and how Kairos-theology is understood within the framework of theodicy.

### **1.8.4. Chapter four: Kairos Theology in a society in Turmoil**

Chapter four assesses the pertinence of Kairos Theology in Zimbabwe within the framework of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Kairos Document (1985), sometimes referred to as "Kairos Theology," is a theological discourse originating from South Africa. It serves as a foundational reference for this chapter. In this chapter, the text emphasizes the importance of a prophetic theology and its moral implications. It highlights the urgency for the church to speak prophetically on COVID-19. Additionally, an effort is being made to provide a description of

COVID-19 in Zimbabwe and the reaction of churches. Zimbabwe was already a vulnerable community, both economically and socially, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most Zimbabweans faced persistent poverty.

#### **1.8.5. Construction of a Zimbabwean theology of Liberation and Reconstruction theology as well as a Kairos Theology of Resilience post COVID-19**

Chapter five examines the fundamental aspects of constructing a theology of liberation and reconstruction in the context of COVID-19 and its implications for the future of faith. This chapter addresses the subject of what constitutes the fundamental elements of the Christian faith, those that are indispensable for Christians. When one's belief system is in a state of turmoil, it is necessary to carefully evaluate and reassess it. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented the Christian church with a chance to reacquaint itself with the fundamental principles of the Christian faith. An endeavour is underway to formulate a theology of liberation and reconstruction that is specifically tailored for the current moment, encompassing pandemics and the times that lie ahead.

#### **1.8.6. Chapter Six: Grounding Kairos-theology in spirituality**

Chapter six provides a theological analysis of the spiritual principles that underlie Kairos-theology. This is a discourse on the type of spirituality that is necessary or that may be sustained during periods of distress and unpredictability. An effort is being made to contemplate the type of spirituality that is necessary to maintain a critical, prophetic, and resistant stance throughout periods of hardship.

#### **1.8.7. Chapter Seven: Evaluation, Conclusion and Recommendations.**

Chapter seven presents a concise overview and assessment of the entire research, which focuses on the significance of Kairos-theology in relation to the COVID-19 outbreak and the subsequent actions taken by ecclesiastical organizations in reaction to the crisis. Consequently, the chapter assesses the results and emphasizes significant milestones in the study. The chapter presents suggestions to assist the State and the Church in mutually supporting each other during times of crisis and in fostering a strong connection even during periods of peace and prosperity. The chapter provides guidance to the church regarding disaster preparedness and the anticipation of future pandemics that may have a greater impact on the church than the current COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, the study's conclusion is documented.

## 1.9 Chapter summary

Chapter one introduces the study's focus on Kairos theology during COVID-19 and the church's influence in national affairs. It summarizes the thesis, discusses the 1985 Kairos Document, and outlines the research problem, objectives, methodology, and theoretical approach. The following chapter explores state-church dynamics in Zimbabwe amid the pandemic. The chapter argues that Kairos theology, when adopted by the church, provides a critical framework for moral and prophetic action in crises like COVID-19. This approach allows the church to address socio-political issues and positively impact society. Subsequent chapters will assess this argument by examining church actions, faith-government interactions, and wider effects on church-state relations in Zimbabwe.

## CHAPTER 2

# COVID-19 AND THE STATE-CHURCH RELATIONSHIP IN ZIMBABWE

## 2.0 Introduction

Chapter two provides an overview of the church landscape in Zimbabwe and an analysis of the church-state relations in Zimbabwe as a way of bringing out the broad context and shape the research gap. It makes a closer gaze at key historical events that have influenced ways in which the church operates in contemporary society. Firstly, I examine various types of church-state interactions and subsequently provide a concise overview of the historical association between the two entities in Zimbabwe. The upcoming chapter provide a more in-depth examination of the relationship between the Church and the State within the framework of the COVID-19 conflict. Social science and humanities scholars believe that the pandemic resulted in a rebirth of authoritarianism, particularly during periods of city and town lockdowns and the closure of places of worship. This has occurred with the active engagement or and passive compliance of religious leaders. Deploying a legal mind shows that international law mandates that governments uphold the rights of individuals, such as religious freedom, while implementing steps to safeguard public health, even during times of crisis. This chapter examines claims that COVID-19 was intentionally used for both beneficial and harmful purposes against the church, supported by historical examples and literature on state-church relations.

## 2.1 Terminology

The dichotomy between secular government and religious organizations or authorities is commonly symbolised by the phrase "Church and State." In a slightly broader sense, it can also refer to the interactions between religious authorities or organizations and the political system (Robbers, 2015). Political parties and pertinent members of civil society are thus brought into sharp focus. In an era of increasing cultural sensitivity and globalisation, the term has been called into question for its potential to be discriminatory towards non-Christian beliefs.

## 2.2 Church

Howard (2017) asserts that term "church" does not have a single, unified meaning that can be easily defined, hence, it is impervious to a singular delineation. Thus term "church" may be viewed as an ecclesiological notion that encompasses several interpretations. The phrase can encompass various meanings, including a physical structure, a gathering of believers, a specific

Christian sect, or the collective community of believers known as the Body of Christ (Orthodox Church in America, 2021). Ecclesiology refers to the study of the Christian Church. It encompasses the many interpretations by different Christian groups on the authentic community of Christians, or the initial organization founded by Jesus. The term "Christian Church" is sometimes used in academia to refer to Christianity as a whole, even if it really encompasses several churches or denominations. Many of these sects claim to be the "one true church" and exclude others (Roman Catholic Diocese of Lansing, 2021). For numerous Protestant Christians, the Christian Church consists of two elements: the visible church, which refers to institutions where the "word of God is preached and listened to in its pure form, and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's instructions," and the invisible church, which includes all individuals who are genuinely saved (and are members of the visible church) as explained by (Cross, 1997:58). The term "church" is derived from the Greek word "ecclesia," which means assembly. This word is synonymous with the Hebrew word "kahal" found in the Old Testament, and both meanings simply refer to a gathering or assembly (Lindsay, 2000:18). For followers of Jesus Christ, ecclesia refers to the redeemed community of God. It is a congregation that is constantly called upon by a messenger to appear in the presence of God, who is always present among them (Lindsay, 2000:18-19). Therefore, in the Old Testament, the term signifies the assembly of Jehovah God, while in the New Testament; it pertains to the assembly of Jesus Christ, as stated by Lindsay (2000:19). The etymological definition presents a challenge due to the growth of the virtual church, where members meet on online platforms such as Zoom, allowing participation from home. COVID-19 has also been associated with the increased presence of the virtual church, as a response to restrictions on in-person gatherings. The distinction between physical and virtual churches is relevant to this discussion, as it became an area where interactions between church institutions and the state were observed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the sake of this discussion, I refer to the Church-State relationship, considering that the term "church" specifically pertains to a Christian organization and is not commonly employed in the theological context of other religions. In Zimbabwe, there are primarily four major Christian organisations known as mother bodies. One of these is the Zimbabwe Council of Churches [ZCC], which serves as the overarching entity for all Protestant Churches and operates under the World Council of Churches. The other one is the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe [EFZ] serves as the overarching organisation for the Pentecostal Churches in Zimbabwe, and it incorporates charismatic churches. The third one is the Union for

Development of Apostolic and Zionist Churches in Zimbabwe Africa (UDACIZA) which serves as the overarching organization for all African Independent/Indigenous Churches (AICs). The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference [ZCBC] which is the fourth serves as the central organization for the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe. Specifically, the study focus on documents from the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, as well as one of its denominations, the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, and the Catholic Bishops Conference.

### **2.2.1. State**

There is disagreement on the definitions of a state. According to Cudworth et al (2007:1), there is a lack of agreement among academics over the definition of the state. The term "state" can have various interpretations based on the specific situation. According to the sociologist Max Weber, the "state" can be defined as a mandatory political organization with a centralized authority that holds exclusive control over the lawful application of force within a specific region (Weber, 1991:78). The term "state" encompasses a collection of diverse theories that pertain to a certain spectrum of political occurrences, which are interconnected and frequently intersect with one another. Scheidel (2013) states that popular notions of a state share the following characteristics: "Centralised institutions are authoritative bodies that enforce regulations through coercion within a specific geographic area. They involve a clear division between those in power and those being governed, as well as aspects of self-governance, stability, and diversity." Scheidel (2013:40).

In the arena of politics, the term "state" refers to a self-sustaining entity comprised of individuals who come together as a community to safeguard their own rights and ensure fairness and justice towards individuals from other nations. Weber (1991:65). In colloquial language, the terms "state" and "government" are frequently used interchangeably, implying that they have no distinction. The government is the institution or apparatus responsible for establishing collective policies, regulating public affairs, and advancing shared interests. Sandeford (2018:11) defines the state as the administrative body of the organisation that encompasses the government. The state is characterised by its enduring and uninterrupted nature, and its fundamental quality is its sovereignty. The term "government of Zimbabwe" will be used in this study to refer to the state, along with its different administrative divisions. Robberts (2015) asserts that when discussing the link between Church and State, there is referring to the division or separation between the sacred, which is represented by the church, and the secular, which is associated with the state.

## **2.3. Models of Church-State Relations**

According to McGowan (2005:1), the Christian church is justified in having a presence in the public sphere. The argument is grounded in a specific theological interpretation of the connection between the church and the state, as exemplified throughout history in different countries. The difficulty lies in establishing and sustaining a favourable relationship. In this context, McGowan (2005) suggested that there are four distinct forms of church-state interactions. The premise is that the church's reaction to government policy is contingent upon the dominant paradigm of their relationship. The four forms of church-state relations that help this thesis articulate its arguments about Zimbabwe are provided below.

### **2.3.1. State-Controlled Church Model**

To exemplify this initial model, the most effective approach is to utilise the case of the Church of England. The situation that emerged in 1559 remains essentially unchanged up to the present day (McGowan, 2005:2). The monarchy holds ultimate authority over the Church of England, and any law pertaining to the church must receive the assent of the royal family. Despite the implementation of a constitutional monarchy, the state nevertheless maintains power over the church, with the monarchy serving as the highest authority of the Church (McGowan, 2005:1). According to McGowan, the Church of England is unable to modify its constitution without the involvement of an Act of Parliament. Additionally, the appointment of bishops and other officials within the church is determined by the monarchy, following recommendations by the Crown Appointments Commission. This commission reports directly to the Prime Minister.

According to this initial paradigm, the church is required to comply with government mandates. Autonomy and freedom of the church are restricted. As a result, the church faces challenges in fulfilling its role as a government watchdog and is unable to openly critique the government's shortcomings. The government determines the role of the church in the public sphere. The church essentially functions as a state church, carrying out its mission in accordance with the directives of the state. Typically, when the state exerts control over the church, it often becomes a tool for disseminating propaganda and in turn, the church finds its ways of responding.

This strategy is presently being executed in Zimbabwe without public notification. Chapter 4 of the Zimbabwean Constitution, entitled "Declaration of Rights," explicitly prohibits religious discrimination. It also ensures the freedom of religion, encompassing the right to practice, advocate, and articulate one's religious convictions, publicly and privately, individually or collectively. In December 2020, the Constitutional Court of Zimbabwe issued a rule prohibiting the recital of the national vow at educational institutions. The court concluded that the phrase

"Almighty God" in the pledge infringed against students' rights to freedom of conscience (United States Department of State, 2022). Any public gathering organised by the church for evangelism or community outreach necessitates an application, ought to be clearance from the local Police. In the Zimbabwean context, churches perceived as critical of the government are typically restricted from participating in public activities beyond regular worship services. This situation reflects not only the nature of state-church relations in Zimbabwe but also demonstrates the extent of governmental authority over influential stakeholders such as the church.

The view from the church leaders has been that security services targeted religious officials who publicly objected to COVID-19 vaccines, as well as officials who criticized what they described as the government's politicized distribution of food aid (United States Department of State, 2022). Human rights groups said the government selectively enforced COVID-19 regulations to silence some churches who wished to gather for prayers, while allowing government and religious groups seen as loyal to the ruling party to gather in thousands.

### **2.3.2. Church Controls the State Model**

During much of the medieval period, the increasing power of the Catholic Church led to its significant influence on monarchs and states (McGowan, 2005:6). Throughout several epochs, the Pope wielded considerable authority over the Holy Roman Empire. Over time, the global community has witnessed nations progressively diminishing the Church's influence over them.

The present circumstances concerning the church-state relationship in Zimbabwe unequivocally indicate that the church is incapable of influencing the state. The government's response to the Catholic Bishop's pastoral letter titled "The March is Not Ended" exemplifies the state's control over the church. Catholic bishops globally correspond with governments to articulate their concerns about poverty, undemocratic practices by nations, and related issues (Dube, 2021:3). Given these circumstances, the Catholic bishops in Zimbabwe acknowledged the imperative of drafting a letter to the Zimbabwean government to fulfil their prophetic obligation of reconstructing a detrimental political climate. "The march is not ended" pertains to multiple concerns, including occurrences of power abuse and the government's employment of violence against its citizenry (Dube, 2021:3). The Catholic bishops regarded themselves as proponents of a democratic society with political ramifications (Tarusarira, 2016).

The Catholic bishops' letter was perceived as a direct attack on the government, prompting a strong reaction from the then Minister of Information and Publicity, Monica Mutsvangwa. In

her rebuttal, she denounced the Catholic bishops as foolish persons who are being manipulated by certain individuals to advance a political goal (Dube, 2021:7). Archbishop Charles Ndlovu, the leader of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, was identified as the individual responsible for the letter. Monica Mutsvangwa characterised Bishop Ndlovu as a morally upright individual belonging to the Ndebele ethnic minority. She accused him of advocating for a change in the government and exacerbating the perception of tribal oppression.

The state employed divide and rule strategies to exert control over the church, specifically in the context of Zimbabwean ecclesiology. The Catholic Bishops' correspondence garnered the interest of Bishop Samuel Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church and Apostle Andrew Wutawunashe, a leader in the Pentecostal church (Dube 2021). Both individuals are widely seen as supporters of the current dictatorship. A regime facilitator refers to an individual or a group that assists politicians in acquiring and subsequently retaining power (Magaisa, 2019). The religious facilitators aimed to undermine the alternative religious perspective in the political sphere of Zimbabwe by discrediting it, as seen in their response to the Catholic Bishops' letter. Religion is employed as a counter-revolutionary tactic to suppress the emergence of new voices (Dube, 2021:8).

The emergence of the black elite; a minority group that holds power and control over politics and the economy, has led to a stratification of society (Paradza, 2020:5). Ezra Chitando (2009:196) contends that the church became ensnared in this intricate network of influence due to its proximity to the black administration. In Zimbabwe, the church became part of the elite, resulting in the appointment of the first black President, C. Banana, who was a clergyman. However, his involvement in the government suppressed the church's ability to speak out prophetically. Thus, it can be contended that the inclusion of individuals with religious beliefs in governmental roles does not automatically imply that the church exercises authority over the state. Conversely, several churches in post-independent Zimbabwe adopted an Afrocentric approach that emphasised African identity, along with the government's African Initiated ecclesiology. This led to a decrease in their prophetic stance and assertiveness (Paradza, 2020:5). Essentially, the political leaders in Zimbabwe downgraded the Church's position from being involved in political processes and public affairs to solely focusing on spiritual things. The role of the political ruling class was limited to reading the Bible, offering lengthy prayers, and preaching the word of paradise, as stated by Chitando (2011:44). Regarding the COVID-19 situation, it appears that the Zimbabwean ecclesiology relied heavily on politicians and the

medical community, resulting in the state exerting control over the church and determining its course of action.

### **2.3.3. Separation of Church and State**

McGowan (2005) asserts that during the reformation, in addition to the magisterial reformers, there were many other prominent leaders and factions. Among these, the Anabaptist movement stood out as the most noteworthy. This movement, consisting of numerous persons and groups, held certain shared perspectives, particularly about the connection between the church and state (McGowan, 2005:7). They advocated for the division between the Church and state. Moreover, it was contended that Christians ought not to engage in matters of national governance. According to McGowan (2005), this was eventually expressed as a rejection of voting or engaging in any political system, as well as a refusal to bear guns for the state. The discussion regarding the division between religious institutions and governmental entities in the United States of America has been on-going since the 16th century. The Baptist theologian Roger Williams, who founded the colony of Rhode Island, originally used the expression "hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world" (Alcorn: 2009). In a letter to the Danbury Baptists in 1802, Thomas Jefferson employed the term to elucidate the first amendment and its limitation on the legislative arm of the federal government. The excerpt from the letter runs as follows:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their "legislature" should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between church and state.

Jefferson believed that it was inappropriate for the government to provide financial or other forms of support to any specific religion or religion in general. He contended that forcing persons to financially support a religion they did not adhere to infringed upon their inherent entitlement to religious freedom (Alcorn, 2009). The subtle separation of state and church areas of influence in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 crisis thus was not a new thing. The state deliberately left out the church from being part of the group of institutions that provided essential services during the crisis. However, the church deployed agentic behaviour to remain relevant in its deployment of the theology of liberation.

#### **2.3.4. Church and State in a Symbiotic Relationship**

The fourth paradigm of church-state connection advocates for a symbiotic association characterised by reciprocal acknowledgment and accountability. An exemplary illustration is the connection between the church and the state that was created by Constantine (McGowan, 2005:9). Upon assuming the position of supreme Caesar over the Roman realm in 324AD, Constantine promptly took action to establish a unified church throughout the realm. Constantine played a crucial role in attempting to achieve theological unity within the deeply divided church by initiating and presiding over the Council of Nicaea (McGowan, 2005:9). Furthermore, he undertook the task of converting the empire to Christianity, therefore establishing what is now known as Christendom. Constantine significantly elevated the status of the church by granting it freedom, security, and recognition, so facilitating safer and more convenient mission and evangelism activities. However, there is need to carefully view Christendom as discussed by Nolan (1992). Instead of placing Christianity identity as the most valuable, he emphasises the need for compassion, universality, authenticity and above directing focus towards Jesus. The same pattern can be visualised in the way Zimbabwean churches related with the state at some point. The church and others of different faiths were categorised as ‘religious groups’ and were regarded as relevant stakeholders but of less essential value in managing COVID-19.

#### **2.4. Historical background of church-state relations in Zimbabwe**

The Church in Zimbabwe has a lengthy historical involvement in politics. Numerous researchers have studied its involvement with the state during the pre-colonial centuries. Zvobgo (1996) has examined church-state connections from the sixteenth century, during the interactions between the Mutapa Empire and the Portuguese. Thomas (1985) analyses the interplay between the church and the state in colonial Zimbabwe. Ganiel and Tarusarira (2014) observe that missionaries accompanied the Pioneer Column into Mashonaland in 1890, indicating a close nexus between religion and politics. Conversely, Thomas (1985) documents that this relationship deteriorated from 1962 to 1980 as the State sought to marginalize the Church, partly due to the Church's criticism of the maltreatment of colonized individuals. Tarusarira (2016) examines the interplay of Christianity within the context of oppression and conflict in Zimbabwe, concluding that Christianity has served as both a mechanism of oppression and a form of resistance.

Manyonganise (2020) provides a forthright examination of the church's public role post-independence. She contends that “following the achievement of independence, the church in

Zimbabwe distanced itself from the political arena and focused on socio-religious matters” (Manyonganise, 2020:39). The church, having mainly remained silent on governmental excesses, began to vocalize its concerns from 2005 forward. According to Manyonganise (2020:39), the church's decision to break its silence was prompted by the inhuman treatment of people during the Fast Track Land Reform which was characterised by chaos as well as how the urban clean up named Operation Murambatsvina were prosecuted.

It is widely believed that most of the early Christian missionaries in Africa were contributors to European imperialism. They “softened up” the Africans for the takeover, called on their metropolitan governments to come in, and afterwards helped to impose a regime and ideology of white supremacy (Maenzanise, 2008). The Christian church in Zimbabwe radically indicated the courage and consciousness to identify itself with the struggle for liberation of the marginalized, the oppressed and the impoverished, specifically in the context of the armed struggle (Paradza, 2019). The challenge with the church is on how it can be simultaneously in politics (thus, to influence it) and beyond politics (thus, to challenge it). Zimbabwe offers a classic case study illustrating this dilemma. Missionaries entered Mashonaland, as it was then known, with the Pioneer Column of white settlers in 1890 (Thomas, 1985). At the beginning of 1890, there was still no white missionary work settled in Zimbabwe except for the London Missionary Society (LMS) stations at Inyathi and Hope Fountain in Matabeleland (Maenzanise, 2008). From 1890 many other denominations joined the Catholics, and three other denominations entered Mashonaland namely, The Salvation Army, the Wesleyan (British) Methodists and the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa (Jankins and Stebbing). These Christian bodies initially worked in support of the colonial government.

The period from 1955 to 1958 saw an awakening of African nationalism in Zimbabwe. The honeymoon of racial partnership during the federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was over (Dodge, 2022:153). All this now marked the beginning of the fearless opposition to the white racists by some church leaders. It is important to note that the Mashona people have three types of religious expression, (Maenzanise, 2008). The first one is the Shona indigenous religiosity. Second is the missionary religiosity which is expressed in “mission” or “missionary” churches. The third type of religiosity is demonstrated in the Independent/Indigenous Churches which have refused to be part of the “missionary church”. These three strands have worked side by side during and after the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe. The way Christian bodies responded to COVID-19 hygiene protocols and containment measures pronounced by government were also influenced by the three distinct Christian bodies in Zimbabwe.

It is important to note that to dilute the influence of the church in public life, the State resorted to co-opting certain religious leaders. A book edited by Ezra Chitando (2013) titled “Prayers and Players: Religion and Politics in Zimbabwe” exposes the way religion and politics interact within the Zimbabwean context. It shows a political leadership that plays religion to gain religious capital while religious leaders also play politics for political capital. In other words, particularly beyond the year 2000, religion and politics at times invested in each other for ‘mutual’ benefit. In a polarised environment such as Zimbabwe, religious leaders are most of the time afraid as being viewed as supporting a ‘wrong’ political party. They, therefore, cannot turn down an invitation from influential political leaders.

On the other hand, the religious leaders are forced to invite political leaders to their meetings and conferences. Often, they pledge their allegiances at these meetings and make promises to all their members voting for the political leaders. This usually happens when ZANU PF politicians attend African Initiated Churches (AICs), for example, religious leaders such as Nehemiah Mutendi, the Late Ezekiel Guti, Emmanuel Makandiwa, Andrew Wutaunashe, and Walter Magaya, among others, have graced political functions, while political figures such as the late Robert Gabriel Mugabe, Grace Mugabe, Joyce Mujuru, Emmerson Mnangagwa and Morgan Richard Tsvangirai, among many other prominent political leaders publicly graced church events. Currently, the leader of the Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) Nelson Chamisa, is not only a trained pastor, but has also appropriated religion in his political messaging and is known for his “God-is-in-it” hashtag. No Zimbabwean who went through the time of political strife could fail to recognise Bishop Ralph Edward Dodge who was against colonial rule and the missionary treatment of Africans, and he wrote the following:

The weakness of the church is due to the fact that the missionaries preach in the church, telling people to love their neighbours but they themselves do not love their neighbours. The missionary school man is good only when he is at school. If you meet him in town, he shows you his true colours and does not recognize you” (Dodge: The Unpopular Missionary)

In 1956, the American Methodist Church in Rhodesia welcomed Bishop Dodge as its new bishop (Maenzanise, 2008). This was the great turning point of the American Methodist Church in its participation in the fight against colonial domination and racial segregation. In his capacity as a leader of American Methodism and in his determination to prepare Africans for leadership in the Church, Bishop Dodge worked hard in sending Africans to universities in

North America and Great Britain (Maenzanise, 2008). One of the people who benefited was Reverend Abel Muzorewa who later succeeded Bishop Dodge and became the first African Bishop in the Rhodesia African Methodist Church. Muzorewa's return from his studies in 1963 coincided with the coming in power of the Rhodesia Front Party with Ian Smith as its leader and Prime Minister. By that time all the nationalist leaders were put either in political exile, detention, or in prison (Maenzanise, 2008:75). There was also significant fighting among the black people themselves in 1963 because of the split between the followers of Joshua Nkomo, of Ndebele decent and those led by Reverend Ndabaningi Sithole, of Shona decent. It was this time also that the church bodies started to assume a prophetic voice to liberate Zimbabwe.

#### **2.4.1. Ian Smith's Government and the Church**

When Smith declared the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1964, the church responded by denouncing the move. Bishop Dodge as a church leader and many others voiced their concerns of the African people in Rhodesia at the very time the political parties were banned, and their leaders silenced in detention. Following the publication of his book, "The Unpopular Missionary", Bishop Dodge was labelled an enemy of the state by the Smith regime and on July 17, 1964, he was deported (Maenzanise, 2008:79). The church-state relationship in every generation is determined by the need of the church to side with the oppressed, the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalised.

In 1969, when the Land Tenure Act was proposed by the Rhodesian Front it was again resisted by the church (Zvobgo, 2005:2). Bishop Lamont of the Salisbury Council of Churches was referred by Bishop Muzorewa as a church leader who felt that dying with the oppressed was better than accepting a constitution which only gave freedom to a few privileged people, the whites (Muzorewa:174). The Smith regime deported Bishop Lamont. However, a lot of black people were already prepared to fight for their freedom. The African knowledge of God affirms a God who is amid our historical situation, God who is the liberator of humanity from oppression, exploitation, and all forms of alienation (Maenzanise, 2008:79). It is in this spirit that Gustavo Gutierrez (1973:308) writes:

We can say that all the political theologies, the theologies of hope, of revolution and of liberation, are not worthy of one act of genuine solidarity with exploited social classes. They are not worthy one act of faith, love, and hope, committed....in one way or another....in active participation to liberate man from everything that dehumanizes him from living according to the will of the Father.

Through the leadership of the man of cloth, the Zimbabwean people won their country back in 1979, when Bishop Muzorewa became the first black Prime Minister (Hove and Chenzi, 2017:1-2). The Zimbabwe general elections were held in 1980, and the political leadership went to Mr. Robert Gabriel Mugabe as the Prime Minister and Reverend Canaan Banana became the First African President of Zimbabwe (Maenzanise, 2008:89). As we can see, both the first Prime Minister and the first President of Zimbabwe were church clericals. This shows how religious leaders played an important role in Zimbabwe's quest for liberation.

#### **2.4.2 The church and Mugabe's government**

Zimbabwe attained political independence in 1980, coinciding with the church's endorsement of African self-governance. The church and state were united by the theme of emancipation. Nonetheless, Robert Mugabe's early accomplishments were ephemeral. The authoritarian political culture from the colonial past persisted notwithstanding the establishment of the new administration. Since 1980, Zimbabwe has been plagued by violence coinciding with the emergence of religious-political movements (Ndlovu 2019).

The following conflict upheavals in the 1980s coded Operation Gukurahundi from 1982-1987 the church and the state relationship became undergonistic. State orchestrated violence against civilians in Midlands and Matebeleland regions attracted the critical comments of the church. Thus, the analysis of church-state relations did not start to show signs of animosity in 2008 but stretching back to 1980. Such questionable state reactions would always be noticeable during election. Political institutions such the judiciary system contributed to institutionalisation of violence. Thus, Operation Restore Order, commonly known as "Murambatsvina" (a Shona language which means get rid of the filth) in which illegal housing structures in urban areas were demolished by the government and attracted the criticisms of the church and even Tibaijuka (2008) a UN eminent person. Tibaijuka (ibid) regarded the operation as a scenario in which the state turned against its citizenry.

Zimbabwean Christians have reacted to the nation's predicament through several approaches, including as political disengagement, moral apathy, aggressiveness and animosity, and prophetic involvement. Christians advocating for prophetic participation assert that obstinate political leaders must consistently be challenged and held accountable, while remaining mindful of the moral objectives being sought (Kaulemu, 2010:1). Phiri (2001) posits that churches, whether ecumenical, denominational, or congregational, engage in national politics when a void arises in African political systems, particularly when the state suppresses civil society organizations. This is debatable, as the developments in Zimbabwe indicate a divergent

trajectory. Churches in post-independent Zimbabwe have failed to offer the necessary cognitive, emotional, and moral guidance in addressing the legacies of the political past and the current political issues facing the country. It can be contended that churches operated under the oppressive authority of Robert Mugabe, who mercilessly suppressed any church or priest that opposed him.

Former Archbishop Pius Ncube is a good example and is a tip of the iceberg on how former President Mugabe dealt with Priests and Pastors who challenged him. Pius Ncube is a Catholic cleric who earned praise for confronting Zimbabwe's dictator, and he played a prophetic role in battling oppression. On 29 June 2000 former President Robert Mugabe accused the archbishop on national television of having contributed to the "ethnic voting in favour of the Movement for Democratic change (MDC) in Matabeleland and threatened to deal severely with him (Amnesty International, 2000). The Mugabe regime allegedly set a secret camera in Pius Ncube's bedroom where he was filmed having a sexual relationship with a member of his congregation. That silenced the cleric who later resigned from his post and ministry (The Chronicle 17 July 2007).

The Mugabe rule asserts that the church must consistently refrain from sin, with the gravest transgression being the church's commentary on political matters (Chitando, 2011:44). Former President Robert Mugabe sought to marginalise the church throughout society, utilizing it primarily for electoral manipulation during general election campaigns. Mugabe consistently urged churches to monitor their limits and refrain from intruding into the political sphere. This issue and the falsehoods propagated by government authorities have resulted in the persecution of certain church leaders, including Pius Ncube, the Catholic Bishop (Paradza, 2020:16). Furthermore, political polarization shaped state theology according to Romans 13:1-7, which asserts that citizens must submit unquestioningly to governmental power (The Kairos Document, 1985:6). The state employed this interpretation to fragment the church, endorsing the 'Pro-ruling Party ideology' of churches compliant with the governing class and 'Anti-ruling Party Churches' that provide prophetic critique of state policies (Togarasei, 2004:76). Biblical scholars contend that biblical texts should be analysed according to their intended objectives, advocating for exegesis over eisegesis; hence, Romans chapter 13 must be interpreted within its contextual framework.

#### **2.4.3. Church and the government of the day**

The former President Robert Mugabe was replaced by President Emmerson Mnangagwa who presided over the COVID-19 era. Since the days of former President Mugabe, whose rule ended

in 2017, Zimbabwe experienced regressive favouritism towards partisan gospel preachers and churches. This is also highlighted by Magezi and Tagwirei (2022). During the said era, the relationship between church and state was undermined, instilling dread in most inhabitants. However, there was hope on the inauguration of President Emmerson Mnangagwa who promised "a new dispensation," although fundamentally resembled the previous administration (Magezi and Tagwirei, 2022:8). Church-state ties began to be undermined, as political leaders exhibit a conciliatory stance when endorsed by church leaders and retributory and retaliatory behaviour towards church leaders who express critical voices. The circumstances and nature of relationship fragment the church, resulting in some pastors aligning with political leaders while others express support (Dombo, 2014:144). Dominant politicians enlisted select gospel ministers to support the "new dispensation" and criticise its opponents (Magezi and Tagwirei, 2022). According to Masunungure & Bratton (2018: 1), post-Mugabe state-church relations grew more hostile, with COVID-19 intensifying these tensions beyond the pandemic period. Masunungure and Bratton (2018) further observe that many religious leaders became increasingly critical of government practices, highlighting issues such as declining democratic freedoms and rising political interference in church affairs. Their research points out that, despite some clergy aligning themselves with political elites, a significant segment of the church remained vocal about governance challenges and continued to advocate for greater civil liberties.

#### **2.4.4. Zimbabwe government's response to COVID-19**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Zimbabwe government implemented public health policies that limit individual freedoms to control disease transmission. While such limitations on liberties are sometimes necessary for pandemic control, many of these policies have been overly broad or have neglected to consider the costs for populations already susceptible to human rights violations (Mutanda, 2022). Furthermore, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities based on health care access, poverty, politics and socio-economic factors.

Zimbabwe reported its first case of COVID-19 on 20 March 2020. The government announced a nationwide lockdown for 21 days effective 30 March 2020 as a measure to contain the COVID-19 crisis, which it declared a "national disaster" on 17 March 2020 (Mutanda, 2022:1). This made it possible to scale up efforts to further contain the spread of the virus in view of its notable threats to the health and security of the citizens. The government tried very hard to implement a full-scale lockdown. This was seen in the mounting of several roadblocks in towns

and on highways to limit and curb movement. Patrols in residential areas and business areas were also frequent (Mutanda, 2022).

On 17 March 2020, President Emmerson Mnangagwa banned public gatherings of more than 100 people. The ban included weddings, church gatherings, sporting events and national celebrations. And by declaring the pandemic a national disaster, this enabled the government to mobilize resources, (Gagare, 2020). On 19 March 2020, President Emmerson Mnangagwa launched a \$26 million COVID-19 plan and established an inter-ministerial COVID-19 taskforce to tackle the pandemic.

Additional measures were covered in statutory instruments further promulgated and passed. Some of the extraordinary measures introduced to combat COVID-19 are considered drastic as they infringe on basic human rights (Mavhinga, 2020) These include rights such as freedom of movement and assembly, halting various religious and cultural activities. Measures that were put in place include but not limited to; The Civil Protection (Declaration of State of Disaster: Rural and urban areas of Zimbabwe) (COVID-19) Notice, 2020 (Statutory 76 of 2020) that declared the coronavirus an infectious disease and a state of disaster; The Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) Regulations, 2020 published as Statutory Instrument 77.2020 that declared the disease a formidable epidemic disease; and, the COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown) Order, 2020 contained in Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 declared a period of twenty-one days of lockdown except for essential services and exempted cases (Chirisa:2022).

It is crucial to acknowledge that the church was not deemed an essential service. Some may argue that this was an opportune moment for the church to fulfil its counselling ministry, particularly for the bereaved. The government's decision to exclude the church from the list of essential services implies that it believed the church was not necessary. Consequently, the church was marginalized and pushed to the outskirts of society.

The execution of essential policy initiatives, including social distancing and stay-at-home mandates yielded both direct and indirect effects on church members and its administration. The church was side-lined in the communication of the policy position on COVID-19. A significant number of individuals firmly contended that the state ought to have engaged the church more, as it possessed the capacity to provide solutions to the predicament. Before delving more into the subject, it is essential to define "the church" as utilized in this thesis. Togarasei (2006) precisely delineates the Christian situation in Zimbabwe and various other

countries as "one Bible, many Christianities." The scholar further contends that Christian Churches can be categorized into specific typologies according to their origins and attributes. This encompasses mainline churches of Western origin, African Independent Churches of African origin, and Pentecostal Evangelical churches characterized by a charismatic perspective, among others.

The government's response to COVID-19 was characterised by a high level of impunity and police brutality in the country. The arrest of journalist Hopewell Chin'ono and politician Jacob Ngarivhume, who publicly denounced corruption, especially inside the Ministry of Health, triggered a nationwide protest corruption on July 31, 2020 (Global Voices, 2020). In response, the government dispatched armed forces to the capital city of Harare on July 28, 2020 (Marima, 2020). Subsequently, there were distressing instances of brutality inflicted upon defenceless civilians, with the military and police resorting to the use of live ammunition. Furthermore, alongside the uncontrolled violence, more than 100,000 individuals were apprehended during the initial four months following the emergence of COVID-19 and formally accused of contravening COVID-19 regulations.

Moreover, the administration disregarded corruption, which intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Corruption has been evident in the absence of accountability regarding the utilization and allocation of COVID-19 funding, equipment, misrepresentation of donations, and the awarding of procurement contracts for personal protective equipment (PPE) and medicine without adhering to appropriate procurement protocols (Marima, 2020). A typical example of the corrupt activities resulted in the dismissal of former Minister of Health and Childcare Obadiah Moyo. Obadiah Moyo faced allegations of endorsing a business to provide government masks at a price of US\$28 per, despite comparable quality masks being available globally for less US\$1 (Maulan, 2020). The government's response to COVID-19, together with conspiracy theories regarding the virus's emergence, may have shaped the church's reaction.

## **2.5. Hypotheses on the origin of COVID-19.**

The actual origins of the COVID-19 virus which turned out to become a world pandemic remains a mystery. However, there are several hypotheses that have gained currency since the emergency of COVID-19 (Mkwanzani, 2021). The following four vantage positions shade some insight.

### **2.5.1. Live animal market trading**

There are some research works that have identified the likely origin of the coronavirus to bats and pangolins that are sold in live animal markets in China, for their use in the traditional Chinese medicine as given by Morgan (2020). Among those who supported this theory are Wassenaar and Zou (2020); Turcio-Casco and Gatti (2020); and Salzberg (2020). According to this theory, the handling of bats and pangolins at these markets poses a risk of contracting the coronavirus disease, as these animals are the primary hosts of the virus, Wassenaar and Zou (2020:343). However, there is need for further research to establish the veracity of the theory of bats and pangolins as the cause of COVID-19.

### **2.5.2. Viral leak from Wuhan Institute of Virology**

The second theory propounded to trace the origin of COVID-19, reveals that this virus was genetically engineered by scientists (who are not named) in a laboratory in Wuhan. Another version of the same theory, which is perhaps more charitable to China; claims that the coronavirus was created (by a mistake) possibly in the process of seeking an AIDS vaccine, Ando (2020). This theory was corroborated, among others, by a French Virologist, one of the Nobel laureates responsible for discovering HIV, namely, Luc Montagnier, Ando (2020). The virologist and his United States of America supporters allege that COVID-19 escaped from a laboratory, possibly by mistake.

Some researchers have dismissed the viral leakage explanation. They contend that the virus has undergone natural evolution from animals like bats and pangolins before transmitting to humans. Mkwanzani (2021) contends that if COVID-19 had been created in a laboratory, there would be detectable indications of genetic alterations in the virus. Researchers from France's *Institut Pasteur* and the National Center for Scientific Research have highlighted that a virus of this kind need animal hosts for its growth and transmission to humans (Ando, 2020). This theory appears to have caused tension in diplomatic relations between the United States and China. The strained relations were worsened by the former US President, Mr. Donald Trump, who regularly used derogatory language to refer to COVID-19 as the 'Chinese virus' (The Indian Express, 11 October 2020, The Washington Post, 16 September 2020).

### **2.5.3. The Fifth generation (5G) Technology.**

The Fifth Generation Technology theory was postulated to explain the origin of COVID-19. The theory suggests that there is a casual link between COVID-19 and the fifth generation (5G) technology. 5G is the latest wireless mobile phone technology that operates through higher radio frequencies that deliver data more quickly and can also support a bigger capacity of

cellular connectivity. According to Morgan (2020), there is a widespread conjecture that 5G might have adverse effects on human health as it exposes human beings to more radiation than the body can handle. According to the theory, radiation from 5G technology causes COVID-19 disease, Van Prooijen (2020). Notably, there are three variations of the 5G technology theory. The first one is the most radical one as it suggests that COVID-19 is directly caused by harmful radiation from 5G networks. The second variation claims that 5G networks have lowered people's immune response to the virus, thereby enabling the virus to dis-ease and eventually kill those infected. The third variation of the 5G technology theory claims that although radiation from 5G technology does not cause COVID-19, it facilitates the rapid spread of the virus. This implies that the COVID-19 is air-born through these radio-active waves.

The 5G hypothesis was so pervasive that it affected the actions of individuals in certain regions of the world about the 5G transmitters. In the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, 5G network transmitters and masts were vandalized by demonstrators, and personnel in those networks faced threats to resign their employment, according to Van Prooijen (2020). Despite its prevalence, 5G is contested by others who perceive it as a conspiracy idea lacking scientific foundation. Morgan (2020) is a critic who asserts that 5G technology cannot be responsible for the pandemic, either by transmitting the virus or by undermining human immune systems. He believes that COVID-19 is transferred through respiratory droplets released when coughing or sneezing. While the three possibilities presented are not definitive, they illuminate the intricacies surrounding the origin of this virus.

#### **2.5.4. Mark of the Beast conspiracy**

Another claim was that vaccines are only a cover for implanting some form of microchip, considered by especially Christian clergymen to be the Satanic 'Mark of the Beast' which is found in the book of Revelations 13:16-18 (17). In October 2022, Twitter was bought by Elon Musk, who has since allowed all information to be posted and shared (Cockeman, 2022:31). There are no content moderators or algorithms removing misinformation about the pandemic. Previously deleted tweets have resurfaced and are now visible. In his July 29th, 2020, statement, Nick Griffin creates a divide between the political conservative right and the conservative left, while drawing a comparison between ID Vaccination Cards and the concept of the 'Mark of the Beast' (Cockeman, 2022). On November 7th, 2021, a tweet was shared that featured an image depicting a barcode mark in the shape of the number "666" on someone's hand. The tweet also made a direct comparison to the 'Beast' mentioned in the book of Revelation and its associated number. The vaccination can be seen as a symbolic representation

of the 'Mark', and there were signs of increasing concern over the creation of a 'vaccination Passport' that aimed to restrict the travel of those who have not been vaccinated. The book of Revelation contains the following statement: “Let him that has understanding count the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred sixty-six,” (Revelations 13;18). Not only was the narrative being shared by social media users, but it had also entered the political arena and the church regarding the brewing distrust about the vaccine and its relationship to biblical apocalypticism (Cockeman, 2022;36). This was Kairos time for the church to rise to the occasion to expound the eschatological message of the book of revelation and guide the world. The church has the tools for the to bring about the correct biblical interpretation.

## **2.6. Zimbabwean Ecclesiological Responses**

Features of church fellowship cannot be understood from a singular perspective but from a multiple and diverse doctrinal perspectives (Mahiya and Murisi, 2021:2). During COVID-19, the church responses were shaped according to the denomination's affiliated mother body's doctrines, morals, and ethos. Chitando and Togarasei (2010) postulated that churches can be grouped according to their associations: Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) and the Development of the Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa (UDACIZA). Features of church fellowshiping cannot be understood from a singular perspective, they are diverse, because of different doctrines. So, their response to the pandemic mirrors that diversity.

### **2.6.1 First recorded death**

Secondly, the first COVID-19 death in Zimbabwe sent shock waves to the entire nation. According to BBC News reporter Shingai Nyoka (2020), the thirty-year-old victim passed away “alone and scared” at Wilkins Hospital which was designated as the main isolation facility for coronavirus patients in Zimbabwe's capital Harare. The victim who was a well-known journalist by profession died shortly after talking to his family. The background of the victim was that he came from a well-to-do background, hence, the affluent background did not help serve his life. While developed countries were overwhelmed by hundreds and then thousands of patients, Zimbabwe appeared to be overwhelmed by one patient at that stage. An investigation by The Zimbabwe Independent published on 6 March 2020 revealed the country's health facilities were woefully equipped. The report revealed that Zimbabwe's main isolation hospital called Wilkins located in Harare as not having adequate personal and protective equipment (PPE) for staff. Rather, it was relying on space suits, gloves, gumboots and N95

respirators acquired when Zimbabwe was preparing to fight Ebola outbreak in 2014. Further investigations by the Zimbabwe Independent revealed that the deceased was hospitalised at the time the institution did not have a single ventilator, power adaptors or an intensive care unit.

The family of the deceased released a hard-hitting statement immediately after the death through social media and was featured in the Daily News of 24th March 2020 which stated that:

At the end before he died, he kept telling us that he was alone and scared and the staff was refusing to help him to a point where he got up and tried to walk out and they were trying to restrain him. So, this is how my young brother ended up dying. If you come here to be treated for corona there is absolutely no treatment you will get, you will die--. I want people to know that the government is lying that it is prepared for the pandemic (Daily News, 24 March 2020).

This case illustrates both state and pastoral care failures. As COVID-19 misinformation—described by Hove & Cillier (2023) as an 'infodemic'—began to spread, church pastors, excluded by the state, experienced fear and anxiety over potential harm to themselves and their families while performing pastoral duties.

#### **2.6.1.1. Fear and Anxiety**

The death of this first victim sent shock waves throughout the whole nation. As said before, that the thirty-year-old radio and television commentator and the scion of one of Zimbabwe's wealthiest families, died two days after testing positive for the virus. This had a bearing on the decisions the nation, particularly the church. Psychologists tell us that anxiety is not biologically inherited (Chinhara, 2015:X). No one is born with anxieties and fear. Anxiety and fear develop as individuals encounter and experience different challenging situations in their lives. The word anxiety itself goes by several different aliases such as burden, worry, trouble care and fear (Gas, 1999:2). The nation and the Zimbabwean ecclesiology became anxious and fearful. This was also exacerbated by the news especially from Cable News Network (CNN) which gave daily statistics on the deceased and those who tested positive. This could also have impacted the Zimbabwean ecclesiology to accept the government's decision to close churches without questioning.

Sociologists observe that to be human is to be in society. Human beings are sociological beings who are susceptible to anxiety. To combat anxiety, people should not worry alone, because

together, people are much more likely to come up with solutions when talking about their concerns (Gas, 1999:5). Ironically, being anxious, which is typically an attempt to anticipate and prevent bad things from happening tends to make one even more worrisome, creating a never ending and constantly escalating vicious cycle of anxiety and more worry. The advent of COVID-19 brought with it fear and anxiety even across the whole world. The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe's 20<sup>th</sup> of March communiqué from the former Presiding Bishop highlighted on fear and I quote:

We are realizing as a Church that there is a lot of fear in our communities. Fear is the opposite of faith. Fear is assurance of disaster. Fear is also a sign of lack of trust in our Creator. The Bible from Genesis to Revelation encourages us not to fear. Having rightful information on the pandemic eliminates fear. (MCZ Communiqué, 20 March 2020),

It is said that, during the Gulf war in 1991, when Iraq launched scud missile attacks against Israel, many Israelites died, but not from the scuds. When the war ended and the scientists gave the mortality statistics, they discovered something remarkable. Although the death rate jumped dramatically on the first day of the attacks, most of the people had not died from the physical effects of the missiles, but they had died from heart failure (Gas, 1999:6). Fear and panic contort our countenance, sometimes with serious results and so the Zimbabwean ecclesiology passively accepted government decision maybe because the advent of COVID-19 brought with it a lot of fear.

### **2.6.2 Social media information.**

The term social media refers to computer/internet-based technology, and channels of mass-personal communication that facilitate interactions among users and through virtual networks and communities (Carr & Hayes 2015:46). In this way, social media made it easier for ordinary people to communicate widely, allowing anyone to broadcast information to a mass audience, and enabling the sharing of information, documents, videos, and photos (Madziva et al., 2022:1). Some of the most popular media websites include Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram Tik-Tok. Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic and people's desperation for information, social media, due to the communication affordances they provide, including immediacy and wide dissemination, have provided the public with the democratic agency to generate conversations across diverse platforms (Madziva, 2022). This has seen a dramatic increase in the proliferation of information and generating what has been termed 'infodemic', associated with various conspiracy theories about the pandemic (Madziva et al., 2022:2). An

infodemic entails the circulation of an over-abundance of information including false or misleading information, leading to confusion, mistrust in health authorities, and thereby undermining disease response, making it ‘hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they needed it’ (Zarocostas, 2020:395) Zimbabwean ecclesiology was not spared of infodemic.

While the COVID-19 pandemic emerged as a global crisis that required immediate intervention, there was no clarity on the origin and causes of the virus during the initial days. Instead, this period was characterized by blame games between America and China, with the World Health Organization (WHO) inadvertently but equally embroiled in this diplomatic quagmire. This provided a conducive environment for social media users to fill this information vacuum. Unfortunately, this void was filled with an abundance of either misinformation or disinformation, which posed serious challenges in relation to ‘knowledge legitimacy, epistemic authority, and competing truth claims’ (Hulme, 2020).

Despite its numerous benefits for sharing health information, social media has raised several concerns in terms of posing panic among the general population around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. Study revealed that social media use has a significant impact on the development of panic among people regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, with possibly detrimental psychological and mental health repercussions (National Library of Medicine, 2022). The Zimbabwean ecclesiology could have been influenced by the fear induced by social media, that the church was left with no option but to close doors and follow all guidelines from the government.

### **2.6.3. Preserving the public good.**

The historical churches in Zimbabwe; also, traditionally known as main line churches, own hospitals and clinics. In the recent past we have seen Pentecostals opening health service facilities such as the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) which now operates a state-of-the-art hospital in the Waterfalls suburb, Harare. These health facilities play a significant role in helping the government provide quality health care to the nation. Thus, the church is aware of the statutes to do with emergency public health. This could be one of the reasons why the church behaved the way they behaved.

The global response to public health emergencies, such as pandemics, often requires enacting public health policy interventions to prevent disease and protect population health. These interventions can and do limit individual freedoms and are widely understood to be appropriate

in public health emergencies (Zweig et al., 2021:1). The COVID-19 has prompted the implementation of public health measures at an unprecedented global scale. International guidance on the rights-limiting measures allowable during states of emergency is based on the Siracusa Principles (Brauner et al., 2021:1-12). These principles state that regardless of the nature or severity of the emergency, restrictions on human rights must meet standards of legality, legitimacy, proportionality, evidence, and non-discrimination (Aragona et al., 2020:52-56). General comment 14 to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and cultural rights (ICESCR) further emphasizes that states have “the burden of justifying such serious measures” with respect to “demonstrating that restrictive measures are necessary to curb the spread of infectious diseases so as to ultimately promote the rights and freedoms of individuals” (Health and Human Rights Journal, 2015:52). However, the implementation of these guiding principles can be intricate given that derogations of human rights standards are multifaceted and maybe complicated by complex interactions between competing aspects of public health, ethics, economics, and law (Gostin, 2019:524)

Moreover, there are no global rules or standards governing state of emergency declarations, indicating that nations are exclusively constrained by national and local public health legislation in such matters. Consequently, public health interventions can and have been implemented in a discriminatory manner, leading to the perception that in Zimbabwe, COVID-19 was weaponized against the church, which was compelled to acquiesce to all governmental mandates. Universal public health policy can pose significant difficulties for marginalized people. For instance, Trinity Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, located in the central business sector of Harare, operated a program called 'The Kitchen Soup' that provided sustenance to nearly all street children in Harare. The unilateral shutdown of churches resulted in the cessation of a feeding program for disadvantaged children and adults on the streets.

#### **2.6.4. Closure of public spaces of worship**

It is important to note that, the Statutory Instrument 76, 2020 that declared the COVID-19 as an infectious disease and state of emergence did not completely ban church gatherings but limited gatherings to 100 people. However, all churches in Zimbabwe immediately closed doors. In some cases, other denominations, for example, Methodist Church in Zimbabwe’s first circular to its congregants asked Bishops and Superintendents to devise ways on how to administer gatherings limited to 100 people. However, it is reported that the congregants did not avail themselves for the services. The Methodist in Zimbabwe communiqué titled: MCZ Response to COVID-19 dated 20 March 2020 written by the then Presiding Bishop Reverend

Dr Solomon Zwana which was a follow up to the nine-point guidelines for the Methodist Church had this to say and I quote the preamble:

Following the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe nine-point guidelines for the Methodist people throughout the Connexion issued two weeks back by the office of the Presiding Bishop and following the emergency Consultative Meeting of the Presiding Bishop with the eight bishops from our Synods and faced with the growing risk of COVID-19virus, the following is recommended to all the Methodist people and their communities. That we dig deep into our faith traditions to withstand the scourge that has come upon the face of the earth. Our main concern is not just physical health, but also mental and spiritual health of the population. In this regard the obligation to worship God cannot be substituted for anything else save for the sick, the elderly and the children, they could follow services through live streaming for those who can afford, or other social means, heed (Matthew 6:6) to study and pray privately. Sunday services with 100 congregants should break up the services to reduce the numbers and maintain safe distances between congregants. (MCZ Communique, 20 March 2020)

In other words, zoom worship became a way of preventing others to die. It is important to note that the above Methodist Church in Zimbabwe communique was written the very day the first COVID-19 case was reported in Zimbabwe of which the infected died two days later, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2020. The record of the first case and the subsequent death of the first victim could have brought a totally different paradigm shift on church attendance. Church doors remained closed even if there was encouragement from government and church leaders for congregants to gather as long as they adhere to the 100 people limit per gathering.

The decision to limit gatherings to 100 people was done by the state without any consultation with church leaders in Zimbabwe and that of civic groups as well. Statutory Instrument 76 of 2020 was followed by another, 77 of 2020 that declared the disease a formidable epidemic disease, and the COVID-19 (Prevention, Containment and Treatment) (National Lockdown). The country was then placed in a period of twenty-one days of national lockdown except for essential services and exempted cases. There could be many reasons why churches conformed without questioning.

#### **2.6.5. A theology of Romans 13:1-7**

Most African Indigenous Churches in Zimbabwe use Romans 13:1-7 to justify their marriage with the state. One would argue that the Zimbabwean ecclesiology could have passively

followed government pronouncements on COVID-19 without questioning. The understanding and interpretation is that all civil leaders are chosen by God and inaugurated by God. It is, therefore, the duty of all Christians to pray and honour those in authority.

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. (Romans 13:1-2).

However, there is need for the church to read the above said text within its context as a text written to Christians in Rome at a particular time and particular situation. Henry (2008:1784) says that there was good reason for the pressing of this duty of subjection to civil magistrates because of the reproach the Christian religion lay under in the world, as an enemy to public space, order, and government, as a sect that turned the world upside down, and embracers of it as enemies to Caesar, and the more that the leaders were Galileans-an old slander. Henry (2008) goes on to say that Christians were looked upon as the trouble causers of the land, their enemies having found such representations needful for the justifying of their barbarous rage against them. The Apostle Paul, therefore, for the obviating of this reproach and the clearing of Christianity from it, shows that obedience to the civil magistrates is one of the laws of Christ, whose religion helps to make people good subjects; and it was very unjust to charge upon Christianity that faction and rebellion to which its principles and rules are so directly contrary.

The reason to enforce this duty is because of the danger Christians run themselves into by resistance. Civil rulers bear the gun and the sword, and to oppose them is to hazard all that which is dear in this world (Henry, 2008:1784). The Christians were then in those persecution times obnoxious to the sword of the magistrate for their religion, and they needed not make themselves more obnoxious by their religion. Therefore, the Zimbabwean ecclesiology should read biblical texts against their purposes.

#### **2.6.6. Regime change agenda**

Firstly, history has shown that in Zimbabwe, any criticism against the state even if it is constructive is regarded as a regime change agenda. Therefore, the churches were to comply with government pronouncements without questioning. In March 2007, the Catholic Bishops Conference wrote a pastoral letter to the former President Robert Mugabe. It stated that the economic hardship and political repression by Mugabe's government had led to widespread anger, leaving the nation in extreme danger, Dzirutwe (2007). In his first public response to the

criticism, Mugabe said the bishops had turned political and warned that this was a dangerous path. He went on to say once they turn political, we regard them as no longer being spiritual and our relations with them would be conducted as if we are dealing with political entities (Dzirutwe, 2007). Most religious leaders who questioned the government on anything were ruthlessly dealt with by the ZANU PF government. The church accepted passively all government pronouncements probably because of the fear of being labelled regime change activists. The pastoral letter, “The March is Not Ended”- of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference that shook the political establishment could be seen as an extension of the sour relations between the State and the Catholic Church.

### **2.6.7 Catholic Bishops Pastoral letter**

The pastoral letter was released on 14 August 2020 by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops is of interest to this discussion. The letter was clarion call which deserve introspection. The bishops analysed events occurring within Zimbabwe in 2020 at the pick of COVID-19 and concluded that the differences in perception between “those who think they have arrived and those on the march has resulted in a multi-layered crisis of the convergence of the economic collapse, deepening poverty, food insecurity, corruption and human rights abuses and other crises in urgent need of resolution” (Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference, 2020). They noted the call for demonstrations in Zimbabwe as a result of “growing frustration and aggravation caused by the conditions that the majority of the Zimbabweans find themselves in (Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference, 2020).

The bishops further condemned the Zimbabwe government’s response to those that took part in or organized the 31 July 2020 demonstrations as only causing the people to be fearful. In their opinion the government needed to respect those people whose views differed from it (Manyonganise, 2022:7). It was an abuse for the government to label anyone who differed with them an enemy of the state. Critiquing the significance of Heroes and Defence Forces days, the bishops said:

As your shepherds, we are sensing that our national leaders want us to take us back to the mentality and practices of the war times where it was ‘us against them’. We want our politics to build a united nation and not to divide us, turning the military who ought to continue the memory of the late heroes against the people who fed them and clothed them and who gathered intelligence at great risk and saved many of our fighters from peril. Some of our vocal political leaders are busy recreating the war situation of us and

them, abdicating from the responsibility to build a united nation. Have we not all been divided by this divisive political environment to the detriment of the national common good? (Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference, 2020)

The politics of division have defined Zimbabwe since its independence in 1980 (Manyonganise, 2022:8). The bishops asserted that, in embracing the re-engagement rhetoric of the purported 'new dispensation,' politicians ought to prioritize the marginalised and disadvantaged populations in Zimbabwe adversely affected by the detrimental economic policies of the ruling authorities. The inadequate healthcare system signifies the demise of leadership in Zimbabwean politics. The bishops saw the political leadership as unprepared for the challenges posed by COVID-19. The bishops observed that this absence of accountability occurs during a period when judicial independence is undermined, the healthcare system has deteriorated, and there is an exodus of essential experts (Manyonganise, 2022:8). The bishops criticized the administration for not accepting the church's help in initiating conversation with health experts. The pastoral letter emphasized the government's erroneous priorities. The bishops observed that government officials possessed more Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) than healthcare professionals, which was detrimental in the context of COVID-19.

### **2.6.8 State response to the Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter**

In response to the pastoral letter, the government through the Minister of Information and Publicity described the bishops as evil and narrow minded (Manyonganise, 2022:8). The Minister accused the bishops as being “reckless regime change, agents whose objective was to incite the public to rise against the government”. In reference to the pastoral letter Mutsvangwa said: “Its evil message reeks of all vices that have personally hobbled the progress of Africa. It trumpets petty tribal feuds, internecine strife as a prelude to civil war and national disintegration”.

Drawing comparisons with the Rwandan genocide, the Minister of Information singled out the Archbishop of Harare, Robert Christopher Ndlovu, and accused him of inciting tribal conflict (Manyonganise, 2022:9). She charged “With nefarious cynicism to history, Archbishop Robert Christopher Ndlovu is itching to lead the Zimbabwe Catholic Congregation into the darkest dungeons of Rwanda type genocide”. Characterising the Ndebele as a minority group in comparison to the Shona, Minister continued as she castigated the archbishop:

He wants to be posited as the leader of the Ndebele minority by fanning the psychosis of tribal victimization. Concurrently, he is sowing sins of collective guilt on the Shona majority. That way, he seeks to nub the spirit of collective vigilance against the known and proven enemies of the populace of Zimbabwe. His transgressions acquire a geopolitical dimension as the chief priest of the agenda of regime change and is the hallmark of the post-imperial major Western powers for the last two decades (Manyonganise 2022:9)

### **2.6.9 Religious Regime Enablers' Response to the Catholic Bishops' Letter**

In post independent Zimbabwe, especially beyond the year 2000, the government has responded to the criticism of historical ecumenical bodies by influencing the formation of pro-government church groups (Manyonganise, 2022:13). During the Mugabe era, the Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe (ACCZ) was formed to counter the messages of church bodies that were critical of government. In the post Mugabe era, Zimbabwe witnessed the formation of the Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-Denominational council of Churches (ZIICC) for the same purpose. According to Manyonganise (2022) the 'second republic' may have felt that the ACCZ was pro-Mugabe, hence it would not serve its best interests. Thus, despite the bishops' letter galvanizing massive support from historical ecumenical bodies, the ZIICC moved in, to counter these and show support to the government. The ZIICC through its patron, Nehemiah Mutendi and spokesperson, Andrew Wutawunashe, reacted to the bishops' letter. Wutawunashe spoke against the bishops' pastoral letter as one that sought to revive old grudges or wounds. He argued:

We take strong exception to and categorically dissociate ourselves from calls by certain religious leaders to march against the government and reignite conflicts and wounds of the past to heal us, from which God answered our prayers by bringing political leaders to the negotiating table whose reconciliation was achieved. (The Herald 19 August 2020).

The government of President Emmerson Mnangagwa succeeded in dividing the church by creating regime enablers. A regime enabler is an individual or group that helps politicians gain power and then helps them to maintain power (Magaisa, 2019). The role of the religious enablers in relationship to the Catholic Bishops' letter was to discredit the alternative religious voice in the Zimbabwean political space. In this case, religion is used as a counter revolutionary strategy to silent emerging voices with different view to ZANU PF. Magaisa (2019) reports

that “the perfect façade of normalcy of some religious leaders is designed to cover the sordid reality of the regime”.

In response to the Catholic Bishops’ letter, Bishop Nehemiah Mutendi, as regime enabler associated with the ruling elite, argues that the letter is irrelevant and dug up old graves. He notes that, instead of opening old wounds like the Gukurahundi issue, churches should divert their energies towards preaching messages of hope to a nation burdened by drought and sanctions-induced economic hardships (New Zimbabwe 2020). Mutendi argued that church leaders should not speak about past wrongdoings but should focus on giving hope to their flocks. There is no need to remind people of the past because everyone has a dark past (New Zimbabwe 2020). Thus, instead of engaging the contents of the letter, Mutendi considered the Catholic Bishops’ letter as “inappropriately prescriptive and grossly disrespectful” (The Guardian, 2020).

The question is, why should a letter that champions the poor, and calls for accountability and ending political imprisonment and corruption, be regarded as inappropriate and disrespectful, especially by religious leaders? How can national healing occur unless past atrocities, such as Gukurahundi, corruption and stealing of COVID-19 money meant for PPE for the health professionals, are addressed and perpetrators are subjected to accountability? It is clear from their response that religious leaders like Mutendi legitimize a regime through blindness to wrongdoing, as a way to remain politically relevant and ensure reciprocal benefits (Dube, 2021).

Another influential religious leader who responded to the bishops’ letter is Apostle Andrew Wutawunashe who represents the Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-Denominational Council of Churches (ZIICC). Wutawunashe states that, “as a religious movement, it categorically dissociates itself from calls by certain religious leaders to march against the government and to reignite conflicts and wounds for the sake of healing” (Pindula News, 2020). It is not surprising that Wutawunashe would want to distance himself from this letter and the political issues it refers to, as he has been involved in various political issues in Zimbabwe in the past and sided with the regime (Dube, 2022). Dube added that Wutawunashe is a known political activist who champions the regime agenda and has officiated at ZANU PF functions and has castigated those with a political different agenda. His view on the letter is anchored on the notion that the religious regime should please the political masters.

### **2.6.10 Ecumenical bodies in solidarity with Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference**

On the other hand, the government's political response to the ZCBC pastoral letter was perceived as a direct attack on the church in general. The historical ecumenical bodies in Zimbabwe and beyond released their statements of solidarity with the bishops. Internationally, solidarity statements were received from World Council of Churches, Methodist World Council, the Lutheran World Federation, World Communion of Reformed Churches, Catholic Bishops of Southern Africa, and Catholic Bishops of Zambia among others (Manyonganise, 2022:11). In Zimbabwe, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, the Anglican Council of Zimbabwe as well as the Zimbabwe Conference of Major Religious Superiors stood in support of the ZCBC's pastoral letter. The Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) released its own pastoral statement, and it argued that:

True democracy is not built on threatening and criticizing those who speak up or speak out; it is not in denying inconvenient and unpalatable truth, it is not in demonizing those we disagree with. Democracy welcomes truth. Democracy is built on the search for the truth (Manyonganise, 2022:11).

The EFZ charged that while the government had managed to stop the 31 July 2020 demonstrations, it had not managed to contain the truth. From their perspective, despite the criticism levelled against the church, for them the truth could not be stopped (Manyonganise, 2022:11). In the same vein, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches also released a statement titled, "Echoing 'The March is not ended'". The ZCC statement affirmed its support to the bishops' pastoral letter which it described as 'honest communication'. In its statement the ZCC refuted the government's blame of the economic crisis on natural disasters such as Cyclone Idai and COVID-19 pandemic as well as international isolation. It called on the government to also put into cognizance some of the serious causes of the economic crisis such as corruption, policy inconsistencies and the government's failure to unite the nations towards a common vision. It noted that the government has always shifted blame and labelled critical voices as 'regime change agents' or terrorists. The ZCC further described the government's response as "overtly too emotional and disrespectful for formal communication (Zimbabwe Council of Churches, 2020)

### **2.7 Virtual Church Response**

Pastoral ministry has manifested physically in ecclesiastical structures, residences, and communal areas, providing direct care and affirmation of God's love and support. The

catastrophic outbreak and rapid dissemination of COVID-19 precipitated unparalleled challenges for congregations, resulting in stringent national lockdowns, the cessation of physical gatherings, a profound disruption of traditional ministry practices, and an imperative shift towards complete digitalization of the gospel, ultimately leading to the termination of physical ministry presence (Tagwirei, 2021:1). The ecclesiology in Zimbabwe adapted to the government's closure of physical places of worship by transitioning to online ministry.

Traditionally, the digital and theological worlds appeared distant from each other and were kept like separate compartments of life for decades (Bogle, 2020:8). However, as Garner (2013:254) asserts, the internet to be utilized to accomplish the Great Commission (derived from Matthew 20:18-20) in any environment (Huston, 2006). With the same considerations, when the Zimbabwean government instructed churches to stop gathering, pastors were forced to adopt digitalization as an alternative means to continue executing their work under prevailing restrictive conditions (Tagwirei, 2021:2). Zimbabwe's main daily newspaper, The Herald (2021) reported that some churches such as Heartfelt International Ministries (HIM), Guta RaMwari and United Congregational churches had resorted to social media (like Facebook and WhatsApp) to conduct services. The MCZ also encouraged its members to go online as evidenced by their circular (01/20/SZ/jmc) of 25 March 2020 which says:

Following a series of consultations and after prayerful reflection on regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the threat it poses I write to advise the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe community that we are suspending worship services and other gatherings including District Synods with immediate effect. We will continue to assess the situation and will advise accordingly. Church buildings will remain open for individuals who may need to come for private prayer and reflection. Ministers and stewards are directed to supervise any such visits and ensure compliance. The Mission Department will provide more guidance regarding live streaming of services and sharing of devotions through social media (Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, 2020).

### **2.7.1 The challenges of pastoring online**

Churches which engaged in online pastoral ministry to circumvent complete absences during periods when physical gatherings were prohibited, encountered numerous obstacles that rendered them unable to maintain their presence. Hence, it is critical to identify the primary challenges encountered by Zimbabwean ecclesiology as the economic crisis, inadequate preparedness, lack of human resources and material resources, disruptions in communication,

cultural disturbances, technical constraints, high data costs, power outages, and congestion on online platforms (MCZ Communications Policy, 2020). It is imperative to acknowledge that in Zimbabwe, there are two primary internet service providers: (i) Econet, which is owned in its entirety by Strive Masiwa; and (ii) Net One Zimbabwe, a parastatal under the government. In the business world, it is generally accepted that in the absence of competition, prices are typically more expensive.

## **2.7.2 Economic Crisis**

The majority of congregations and pastors could not afford online pastoral ministry because of economic problems. Zimbabwe has been in a deepening economic crisis since the reign of late Robert Gabriel Mugabe up to the military assisted rule (Cook, 2017:1) of incumbent president Emmerson Mnangagwa in November 2017 to date (Masunungure and Bratton, 2018:1). The rural population in Zimbabwe depends on subsistence farming. The advent of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns brought a lot of challenges to the rural farmers who were used to transporting their fresh produce to nearby towns. Besides having transport problems, they also needed to register with the authorities to be given permits to travel with their produce to the urban markets. Not only that, but the urban markets were also allowed to open for few hours which rendered rural farming to the periphery of doing business.

The Zimbabwean economy has been disturbingly floundering as confirmed by increased dependence on primary commodities such as platinum, diamonds, and gold; massive deindustrialization and infomalisation of the economy (Kanyenze, Chitambara and Tyson, 2017:6-14). The country has also encountered low investment levels because of political volatility, and policy discrepancies that disestablished business confidence. Issues of flawed rule of law, command policies, weakening of public institutions, fiscal and debt mismanagement, corruption, heavy taxation, high inflation, and high liquidity constraints ruined the Zimbabwean economy (Bhoroma, 2021; Pasara and Garidzirai, 2020:2). As a result, the majority of Zimbabweans have been subjected to abject poverty (Chingono, 2021). In such an economic quagmire, congregations and pastors could not afford the costs of attending online ministry. Furthermore, urban livelihoods were heavily impacted by the emergence of COVID-19 which was accompanied by several lockdown measures which suffocated the livelihood strategies among the low-income group of the economy (Muzuva and Hlungwani, 2022:1). It is in the high-density areas of Harare in Zimbabwe where most Christians reside.

### **2.7.3 Lack of preparedness**

A lack of preparedness was both found in the church and the members. Most Zimbabweans especially in the high-density areas and rural areas would prefer small durable cell phones which are said to save battery usage due to electricity blackouts and most of these phones are not compatible with social pages of the day. Regardless of the economic drawbacks, the COVID-19 pandemic demanded a quick move of operations to virtual modes. Globally, the process of moving the church online demanded research, budget, plans and expertise (Elbert, 2020:12-14). Most of the churches in Zimbabwe especially the traditional churches mostly known as Main-Line churches were having challenges of transitioning from traditional instruments to modern instruments well before the advent of COVID-19.

Similarly, in Zimbabwe, the COVID-19 pandemic drew some human resources to quarantine centres, intensive care units (ICUs) and that wreaked havoc in processes of human resource mobilisation and development for the church to catch up with the digital demands. Such predicaments puzzlingly hard-passed Zimbabwean denominations as material, human and financial resources got unsettled (Tagwirei, 2021). Most churches, because of their traditions, were not yet open to the use of modern instruments and equipment. Media units with media equipment were non-existent and most of the equipment is cheaper when one is buying from outside the country and yet borders were closed minimizing movement of people and goods.

### **2.7.4 Lack of material resources**

The ‘new normal’, socially distanced context demanded a drastic approach to pastoral ministry, which costs digital resources such as smartphones, laptops, tablets, recording cameras; technical expertise, data, electricity, and network (Tagwirei, 2021:7). Depending on the type of social page, which was to be used, there was a need in some instances to create mini-broadcasting studios, and this needed a lot of resources. Picture quality and sound depended on the quality of gadgets used by the Church. Because of limited capacities, few pastors from economically sound denominations engaged in live streaming and the bulk of them failed. This was evident as one peruses public social pages for example Facebook and YouTube, very few Churches were found on these. This means that pastors work online while physical meetings were suspended. It is, however, recommendable that pastors should utilize their limited resources and embrace any viable medium like SMS, which is conveniently accessible to the least resourced for short messages while surrendering their congregations to the interminable spiritual presence until physical presence is fully restored (Tagwirei, 2021:8).

### 2.7.5 Lack of human resources

Although digitalization necessitated that practitioners acclimate to increased speed, enhanced efficiency, and novel methodologies in the workplace (Shibata, 2021:19), a limited number of pastors have the knowledge-based abilities to utilize digital devices in ministry. A significant number of pastors were unable to effectively digitalize their ministry. Due to insufficient skill sets in the digital vineyard, certain pastors have struggled to adapt to the rapid advancement of new technology (Tagwirei, 2021). Many pastors, particularly the elderly and less educated, perceive internet pastoring as inadequately resourced, inconsistent, and ineffective in Zimbabwe. The transition from serving a live congregation to an online audience dispersed in their homes necessitated the training of pastors and lay preachers, although time for such training was lacking.

However, in this thesis I argue that pastors who struggle with new technologies should have sought not only assistance from their **congregational members and other external sources but went on an upskilling trajectory and acquire essential skills relevance for being effective in the evolving contexts**. Up to the contemporary, the future remains uncertain as the possibility for another pandemic could be there. It is essential for the Churches to establish a 'Media Unit or Department' responsible for communications and oversee all social media platforms associated with the Church.

### 2.7.6 Disrupted communications

During my high school education, I learned that communication is a process encompassing the transmission and reception of messages by verbal and non-verbal means. Communication is a reciprocal process of conveying information, including thoughts, views, and ideas, between two or more individuals aimed at fostering understanding. The primary disturbance during online services was the absence of real-time feedback. Due to most of the churches' inability to transition to internet ministry, which offers visual content, the dissemination of audio recordings became standard practice. The church universally uses face-to-face communication for the dissemination of the gospel (Reimann, 2017:70). Although digital media may enhance ecclesial and pastoral communication in Zimbabwe, the transition from physical to online ministry has hindered pastors' access to vocal and nonverbal cues that are inherently essential to communication. In contrast to other nations where online communication exhibits greater fluidity, pragmatic usability, and effectiveness than traditional communication, the

Zimbabwean context is hindered by electrical, network, and resource issues that undermine fluidity, usability, reliability, and efficacy.

It is indisputable that without auditory and visual cues, clear communication is challenging. Gestures augment communication by assisting speakers in articulating speech, accessing difficult vocabulary from lexical memory, transmitting information to listeners, and improving listeners' understanding (Byrne and Nuzum, 2020:208; Driskell and Radtke, 2015:446). Digital communication seems static and disembodied, unable to completely transmit gestures, tone, and facial expressions, which are essential for effective message encoding and decoding. Recognizing that effective communication among humans often involves the disruption of non-communicative functions of speakers, expressions play a crucial role in facilitating communication. This is particularly true during silent reflection and attentive listening as individuals convey their personal issues and concerns in times of need, especially when attempting to express emotions (Tagwirei, 2022:18).

According to Khroul (2021:202), digitalization in Russia has generated both opportunities and obstacles in communication for religious institutions, clergy, and worshipers. The same is true for the Zimbabwean situation. The implementation of digital pastoral ministry garnered several information sources, resulting in a transition from interpersonal to digitally mediated communication. Digital technologies have emerged as a pivotal factor, contesting bureaucratic information filters and the management of ecclesiastical secrets. Victor Khroul (2021:202) observed that in the Russian context, 'digitalization has become increasingly fluid, ambiguous, and pluralistic regarding ideals and behaviours.' Given the contextual challenges in Zimbabwe, how may the ill and bereaved, who experienced restricted and expedited burials, perceive the presence of their pastors online, particularly when accessibility and connectivity issues persist? This also pertains to weddings and associated activities. Consequently, online ministry faced significant cultural obstacles in Zimbabwe.

### **2.7.7 Technical constraints**

Most of the individuals with the experience in Information and Technology are costly to employ in Zimbabwe, likely due to the ailing economy, which has resulted in the church's inability to secure sufficient volunteers for technical services. Digitalization in Zimbabwe has frequently been hindered by inadequate service delivery, technical malfunctions, and the expensive maintenance and upgrading of digital devices by service providers (Shibata, 2021:21). In Zimbabwe, unlike in other nations, service providers frequently encounter difficulties in

maintaining their infrastructure and ensuring consistency due to the nation's declining economic conditions. Considering the aforementioned challenges, the internet presence became consistent. On various days, WhatsApp and Facebook were entirely suspended in Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, SMS continued to be viable for brief messages.

### **2.7.8 High costs of data**

The presence of two primary internet service providers in Zimbabwe indicates a significant demand for the service, coupled with a lack of competition among the providers. This elucidates the reasons behind the elevated cost of data. The bulk of congregants originate from low-income regions, including rural, semi-urban, and densely populated urban areas. Several local pastors recognised that the COVID-19 problem provided a chance to cultivate innovation and engage with their parishioners digitally. Regrettably, digitisation became costly as network providers continually increased their charges to sustain their operations in the volatile Zimbabwean economy (Tagwirei, 2022:25). Lucky Mabhiza noted that a limited number of Zimbabweans participated in online worship services due to the exorbitant cost of data, insufficient access to cell phones, and a general lack of enthusiasm (Mabhiza, 2021). In response to the deteriorating Zimbabwean economic conditions, major local telecommunications firms such as Econet Wireless and NetOne increase their charges nearly every quarter. The increase in data costs excluded countless individuals from virtual services due to affordability issues. Practically, a growing number of congregants have been left out of the church. Those who cannot afford smartphones, computers, electricity and data as well as others who are in remote areas completely without gadgets, power and connectivity gave up. However, those who have any kind of phones could be, sometimes, reached through SMS. Communication through SMS could never be reliable because of electrical power cuts.

### **2.7.9 Electricity blackouts**

As reported by the Zimbabwe Independent Newspaper (28 February 2020), the supply of electricity in Zimbabwe has been erratic, costly and frequently hiked for the past decades (Mananavire, 2020). The Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority (ZESA) has also been failing to provide enough electricity to the entire nation, effected load-shedding and that eventually threw the nation into arbitrary blackouts. The blackouts affected live services either on the side of the preacher or the receiver. Blackouts were a major contributor to communication disruption.

The load shedding is also a major contributor to the high cost of data because the service providers of internet use standby generators to power aerial communication receivers dotted across the country, which use diesel of which diesel is expensive in Zimbabwe. It is an obvious case that the costs are pushed to the consumer of the product. The disheartening power supply and demand statistics for Zimbabwe demand 2200 megawatts against a meagre power supply of 1300 megawatts, which signposts a frightening power deficit of 900 megawatts that can only be imported from neighbouring Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries such as South Africa and Mozambique when they have a surplus of power supply. Conversely, Zimbabwe struggles to finance power imports because of economic meltdown as confirmed by non-payment of some previous electricity debts (Rusivingo, 2014:23).

As noted by Alhelou et al. (2019:16-17), intermittent electricity provision and outages disturb network provision, maintenance, information, communication, and technological operations. In addition to that, electrical problems affect the recharging of digital gadgets. Such effects of electrical power problems have been intermittently faced in Zimbabwe. Thus, digitalized pastoral programs and services have been congruently disturbed by electricity and network problems.

#### **2.7.10 Congestion on online platforms**

The presence of two primary internet service providers in Zimbabwe has resulted in an increase of subscribers, leading to congestion. Moreover, social networks such as Zoom impose restrictions on the number of simultaneous users, resulting in congestion and preventing additional members from logging in. During the rapid digitalization of numerous services in Zimbabwe, as lockdowns halted nearly all activities, an increased number of individuals and companies transitioned online to sustain operations. The rise in the number of individuals working digitally has exacerbated the demand for electricity and network services, which were already inconsistent in Zimbabwe. The collaboration of digitalization has the potential to revitalize ecclesiology and pastoral ministry; however, the economic crisis in Zimbabwe has severely impacted network and electricity providers, prompting them to continuously reassess their fees in efforts to sustain operations (Tagwirei, 2022:28). As both physical and virtual interactions became disrupted and inconsistent, the most reliable presence is spiritual, necessitating appreciation and submission to it.

## 2.8 Preliminary conclusion

This chapter examined and described Church-State relationship models as documented by McGowan (2005). In essence, four models were deliberated upon: (i) the relationship in which the state controls the church; (ii) the relationship in which the church controls the state; (iii) the separation of church and state; and (iv) the relationship between the church and the state. It was observed that the missionary church, which had initially backed the state, subsequently distanced itself from most of the colonized and oppressed people. Following independence in 1980, there was a brief period of amicable relations between the Church and State. The church expressed disapproval of the ZANU PF liberation government when it adopted policies like those of the colonisers. In response, the church criticised the government, which resorted to derogatory language and labelled the church agents of regime change. The Mugabe and Mnangagwa administrations proclaimed unequivocally that the church has no role in public spheres, particularly politics.

To counter criticism from authentic and traditional church organizations, the Zimbabwean government supported what can be termed counterfeit churches and individual clergymen for the purpose of advancing state propaganda and countering criticism from traditional churches. "Religious regime enablers" was the moniker given to the sponsored congregations and individuals. An already deleterious relationship was further intensified by the emergence of COVID-19. The church's reaction to the COVID-19 crisis and government declarations regarding COVID-9 was predicated on the prevailing strained relationship. Significantly, the church's response was influenced by social media, the initial documented death, fear and panic, conspiracy theories regarding the source of COVID-19, hygiene protocols, the closure of places of worship, and the government's designation of the church as non-essential, among other factors. In the next chapter I deal with the Christian image of God in the context of COVID-19.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE CHRISTIAN IMAGE OF GOD IN COVID-19

#### 3.0 Introduction

Chapter three commences by providing a critical and analytical account of the historical discourse pertaining to the concept of "theodicy". It is historically established that theological evaluation of human suffering, and more precisely its causes, is necessary for any adequate theological response to human suffering. In many religious traditions, including some Christian circles, suffering is commonly ascribed to sin. It is, therefore, my view that in Zimbabwe and other former colonial states, colonialism sowed the seeds of suffering, of which the incubation period began in 1980 with the birth of self-government. This self-destruction commenced around the year 2000 when the actual germination process commenced. Prior to the arrival of COVID-19 in Africa, Zimbabwe was an economically, socially, and politically unstable nation. Thirdly, the book of Job, which vividly stands as the primary source of theodicy, is dissected in this chapter. Fourthly, individuals respond to catastrophes in various ways, one of which is to assign responsibility. This sparks a comprehensive discourse regarding the appropriation of COVID-19 for the purpose of identity politics, particularly because influential members of society and some Christians perceive COVID-19 as a divine retribution against their adversaries. This segment of the research endeavours to conduct a comprehensive examination of the notion that suffering serves as a trial of one's faith, leading to the different image of God.

#### 3.1 Terminology

To increase understanding, clarity and reduce ambiguity in this chapter, three terms are worth defining namely, "the problem of evil", "theodicy" and "defence".

##### 3.1.1 The Problem of evil defined

While the terms "theodicy" and "the problem of evil" are frequently employed interchangeably. In its strict sense, "the problem of evil" represents the more extensive matter of which "theodicy" is merely a subset, since a secular problem of evil is possible (Richardson & Bowden, 1991:563). The problematisation of evil occurs when an attempt is made to elucidate its existence and establish its connection to the world. In fact, something can be considered malevolent if it undermines our fundamental confidence in the structure and order of our world. Following this, COVID-19 can be characterised as malevolent, as it emerged as an untamed entity that breached every social structure. This then shaped the image of God for people during the era. In a response given by the Charismatic Churches in Zimbabwe, portrayed by prophecies

of Emmanuel Makandiwa in 2020 in a series of virtual services found on YouTube, God was then viewed as the Saviour and hero for the people. God was viewed as the only one that can protect the public from evil. One of the significant statements in most of the sermons was an emphasis on “health and wealth”. The message was centred on prosperity. According to the online sermons, Emmanuel Makandiwa mobilised prayers for protection of the public citing that God is the “essential supply-line of the struggle”. The theology emphasised that God was the “protector against evil” for the people.

### **3.1.2 Theodicy defined**

Etymologically, the word theodicy derives from the Greek words, “Theos” and “dike” and Theos is translated “God” and can be translated as either “justice” or “right” McGrath (1994:501). Thus, theodicy literally means “the justice of God”, Richardson and Bowden (1991:564). McGrath (1994:502) goes further and defined it as a theoretical justification of the goodness of God in the face of the presence of evil in the world. In the case of COVID-19, the billion-dollar question is how the presence of God can be justified as all loving, all powerful, ever present, all knowing, to mention but a few of his attributes? Theodicy means vindication of God. Harper (1990:5) says it is to answer the question of why a good God permits the manifestation of evil, thus resolving the issue of the problem of evil. Further, some theodicies also address the evidential problem of evil by attempting to make the existence of an-all knowing, all-powerful and all-good or omnibenevolent God consistent with the existence of suffering in the world. According to Harper (1990) theodicy is distinct from defence. Unlike a defence, which tries to demonstrate that God’s existence is logically possible in the light of evil, a theodicy attempts to provide a framework wherein God’s existence is also plausible (Harper 1990:6). In other words, a defence attempts to demonstrate that the occurrence of evil does not contradict God’s existence.

Dryness (2008:883) defined theodicy as a theological discourse which response to the question of evil and suffering. Theodicy deals with the theological question of how a good God cannot prevent the innocent from suffering. The book of Job in the Old Testament is used by the Jews and Christians to justify the presence of God in suffering (Job 1:1-20). According to this notion, suffering is viewed as temporary phase with a divine purpose. The above theological view also explains the significance of the Christian church in the Zimbabwean society where COVID-19 brought about much suffering and many unanswered questions.

### **3.1.3 Defence**

A defence differs from a theodicy in that rather than trying to provide an answer to why people

suffer, it seeks to show that theistic belief in God in the face of evil is rational, (McCord 2006:10). Strictly speaking, a logical defence is not making claims about how God works but that he exists. This is exposed in the letter by Dr Xolani Maseko of the Zimbabwe-Synod as shown by the following quote:

The situation is a challenge to the meaning of faith, yet we hold on firmly to our conviction and knowledge that Jesus has conquered this world by his death. He tells us saying: John16:32 “Behold, the hour comes, yes, has now come, that you shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me.” In John16:33 “These things I have spoken to you, that in me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” We preach this word to all during this time that “The Father is with you, and you will overcome because Christ has won “(Maseko, 2021).

DiGregorio et al. (2022) supports this by exposing how the public relied on God for a way out of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was belief in a higher power and the ability of God in intervening and saving the people from the disease.

### **3.2 Historical debate on Theodicy**

The debate regarding theodicy has far more ancient roots, but it is also more widely recognized as having shaped intellectual modernity in Europe, (Viner, 1972:58). This section narrates the history of theodicy from the time the word was coined by Leibniz.

#### **3.2.1 Gottfried Leibniz 1710**

Richardson and Bowden (1991:564) say the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz coined the term “theodicy” in 1710 in his work “*Theodicee*”, though various responses to the problem of evil had been previously proposed. Boethius had already given classical expression to the question of theodicy (If God is righteous why evil). Richardson and Bowden (1991:564) say Boethius gave the answer as follows. Either God wishes to prevent evil but cannot, in which case he is just but not omnipotent. Or he can prevent evil but does not want to, in which case he is omnipotent but just. Immanuel Kant put the question of theodicy in more general terms as the question of the defence of the supreme wisdom of the author of the world against the accusation raised against it by reason, because of what thwarts his purposes in the world. Kant’s view in 1791 essentially turns from philosophy to biblical theism, (Huxford 2020:17).

### **3.2.2 Biblical Traditions**

According to Richardson and Bowden (1991:565), the biblical traditions, particularly the Psalms, Job, Lamentations, and passion narratives, present the question of theodicy in such a fundamental way that it appears unattainable to resolve or dismiss. Why must the devoted endure suffering when the godless prosper well, if God is just? Why is Israel delivered to the power of the Gentile nations if God is dependable? COVID-19 slaughtered without discrimination the pious, the innocent, the wealthy, the impoverished, people of faith, and those who would become Gentiles in our time.

Garcia (2021) says in the history of religion and philosophy we keep finding two different solutions, that is the dualistic conception and the monistic conception. The dualistic conception holds that a good principle and an evil principle are in conflict in the world. People must decide about the side they want to take. Only good comes from God and evil comes from an anti-God, the powers of darkness. Garcia (2021) goes on to say, the monistic conception holds that only good has existence: evil does not. Therefore, in history, evil serves the good in one way or another, and good shows its greater power in the negation of the negation.

A consensus exists among New Testament scholars regarding the nature of the Gospel of Mark: it is an exhortation to a despondent religious minority residing in the city of Rome. The Gospel encompasses two prominent themes: (1) The Son of Man serving as a minister, and (2) The Son of Man enduring suffering. Viljoen (2018) asserts that God himself experiences a particular type of torment. By virtue of his covenant with Israel and the act of his name being indwelt within this people. God is directly involved in the captivations, afflictions, and persecutions of Israel. He is the companion in suffering of the virtuous. The New Testament account of the Passion of Jesus, the Son of God, is founded upon the Israelite concept of the fellow suffering of God (Theopathy), as noted by Green (2000:297). He is the benevolent servant of God who endures our sufferings, accomplishes our wills, and thus liberates us. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' suffering is divine, redemptive, and in solidarity with humanity.

### **3.2.3 The Church Fathers**

The Church Fathers, particularly Irenaeus and Augustine, utilised Middle Platonism, Richardson, and Bowden to resolve the theodicy problem (Richardson & Bowden, 1991:565). Their stance was that evil does not exist and that virtue itself is non-existent. Therefore, it cannot be attributed to the creator God. This perspective reconciles the blame for COVID-19 with God. Sin is moral depravity that results from the free will of humanity. Badham (1990)

argues that the Irenaean theodicy provides support for the likelihood of an all-powerful and all-benevolent deity despite the existence of evidence of evil in the world. A multitude of iterations of theodicy have been posited, all of which contend that God is either not culpable or does not bear responsibility for the existence of evil. The Irenaean theodicy normally posits that the current world is optimal among all potential worlds due to its provision of ample opportunity for human development (Badham, 1990). Human development, according to Irenaeus, is contingent upon the experience of evil and free will. The difficulty with Irenaeus' theological stance is that those who are dying are the most severely impacted by COVID-19, leaving them with no opportunity for complete maturation.

The development of “process theology” has challenged the Irenaean tradition by teaching that God using suffering for his own ends would be immoral (Iammarino, 2013). Twentieth-century philosopher Alvin Plantinga's free will defence argues that, while this maybe the best world God could have created, God's options were limited by the need to allow free will. Plantinga stresses that this is the reason why he does not proffer a theodicy but only a defence of theistic belief as rational in the face of unanswered questions. It can also be argued that love cannot be expressed through suffering. The magnitude of suffering brought about by COVID-19 is excessive, and in some cases, cannot lead to moral development.

Augustine thinks that the emergence of evil in the world is mostly attributed to original sin and its persistent existence due to human malfeasance (Allen, 2003). Augustine's perspective aligns with others who attribute the potential authorship of COVID-19 to the Chinese. Donald Trump, the former president of the United States, was recorded referring to the infection as the 'Wuhan virus,' 'Chinese virus,' or 'Asian viruses.' According to Augustinian theodicy, God's kindness and generosity are flawless and devoid of accountability for evil or suffering. He dismissed the notion that evil originates from God, viewing it instead as a perversion of goodness resulting from humanity's misuse of free will. Augustine's reasoning culminates in the assertion that COVID-19 is not a divine retribution. Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin were subsequently affected by Augustine's theodicy, proposing a comparable theodicy grounded in the belief that God embodies love and that evil cannot reside within Him (Allen, 2003). Thomas Aquinas posited that the presence of goodness permits the creation of evil, attributable to human fault. This perspective endorses one of the conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 is a result of an error or a laboratory leak.

Richardson and Bowden (1991:565) assert that the Reformers minimised the perspectives of the Church Fathers, contending that the theology of salvation addresses the issue of theodicy. In Protestant orthodoxy, evil is articulated within the context of God's sovereign dominion over the world: God permits evil without condoning it; He orchestrates evil to ultimately yield good; He imposes constraints on evil and ultimately vanquish it. Physical ailments serve as a divine instrument of retribution and instruction, intended to purify and refine humanity. According to Richardson and Bowden (1991:565), even metaphysical evil, represented by the devil, must fulfil the purposes of God. Individuals in the 21st century find it exceedingly challenging to comprehend that God used evil to punish, purify, and instruct humanity, particularly in light of the catastrophic consequences of COVID-19. Given that the Bible states all have sinned (Romans 3:23), one may anticipate uniform effects of COVID-19 throughout all continents; nevertheless, this was not observed. A significant issue of this religion is to rationalize the punishment of innocent children who were victims of the pandemic.

#### **3.2.4 Eighteenth Century- The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755**

The city of Lisbon in Portugal was virtually devastated on November 1, 1755, by the largest seismic event ever recorded to strike Europe, according to Strickland (2015). Lisbon was approximately 100 miles to the southwest of the epicentre of a powerful earthquake that struck the Atlantic Ocean at approximately 09:30 hours on a Sunday. Strickland claims that shortly after the battle, a tsunami inundated the city, and in the dry areas, a multitude of fires erupted for the next five days. The loss of life was enormous, with some estimates placing the number of fatalities at fifty thousand. Strickland characterizes the event as a catastrophe reminiscent of biblical proportions, which prompted conjecture regarding its theological significance. Such speculation was heightened by the fact that the tragedy transpired on a religious holiday (All Saints Day), during which numerous individuals perished while attending mass in the church, while others perished in fires ignited by fallen altar candles.

The Lisbon earthquake in the seventeenth century undermined belief in the world's harmony and the benevolence of rulers (Richardson and Bowden 1991:565). Voltaire was among the pioneers in questioning the alignment of such events with divine providence. In what manner could such an occurrence align with God's design? Did God possess a plan? Strickland (2015) asserts that Voltaire reluctantly acknowledged the likelihood of a divine purpose, although deemed it ultimately incomprehensible to humanity. This prompted Voltaire to direct his criticism not at God, but at the philosophers who sought to elucidate and rationalize not only this sin but all of the world's afflictions. Voltaire's initial focus was on what contemporary

discourse refers to as retributive theodicy, specifically the conviction that natural calamities serve as divine retribution, (Strickland 2015).

### **3.2.5 Twentieth Century Holocaust of Auschwitz and Hiroshima**

In the twentieth century, human self-confidence was shattered in the unspeakable crime and horror of the holocaust of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, (Gribertz, 2004:14). The Holocaust, also known as the Shoah, was the genocide of European Jews during World War Two. Between 1941 and 1945, Nazi Germany and its collaborators systematically murdered about six million Jews, Gribertz (2004:15). The murders were carried out in pogroms and mass shootings; by a policy of extermination through labour in concentration camps; and in gas chambers and gas vans in German. In his writings, Breslauer (2018:137) says the trauma of the Nazi Holocaust has confronted American Jews with the reality of radical evil. The profound evil of the Holocaust has and continues to evoke crisis of faith for many of those who take seriously the traditional conceptual notion that God is both omnipotent and good, (Pill, 2014:2). Indeed, the faith of many Jews was choked in the smoke of the crematoria. Pill (2014) says questions about God's power, goodness, and his relationship to the world, mankind and the Jewish people play a central role in post-Holocaust religious thinking.

Friedlander (1999:462) says if God is omnipotent, He must have chosen to permit the Holocaust, and if so, how can He be good? If God is good, the Holocaust must have been perpetrated against His will, and if so, how can He be all-powerful? Kollontai (2002:265) says in the post-Holocaust world traditional theodicy has become increasingly unacceptable for many Christians. Scholars such as Jurgen Moltmann, Dorothee Soelle and Paul Fiddes, each in their own way, have presented an alternative to traditional theodicy through the concept of a God who suffers with humanity (Friedlander, 1999). Kollontai goes on to say that this theology of a suffering God is intended to maintain belief in the existence of God by asking not why God allows suffering but how does our pain become God's pain and how does God's pain appear in our pain?

The view that God does not intervene in men's despicable behaviour is in contrast with the theology of suffering. Green (2000:297) says God is involved in the suffering of his people for he suffers with his people to redeem them. Jesus carried the cross on Good Friday, which was heavy and shameful, but he carried it for the sake of Easter (Green 2000:298). In other words, there is no Easter without good Friday. This view, when interpreted, seems to suggest that there is goodness that comes out of evil. There are positive things that COVID-19 brought about

even though the negatives outweigh that which is good.

This thesis briefly examines the potential therapeutic strategy for addressing pain associated with the Holocaust during World War II, a subject that has been extensively discussed and documented. Harper (1990:76) It must be acknowledged that God permits a wide array of suffering in human affairs, encompassing anything from minor discomfort to extreme anguish. Harper (1990:77) asserts that God, as understood within the Godhead, does not intervene in humanity's reprehensible actions or in human conduct overall, however this does not negate the veracity of God's divine essence. God's eternal purpose, an unassailable end, is both anthropomorphically conceived and formally attributed to an eternal Being through the use of metaphorically expansive language (Harper 1990:78). One can contend that if God refrains from intervening in humanity's reprehensible actions, and if this assumption is valid, it follows that COVID-19 is a consequence of such behaviour and the rationale for divine non-intervention. On August 6, 1945, during World War II, an American B-29 bomber dropped the world's first atomic bomb over the Japanese city of Hiroshima, (Harper 1990:78). The explosion immediately killed an estimated 80, 000 people; tens of thousands more would later die of radiation exposure. Three days later another bomb was dropped on the city of Nagasaki, killing an estimated 40,000 people, Harper (1990:78). In all this, God did not intervene because he is not involved when people suffer the consequences of their own actions says Harper (1990).

### **3.2.6 The 2010 and 2016 Haiti Earthquake**

On 12 January 2010 an earthquake in Haiti killed more than 100 000 people but the Haitian government's official count was more than 300 000, Pallardy (2016). Hundreds of thousands of survivors were displaced and efforts by citizens and the international aid organizations to provide medical assistance, food, and water to survivors were hampered by the failure of the electric power system, loss of communication lines and roads blocked with debris. Pallardy (2016) says because many hospitals had been rendered unusable, survivors were forced to wait days for treatment and with morgues quickly reaching capacity, corpses were stacked in the streets. Further deaths occurred as serious injuries went without treatment in the absence of medical staff and supplies. The orphans created by these mass mortalities as well as those whose parents had died prior to the quake were left vulnerable to abuse and human trafficking, Pallardy (2016)

Early in the morning of 14 August 2021 a 7.2 magnitude earthquake rocked Haiti, causing

hospitals, schools, and homes to collapse, claiming hundreds of lives, and leaving communities in crisis. It is reported that by mid-September 2021, around 650 000 people, including about 260 000 children, were estimated to need humanitarian assistance (Pallardy 2016). Even before the earthquake, Haiti was facing multiple challenges, and the challenges were further exacerbated by COVID-19.

Scott (2010) asserts that periods of profound suffering, both collective and individual, prompt the re-emergence of the issue of evil, and amidst the devastation, the enduring inquiries of theodicy arise with theological and existential urgency. The Haitian experience necessitates theological agility and empathy. Scott expresses sorrow that Christian leaders and theologians frequently falter and fail in the wake of catastrophe. Rather than offering thoughtful and nuanced responses, individuals often resort to hurried and poorly conceived platitudes, or, at worse, to cruel and insulting comments. Scott (2010) asserts that theology and theologians must identify methods to communicate constructively and beneficially at periods of doubt and despair. Scott posits that theodicy, as an attempt to rationalise the incomprehensible, commences practically immediately following the occurrence of tragedies. Regrettably, theodicy frequently devolves into "blaming the victim" instead of clarifying the issue or offering solace and optimism. Scott proposed that a robust theodicy must satisfy three criteria: it should utilize the unique resources of its tradition; it must be intellectually, spiritually, and theologically consistent; and it must be comprehensible in the context of actual experiences of suffering.

Scott's statements were in opposition to the claims made by Pat Robertson, a well-known American television evangelist and former host of the 700 Club. Robertson attributed responsibility for the Haitian earthquake to the Haitians themselves, alleging that they entered a pact with the devil to attain independence from the French. He theorized that they have been "cursed" ever since. According to Scott (2010), Pat Robertson's theodicy is founded upon a theodicy of divine wrath, cruelty, and retribution against a God who inflicts indiscriminate and disproportionate suffering upon countless innocent people. Although certain biblical passages allude to divine vengeance for transgression, they do not establish a parallel between punishment and natural disasters. Instead, the Bible depicts the companionship of God for those who endure suffering, referring to them as "blessed" rather than "cursed" (Matthew 5:1,12). Scott responds that Pat Robertson's theodicy lacks expression of the Christian perspective on God's love and compassion, specifically towards the impoverished and marginalized, from a theological standpoint. Theodicies explore numerous theological pathways. Job's companions,

adhering to the notion of retributive justice, determined that his suffering sprang from a personal fault. By subscribing to the theodicy of Pat Robertson or Job's companions, one engages in a paradigm where natural evil arises from moral evil, divine wrath is manifested through the crucifixion of infants for the sins of distant relatives, and the systematic arrangement of corpses in the street epitomizes divine justice (Scott 2010).

### **3.2.7 The 2011 Japanese Earthquake and Tsunami**

On March 11, 2011, the Japanese populace and the global community were significantly impacted by the earthquake event and ensuing tsunami in eastern Japan, known as the Tohoku Tsunami (Saito, 2011). Since the inception of modern record-keeping in 1900, it has been classified as the fourth most intense earthquake worldwide and the most powerful ever documented in Japan (Red Cross, 2011). Substantial tsunami surges may have been produced by the earthquake, potentially exceeding 40.5 meters in height near Miyako, Tohoku. The residents of Sendai received only eight to ten minutes' warning before the catastrophe. The snowfall during the tsunami severely hindered rescue operations. Ishinomaki, the city with the worst fatality toll, recorded temperatures as low as 0 degrees Celsius (32 degrees Fahrenheit) at the time of the tsunami (Saito 2011). As of April 11, 2011, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) indicated that the death toll exceeded 13,000 individuals, with an additional 14,600 individuals unaccounted for.

Has the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake prompted theodicy in Japan? Fugiwara (2013:501) contends that this inquiry would perplex numerous religious scholars for two primary reasons. Theodicy is typically considered an antiquated idea, and vibrant discourse on the subject is seldom encountered in contemporary academics, save within theological circles. Secondly, conventional theodicean inquiries are improbable to be posed publicly in Japan, where fewer than two percent of the populace adheres to monotheistic faiths. Fugiwara (2013) notes that most Japanese view the disaster as divine retribution. This perspective reflects longstanding cultural and religious beliefs surrounding fate and natural events in Japanese society. Additionally, the interpretation has influenced both public discourse and government responses in the aftermath of the catastrophe. Eight days post-disaster, Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara declared that the catastrophe affecting his nation was “tenbatsu,” or divine retribution, for the moral failings of the Japanese populace, Fugiwara (2013). “We require a tsunami to eradicate the egoism that has corroded the mentality of the Japanese over an extended period,” stated Ishihara, who subsequently issued an apology. United States political personality Glenn Beck

stated on his radio broadcast that the Japanese disaster was a form of punishment, according to Fugiwara (2013). Concerning COVID-19, there are some who share the perspective that it is a divine punishment.

The Bible offers justifications for dismissing the notion that calamities are typically divine retribution (Mathuna et al. 2018). Jesus was inquired if a group of Galileans slain by Pilate and eighteen individuals who perished when a tower collapsed on them were greater sinners than those residing in Jerusalem (Luke 13:1-5). He responded with a resounding, No! Jesus urged his audience to reflect on their own position before God. Jesus suggests that individuals are harmed or killed in disasters because to their unfortunate positioning at critical moments. On another occasion, Jesus was inquired whether a man was born blind due to his own guilt or that of his parents (John 9:1-3). He unequivocally refuted the notion that the blindness resulted from anyone's transgression. He stated that God will manifest in this individual's life. Mathuna et al. (2018:35) assert that illness, injury, or death resulting from a disaster or any other circumstance should not be seen as divine judgment for a particular sin. The Bible's consistent position is that in most cases, we do not know if a particular sickness, disease, or disaster has any divine involvement. Humanity may never know why something happened. Disasters, diseases, and devastation can have purely physical causes like geological upheavals, microbes, or genetic mutations, or can have a mixture of human and natural causes, (Mathuna et-al 2018:32). This view when applied to COVID-19 projects that the origin of the virus may remain a mystery.

### **3.3 COVID-19 and the book of Job**

Having discussed several sufferings human beings went through in different times and places in the passage of history and the answers which were given to the problem of evil, it is appropriate to apply the concepts to COVID-19 considering the book of Job. In the book of Job, the story of Job is used as a starting point for a discussion of the suffering of righteous people, (Hinson 1992:102). The story unveils in a way that the audience of the book are made aware of where the sufferings of Job emanated from, the audience are told of the discussion between God and the Devil about Job, yet Job is not aware. Currently, humanity is not aware of the origins of COVID-19, except for different hypotheses and conspiracy theories. Hinson (1992:104) says the book of Job is concerned with the problem of the suffering of righteous people, which is part of what we call today the 'problem of evil'. But it does not provide any answer which fully explains the reasons for suffering. Parallels can be drawn between the sufferings of Job and those caused by COVID-19.

### 3.3.1 Could COVID-19 be the leprosy of our time?

“So went Satan forth from the presence of the Lord, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown” (Job 2:7). COVID-19 can be called the 21<sup>st</sup> century leprosy. Leprosy in the Bible was a disease for which there was no cure just like COVID-19, though sometimes people could spontaneously recover. It caused fear and revulsion. There are only three references to leprosy being sent as a punishment for sin, Numbers 12:10, 2 Kings 5:27 and 2 Kings 15:5, Nicholson (1996:78), a position spoken and unspoken by many people as regards COVID-19. Rather than as a punishment, leprosy was seen as a mystery which only the mind of God could explain. Terrible as the disease of leprosy was, it was made doubly by the treatment given to the leper, Barclay (1975:34).

### 3.3.2 Similarities between leprosy and COVID-19

In the Old Testament, no affliction was as dreadful as leprosy. It was essentially a state of living death. This was particularly true for COVID-19 during its initial months of emergence. The condition of leprosy was inherently dreadful, but its severity was exacerbated by the treatment administered to the afflicted individuals (Barclay 1975:34). Upon diagnosis of leprosy by the priest, the afflicted individual was expelled from society. This also pertains to the quarantine protocol for all individuals infected with COVID-19. Quarantine centres were established, and isolate centres and home were set-up with strict measure. The term 'quarantine' originates from a Jewish practice. In fourteenth-century Italy, it was observed that during plague outbreaks, Jews were significantly less affected than others (Barclay 1975:32). They determined that the Jewish laws of impurity were likely relevant, particularly the stipulation that a Jew became unclean upon contact with a deceased body. Barclay (1975) states that the Italian authorities enacted a legislation mandating the isolation of anyone who had been in contact with a suspected plague case for a duration of forty days. The Italian term for forty is 'quaranta', which is the origin of the word quarantine (Barclay 1975).

“He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp” (Leviticus 13:46). The leper had to go with rent clothes, dishevelled hair, and with a covering upon his upper lip, and as he went, he had to cry, “Unclean, unclean” (Leviticus 13:45). Barclays (1975) says that in the Middle Ages when a man became a leper, the priest, having done his stole and taken his crucifix, brought the man into the church and read the burial service over him. For all practical purposes he was dead. In Palestine a leper could not enter the Temple or go into Jerusalem or any walled city; the penalty for doing so was forty stripes (Henry 2008:1504). In the Middle Ages the leper was banished

from all church services but was allowed to watch from outside; and in many old churches there can be seen to this day openings cut in the wall and focused on the Holy Table (Barclays 1975:34). They are called “leper squints” and through them the leper might look at the worship of God from afar (Barclay, 1975).

In Palestine it seems that, though the leper was barred from Jerusalem and all walled towns, he was not barred from the village synagogues. The law lays it down that in the synagogue the leper must be first to come and last to go, and that he must be confined to a little isolated chamber called “Mechitsah” ten feet high and six feet wide (Barclay 1975:35). Contact with a leper defiled the person who had that contact (Henry 2008:1505). We have seen this same aspect when one was diagnosed with COVID-19 that there was need for contact tracing of all persons who were in contact with the infected. For all practical purposes they were suspected of having contracted the virus. Barclay (1975) says if a leper so much as put his head inside a house everything in it became unclean, even to the beams of the roof. COVID-19 hygiene protocols required that private and public spaces were to be regularly sanitised, and fumigation was considered the most effective method of getting rid of the virus.

Lepers were forbidden to be greeted, even in broad daylight. It is forbidden to approach a leper closer than four cubits (equivalent to eighteen inches). Furthermore, if the leper were to emit an airflow in the opposite direction of the observer, he would be required to maintain a minimum distance of one hundred cubits (Barclay 1975:35). Leprosy was unlike any other malady in isolating an individual from his fellow human beings. The distance between a pariah and a clean individual exemplifies the terminology and concept of modern social distance. In the case of COVID-19, social isolation was mandatory for all individuals, not just those afflicted with the disease (as in the leprosy case), because everyone was expected to view the next person as a potential suspect. According to Barclay (1975), most Old Testament scholars also contend that leprosy primarily affected the elderly and not the young; this trend was evident in the COVID-19 pandemic, which spared the young. The information disseminated by the United Nations (2020) demonstrates this. Although they claim that the children have escaped the infection, they are nonetheless impacted by the mitigating factors and socioeconomic concerns.

### **3.3.3 COVID-19 as a punishment for sin**

During Job's debate with his three companions, they contend that suffering is a consequence of sin and that Job's apparent righteousness notwithstanding, his suffering indicates he must be at

fault for some grave transgression. (Job 4:7-9). Job acknowledges that his suffering would have been warranted had he committed sin. However, despite his strong conviction in his own righteousness, he is overcome by God's power (Job 9:13-24). His companions persisted in their condemnation of him for sin, unable to offer him consolation (Job 22:6-10). The church engaged in precisely this type of accusation in the early phases of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. According to Chitando (2007:2), the African church was profoundly embroiled in the conflict, particularly during the nascent stages of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, and churches were eager to portray the epidemic as a means of retribution against a generation that had abandoned its faith. The church's initial perspective was founded upon the notion that HIV and AIDS were transmitted primarily through sexual relationships, frequently involving extremely promiscuous or homosexual sex. Consequently, there was no rationale for shedding tears of pity and futile efforts to assist those inflicted with the virus (Chitando 2007:5).

In the Zimbabwean context, Minister of defence celebrated the high number of death of people in America and Europe from COVID-19 on the grounds that they were being punished by God for imposing sanctions on Zimbabwe (The Independent Express 15 March 2020). Pain can be a consequence of sin without necessarily implying that it is a punishment inflicted by God. It is important to distinguish between punishment for an action and the consequences of an action, Nicholson (1996:26).

According to Lewis (1995:62), humanity is a corporate entity of human society and is a part of the organism of mankind. As a result, humans are inherently social creatures who despise solitude. Sickness and suffering alike propagate sociologically in this manner. Further, according to Lewis (1995), no one sins in a strictly private and individual capacity. The repercussions and contagion of an individual's transgression permeated the entirety of the society to which he belonged and ultimately affected the entirety of humankind. Lewis states that the sin of one individual exacerbates and cultivates the sin of another, while the inverse also holds true (1995:63). The existence of malevolent establishments within a given vicinity fosters and escalates the expansion of sin. As an illustration, the absence of brothels in Highfields, a western high-density locality in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, would not imply the absence of sexual vice; rather, their existence amplifies the prevalence of such illicit activities in the area. Lewis's (1995) human solidarity theory appeals to Christians who perceive COVID-19 as a retribution for transgressions. Because of this human solidarity, both the pious and the sinners endure suffering.

Whilst we cannot accept that God specifically created COVID-19 as an expression of His wrath against humanity's wrong doings, nevertheless, the appearance of the virus has profound theological significance for humanity. It reminds of three facts about humanity. Firstly, COVID-19 reminds humanity of our mortality. Secondly, COVID-19 reminds human's solidarity with each other and because of this solidarity, the innocent suffers with those who are guilty. Wilkinson (1992:103) referring to the devastating effects of HIV and AIDS says all is not doom and gloom in man's present state and that Christian theology does not abandon man to the inevitable consequences of sin. According to Dube (2003:12) sin is the point of departure for the Good News as narrated in Luke 4:16-22, which is the mission statement of Jesus, the good news being that man's sin can be forgiven here and now and that Christians have the realized and future eschatological hope that COVID-19 has its end.

### **3.3. 4 Lessons from the story of Job**

The several sections of the book of Job present multiple endeavours to address the issue of suffering. The three companions of Job symbolise humanity, particularly in the context of how suffering is seen by people. In most Christian and religious traditions, suffering is often perceived through the belief in divine retribution for sins. In contrast, as suggested in Job's introduction (1992:104), pain is depicted as a test of one's goodness. Sincere virtuous folks do not act righteously for the sake of money gain, familial cohesion, or physical health. This is attributable to the enduring nature of their relationship with God throughout both prosperity and adversity (Job 1:21; 2:10). In this chapter of the Bible, Satan is depicted as an archangel of God tasked with scrutinizing the integrity and purity of humans' souls. This claim presents a theological dilemma because the Christian understanding of God is that of a benevolent being. This divine virtue of love challenges the idea that a pandemic like COVID-19 can serve as a measure of humanity's chastity and integrity.

Hinson (1992:105) states that Jews were directed to reject any notion of evil powers that suggests their independent existence from God, their non-creation by Him, and their ability to externally oppose the Lord. Nevertheless, God cannot be deemed responsible for the existence of malicious entities, as Satan was allegedly an angel with a rightful role in God's service who subsequently rebelled and succumbed to sin, like to be fallen humanity. The Old Testament typically espoused the concept of retributive justice, as illustrated by Job's debate with his three friends: the upright will be rewarded, while the wicked would be punished (Hinson 1992:106). This viewpoint on suffering is intricately linked to the concept of Ezekiel, which asserts, "The

soul that sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18 and 33:10–20).

However, the idea of retributive justice and how the Jews interpreted it was challenged by the prophet Amos who can be said was a social justice preacher. The prophet Amos argued that some rich people were rich not because they were being blessed for their righteousness but because they were oppressing and exploiting the poor. In the same vein, the poor were not poor because they were cursed for their sins but because they were being oppressed and exploited by the rich (Henry, 2008:1199). The three friends of Job argue that such suffering Job was going through was nothing but a result of sin. The friends could not comfort him, and they continued to accuse him of sin (Job 22:6-10). Henry (2008:577) says in the hymn of Wisdom human security is in the fear of the Lord, and to depart from evil is understanding. The traditional perspective in Israel posits that the welfare of individuals is contingent upon their adherence to the will of God. Nevertheless, Job has yet to discover solace in the complete and literal sense of that Hebrew term. He is experiencing suffering even though he is innocent.

The climax of the book of Job comes in the speeches of the Lord, who reminds Job that there are many things in creation which he does not understand and cannot control (Job 38:1-41). His life is not dependent on such knowledge; it is sufficient for him to know that God is in control (Hinson, 1992:105). So too with suffering, Job must leave all things to God's control and be content to know that God cares for all His creation. The origins of COVID-19 remain unknown just as Job was not aware of the origins of his suffering. Subsequently, even though it may be impossible for human beings to know the reasons for such suffering, they can submit to God without fearing that their trust and obedience will be betrayed. However, it is a fact of life that when people are in a crisis, they normally do the unusual and they are bound to ask, 'where is God when it hurts most?'

### **3.3. 5 COVID-19 as part of natural evil or human evil**

Natural evil refers to malevolence that emerges from phenomena that are considered "natural" in nature, stemming from the inherent mechanisms of the world (Uzommah et al., 2020:64). This would include phenomena such as earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, diseases, birth defects, and volcanoes, among others, that contribute to human distress and loss of life. Although it results in human suffering and anguish, it is not directly attributable to human intervention, according to Asira and Francis (2012:65). Human evil consists of malevolent actions brought about by human beings, including but not limited to murder, rape, larceny, corruption, and hatred. It transpires when individuals actively resist the dictates of the divine law. Uzommah

et al. (2020:64) define human evil as that which emanates from man and is justified by his actions that are illogically inconsistent with the ideal human conduct. That is an act of malevolence. Because of man's inhumanity toward man, evil ensues. This phenomenon may also be termed "the dehumanization of man." This explanation is consistent with one of the conspiracy hypotheses that a laboratory leak in China was the cause of COVID-19.

Zimbabweans are aware of the challenges faced due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic which is analogous to those presented by COVID-19. Conradie (2015:408) asserts that Christian theologians facilitated leadership training, created liturgical and resource materials, considered suitable methods of pastoral care and counselling, and provided leadership training to aid churches in addressing the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Christian theology responded to the problems posed by the pandemic in the manners above as discussed. Unlike during the HIV AIDS pandemic, theological discourse was muted during the COVID-19 epidemic and anachronistic reactions from Christian theologians in the post-COVID-19 era. Conradie (2015:411) asserts that a comprehensive theological response to human suffering necessitates a theological evaluation of human suffering, particularly its roots. Our investigation into several hypotheses about the origin of COVID-19 suggests that human agency cannot be excluded as a potential factor in the outbreak's causation. McGrath (1994:230) emphasizes that Augustine asserts human beings are accountable for moral evil. Adam and Eve were created as entirely blameless entities endowed with free will. Their transgression is entirely volitional; it was a manifestation of their own resolve.

### **3.3.6 COVID-19 as a moral evil**

McGrath (1994:230) highlights that Augustine holds that human beings are responsible for moral evil. Adam and Eve were created purely sinless beings, and it was yet possible for them to sin as it was also possible for them not to sin. The sin of Adam and Eve was purely volitional; it was an act of their own determination (Henry, 2008:8). However, it may not be sound to say COVID-19 is a moral evil when its origin remains obscure. Unlike HIV and AIDS where most estimates suggested that the HIV virus evolved from SIV that affect monkeys, in the 1930s and the earliest case of AIDS occurred in 1959 in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Madden, 2011:2). Madden (2011) goes on to say several cases have been confirmed from the 1960s and 70s. By the 1980s, international travel coupled with other factors such as blood transfusion, drug abuse and sexual promiscuity had allowed the virus to spread. Though the virus was discovered in 1983, the link to AIDS was made in 1984 (Madden, 2011:3). Therefore, human

beings are victims of what started in the natural scheme of things.

### **3.3. 7 COVID-19 is not a punishment but a consequence of free will**

Most Christians believe that when God's laws are broken there must be consequences. The premise will mean that COVID-19 cannot be a theodicy since it is a consequence of humanity's actions. However, Nicholson (1996:78) says the innocent suffer because sin is sociological. Amidst the worldwide attention garnering attention towards COVID-19, a profound realisation emerged: Humanity is a unified people; the pandemic that originated in Wuhan, China, had an impact on every individual across the globe. The argument is that COVID-19 virus and its spontaneous spread was not due to individual behaviours, but a result of a free global village characterised by free movement and association, unlike HIV & AIDS whose spread was based on individual actions. Consequently, Musa Dube in Anono (2003:13) says that human beings are free beings and must choose their own destiny and, in the process, must be prepared to bear the consequences of their own actions. Dube (2003) referring to HIV and AIDS pandemic argues that for too long we have tended to see the pandemic as an individual sin, as a reflection of immorality, while we fail to see structural sin and its impact on individuals and the choices they make. Dube goes on to say we have undermined and sometimes overlooked the structural issues that make an individual powerless. For example, we have failed to address culture that makes man unfaithful; we have failed to address rape which renders many abstaining women and girls vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. It is also the structural challenge that renders COVID-19 a theodicy of our time.

The structural challenge made it difficult for the poor to at times fail to observe lockdown regulations especially in Zimbabwe because of desperate efforts to irk a living. Many of the people are vendors with a hand to mouth style of everyday life. Lockdowns became a threat to livelihoods. The government of Zimbabwe also failed to provide safety nets to its people blaming sanctions as the major cause crippling the economy even though many economic commentators say corruption and incompetence are the major factors (Dube, 2003). Due to structural challenges, the government of Zimbabwe was not able to by vaccines for its people were it not benevolence from the Peoples Republic of China. In the western suburbs of Harare, mostly known as high density areas, social distancing was a challenge to the housing scheme and layout in those areas, again raising the structural challenge.

### **3.4 The Christian picture of God in COVID-19 and the Politics of Identity**

Individuals respond to a calamity in various manners, one of which involves attempting to ascertain culpability. Typically, those in authority attribute responsibility to the vulnerable and defenceless; within this framework, certain factions of the church perceived a calculated weaponisation of COVID-19 by the state against the church. The conviction held that COVID-19 is a malevolent force not originating from divine authority, but rather from sinister entities aimed at undermining the church. This perspective originates from Christians who assert that no evil or malevolence derives from God, contrary to Job's assertion, "But he said to her, 'You speak as one of the foolish women would speak.'" "Shall we accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?" (Job 2:10). Zimbabwean ecclesiology may have responded this way to manage identity politics. In this context, a thorough examination of the appropriation of COVID-19 within identity politics, as influenced by the Christian conception of God, is essential.

#### **3.4.1 Politics of Identity**

Haris et al. (2013: 6) defined the phrase 'politics of identity' as "the construction, reconstruction, or disruption of notions about what it means to claim identities. Or the creation or recreation of meanings attached to them-especially if these efforts are attempts to shift power relations within or between groups". Agius and Deen Keep (2018: 3) argue that "politics of identity is concerned with how identity works and effects it produces. How is identity performed? How do language, discourse, and narrative shape the meaning and identities? How do we use technology, media, images, and other forms of communication to express ideas about identity? Identity tensions become more noticeable when people face difficult situations or crises. For example, during tough times, individuals and groups might struggle with questions about who they are, how they fit into their community, or how they relate to others with different backgrounds or beliefs.

#### **3.4.2 Appropriation of COVID-19 in politics of identity**

Outbreaks create fear, and fear is a key ingredient for racism and xenophobic to thrive (Devakumar et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered social and political features within communities, with racialised and discriminatory responses to fear, disproportionately affecting marginalised groups (Devakumar et al., 2020). I am arguing that COVID-19 has created politics of identity, but that it has become a platform or stage in which the already existing politics of identity has manifested. It has sent fear and panic waves to the nations and communities, resulting in anger, and blaming one another. Therefore, it is in such a context that identity issues manifest either in a positive or negative way. Zimbabwe like other countries

in the Global South with less means merely adopted the WHO approaches to managing COVID-19 but those in the Global North with capacity to manufacture drugs and other essentials for use during the pandemic started to express nationalist sentiments of prioritising their own citizens.

The Zimbabwean case of a Minister of Government referred already in this thesis is a representation issue of tensions that arise. Phiri (2004:422) states that on March 6, 2004, a collective of women theologians known as “Women of Faith” convened in South Africa to deliberate on the reasons for human suffering and the approach to mission within the framework of suffering. The panel determined that the theological perspective interpreting the HIV and AIDS pandemic as divine retribution should be dismissed, as it is life-denying and contradicts the comprehensive message of God's mission. The Zimbabwean ecclesiology also deemed statements that COVID-19 is a divine punishment for perceived adversaries as unchristian and unrepresentative of African values (Phiri, 2004). Less powerful nations utilised the COVID-19 epidemic to demonstrate the vulnerability of seemingly indestructible economic and political giants. For weaker nations, a formidable force had ultimately vanquished the giants that had been oppressing them. This mind-set underlies the private discourses of numerous individuals in the less developed and minimally impacted nations.

Globally, former President of the United States, Donald Trump, referred to the epidemic as the 'Wuhan virus' or 'Asian virus.' On 30 April 2020, Donald Trump asserted that the virus originated in laboratories in Wuhan and then threatened China with more trade duties (Rodgers, Jakes & Swanson, 2021). What is the relationship between the virus and trade tariffs? Is it not the longstanding reputation of the economic/trade conflict that has persisted between these two nations for decades? Power dynamics are central to the politics of identity. These two nations are documented as main competitors in the global economy, and COVID-19 only fostered conditions that sustained their rivalry. Zimbabwe and other developing nations were not only spectators in this giant rivalry during the COVID-19 but became ‘pan in the chase game’ as they received drugs and essential equipment for the fight against COVID-19, medical material whose effectiveness was unknown.

On a worldwide scale, in France, two medical scientists, Dr Camille Locht and Dr Jean-Paul Mira, publicly suggested conducting trials of novel COVID-19 medications in Africa. Jean-Paul Mira stated, “If I may be provocative, should we not conduct this study in Africa where there are no masks, no treatments, and no resuscitation?” He likened it to several AIDS studies:

“In prostitutes, we experiment because we recognize their high exposure and lack of self-protection” (Cara, 2020). The concept was dismissed by WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom as 'racist and a remnant of colonial thinking' (Chipunza, 2020). Dr Tedros Adhanom emphasized that standard and appropriate protocols must be adhered to irrespective of geography and ethnicity. In this context, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) established an Ecumenical Theological Task Team to examine vaccine developments and the associated conspiracy theories, with their inaugural meeting occurring on 3 February 2021 (South African Council of Churches, 2021).

### **3.5 Impact on the ecclesiology of Churches in Zimbabwe**

Responses of various churches to COVID-19 and the historical perspectives on divinity during comparable trials and epochs imply that God penalizes mankind for its transgressions. Biblical prophecies offer challenges for spiritual development and indicate the necessity for collaboration between church and state for dialogue. Further concerns encompass the church's capacity to effectively leverage contemporary technological breakthroughs, adapt to evolving trends and practices in religious worship, and recognize the significance of divine intervention. Humanity has religious impulses, and the Christian faith has provided vital relief, including healing, to address the issues presented by COVID-19.

### **3.6 Preliminary Conclusion**

The second stage of the specific research approach employed in this "praxis cycle" involved the researcher performing an analysis and assessment of the issue. This was achieved by the Christian depiction of God in relation to pain, especially the anguish induced by COVID-19. A thorough theological analysis of human suffering requires a first assessment of its roots. This chapter introduced the theme of theodicy for discussion to effectively handle the evaluation. The chapter included a historical overview of the term "theodicy," originating from its creation by Leibniz in 1710. A few incidents, notably COVID-19, deemed disastrous, terrible, malevolent, or wicked, were examined and interpreted from a Christian viewpoint. The main goal was to determine the responses of Christians during those events. The Book of Job significantly elucidates the reasons why the righteous suffer alongside the wicked. Consequently, COVID-19 was likened to modern leprosy. The conclusions primarily stem from pastoral letters written by churches in reaction to the government, providing guidance to congregants on managing COVID-19. The way the answers catalysed identity politics is very fascinating. Chapter 4 explores the conceptual landscape of Kairos theology within the context of a troubled Zimbabwean space.

## CHAPTER 4

### KAIROS THEOLOGY IN A SOCIETY IN TURMOIL: THE CHURCH LANDSCAPE IN ZIMBABWE

#### 4.0. Introduction

This chapter critically assesses the significance of the 1985 Kairos Document, referred to as "Kairos Prophetic Theology," in relation to the issues confronting the church. The critical reflections are made in the context of church in modern the Zimbabwean society. Zimbabwe is characterised as a society in turmoil due to two decades of political and socio-economic issues that have plunged many Zimbabweans into poverty. The underlying issues were intensified by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which further strained an already vulnerable and impoverished community. The church was significantly impacted, experiencing closures for public worship due to national lockdowns and containment measures referred to as hygiene regulations. This chapter examines the significance of Kairos theology and its potential as a remedy for the difficulties confronting the Zimbabwean community and ecclesiology. The initial step involves defining the Kairos Document and Kairos theology, see attached appendix 'D'. The discussion further examines the significance of theology for a community in crisis through three themes: state theology, white-church theology (which was perceived as the national theology that legitimised the existence and perpetuation of Apartheid in South Africa), and prophetic theology. Therefore, this chapter takes a closer analysis of the Kairos document as it relates to the political and socio-economic situation. This is within the broad context of COVID-19 and the ways in which Kairos Theology may assist Zimbabwe beyond COVID-19.

#### 4.1. Origin of Kairos Document (1985).

The Kairos Document, which was authored in September 1985 in South Africa and subsequently influencing a wider ecumenical Christian community was referred to as Kairos theology (Verstraelen-Gilhuis, 1992:22). A wide variety of black and white Christians representing congregations in South Africa affixed their signatures to the document. The theology of Kairos originates from a cohort of Christians who resisted apartheid (Chapman 2010). The document explains why the transition from "Church Theology" to "Prophetic Theology" is necessary for social justice.

The declaration originated from the context of the brutal racial policy of Apartheid which thrust South African society into political strife and divisiveness. The Kairos Document emerged as a response to the escalating crisis afflicting South African society. Charpman (2010) asserts that, akin to the 'Declaration of Barmen' during Nazi Germany, the Kairos Document articulates the exigencies of the Gospel within a significant political crisis in South Africa, where Christianity was employed to rationalise an egregiously unjust political regime. Smit (2010) asserts that revolution in South Africa was inevitable, and the document should be seen as an urgent and serious appeal to all Christians. Kairos is a biblical phrase (Luke 19:14) signifying the announcement that "the hour of truth" has arrived for the church and everyone who identifies as Christian (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1992:22). The Apartheid scenario in South Africa created a Kairos Moment (Kairos Document, 1985:2). Kairos is a Greek concept that signifies a moment when God presents His people with a chance for conversion and repentance for transformation (Rahner and Vorgrimter, 1981:262). Concerning the subject at hand, COVID-19 presented an opportune moment for the church to penetrate public space with alternative solutions to the crisis. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic era was part of the Kairos moment in a way such that the Zimbabwean churches had to respond to a pandemic, projecting the church as an institution which could not be excluded in national socio-economic and political matters.

The document was characterised as a timely opportunity and a moment for success, during which God presented a challenge at a pivotal point. The theologians were necessitated to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the dominant theologies in South Africa, specifically state theology, white church theology, and prophetic theology, during that critical juncture. The notion of Kairos, from which the paper receives its name, is essential to all aspects. The essential condition for the possibility of a prophetic theology is Kairos (Parratt, 1997:149). The Kairos Document, described as a "Christian, biblical, and theological commentary on the political situation in South Africa," both analyses and originates from a "situation of death," aiming to formulate a biblical and theological alternative to achieve authentic transformation (Verstraelen-Gilhuis 1992:22). The statement was fundamentally formed in Soweto after the declaration of a state of emergency and can be seen as "people's theology" and articulates the expressions of anger, helplessness, and optimism emerging from the black townships (Parratt 1997:150). The document's significance lies in its grassroots origin, created by the people rather than imposed from above. Kairos theology is a hermeneutic notion advocating preferential consideration for the impoverished. The hermeneutical idea of preferred option for the poor originates from the impoverished individuals themselves (Gutierrez 1987:79). The approach

asserts, “nothing is for the poor without the poor,” thus underscoring the importance of composing the text particularly in Soweto.

The ‘March is not Ended’ (2020) Pastoral letter originated by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop’s Conference on the situation in Zimbabwe, can be projected as a birth of Kairos theology in Zimbabwe. The letter stated that the struggle in Zimbabwe is between those who think they have arrived and those who are still on the march. Those who have arrived are the political elite and the most privileged and those who are still marching are the poor and the less privileged. The letter was written on the backdrop of the unresolved past hurts like Gukurahundi, economic collapse, deepening poverty, food insecurity, corruption, human rights abuses, and the devastating effects of COVID-19. One would see Kairos theology at play as the Catholic Bishops called out the government of Zimbabwe vehemently on how it was misgoverning the nation. They pointed out that the government was taking advantage of COVID-19 Statutory Instruments to suppress ascending voices.

#### **4.1.1. State Theology**

State theology serves as a religious rationale for oppression, racism, authoritarianism, injustice, and capitalism (Paradza 2015:13). It is a theology that exploits theological beliefs to uphold the current quo (The Kairos Document, 1985:6). State theology employs biblical passages, specifically Romans 13:1-7, to uncritically legitimise the existing order as divinely ordained. Biblical writings should be interpreted considering their intended aim to prevent eisegesis, particularly with passages such as Romans 13. This has initiated a theological discourse in Zimbabwe, following Josiah Hungwe, a former ZANU PF cabinet member, who referred to then Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa as “The Son of Man” during his inaugural party (The Standard, 2014). Certain factions within the ruling party ZANU PF believed he had gone beyond acceptable limits as the term was believed to be reserved for the Head of State. The argument demonstrated the power and significance of state theology inside Zimbabwean cultural landscape.

The state theology is purportedly employed to enhance the influence of the Apostolic sects in Zimbabwe, which are said to endorse the ZANU PF administration. When the Indigenous Independent Churches address a matter related to national politics, it is then asserted that the church has made a pronouncement. Consequently, state theology infiltrates the church primarily via state-aligned congregations to propagate the state's ideology. In Zimbabwe, certain churches such as some of the New Religious Movements, are financially incentivised

by the state to legitimise the authoritarianism of the status quo. Furthermore, mainline denominations, such as the Anglican Church, have been co-opted, as already noted by Dombo (2014). This indicates that no church or leader is exempt from official scrutiny. Moreover, Dombo (2014) illustrates that the symbiotic relationship between the state and the church in Zimbabwe was founded around healing initiatives. The church, via ZCA, commenced the connection by advocating for peace. The state subsequently co-opted the influential churches that were reluctant to engage. This subsequently elucidated the link between state and religion.

The participation of white garment churches (Vapositori) and African Indigenous churches in the Zimbabwean politics characterised by support of the ruling political party ZANU PF is a political-religious arrangement meant to sustain the institutions. The referred religious sects in this context are identified contextually as regime enablers. In contrast to other Christian denominations in Zimbabwe, the Vapositori churches significantly contributed to legitimising ZANU PF's retention of power from the early days of Zimbabwean democracy to the time of Mugabe's ousting (Musoni, 2019). Thus, the dissemination of state theology may be observed inside the white garment churches. The alliance between ZANU PF and Vapositori might be metaphorically characterized as a union for political advantage (Musoni, 2019). Musoni (2019) asserts that the participation of political figures in the Vapositori rallies has not been genuine, but rather a means of soliciting political backing during elections. It is essential to recognize that from the Mugabe era to the present, ZANU PF has influenced the beliefs and convictions of Vapositori by exploiting their theology on messianic leaders (Musoni, 2019). Many of these Vapositori recognize that their ecclesiastical leader was divinely appointed to liberate black Africans from white oppression and imperialism. Thus, it is determined that the vitality of these Vapositori congregations is dependent on their leaders. The members of Vapositori obey the directives of their boss, according to Musoni (2019). Consequently, seizing control of the leader equates to seizing control of the members; this is the strategy employed by ZANU PF to maintain its authority and further its objectives.

#### **4.1.2 Kairos theology versus State theology**

Kairos theology critiques it for its endorsement of the Apartheid status quo in South Africa. This parallels the era of Augustine of Hippo when he chronicled the events surrounding the collapse of Rome. Augustine perceived the dualistic essence of the world, distinguishing between two cities: "*civitate dei*," representing the city of God, and "*civitate Errena*," expressing humanity's self-serving love (McGrath, 1996:13). During the 1980s, South Africa was entrenched in the depths of Apartheid, residing in the "*civitate Errena*." Augustine asserts

in "*civitate Errena*" that kings govern for their own glory and to safeguard their personal interests. The populace is neglected, and citizens exhibit loyalty to evade oppression. In South Africa, state religion was employed to subjugate the black majority (Verstraelen-Gilhuis, 1992-23).

State theology legitimises injustice. It serves as the theological rationale for racism, capitalism, and totalitarianism; and it distorts biblical interpretation, particularly by misreading Romans chapter 13 (Verstraelen-Gilhuis, 1992:23). It serves as a religious justification for the state's endeavours to maintain its authority. Kairos theology is distinguished by its pursuit of a "prophetic theology." Verstraelen-Gilhuis (1992) asserts that this inquiry involves "interpreting the signs of the times" considering biblical teachings on oppression and tyranny. Kairos theology articulates a truth that is fundamentally contrary to the assertions of the court's prophets. The authors of the Kairos Document conclude that oppressors are adversaries of the populace, transgressing God's intentions for humanity.

Substantial evidence indicates that in African nations, liberators frequently become oppressors. The scandal of poverty amidst abundance is evident, as those with the potential to effect change often fail to wield their authority for justice, frequently perpetuating injustices instead (Boff, 1985:27). The significance of Kairos theology lies in the notion that the fight for the freedom of the oppressed is an enduring endeavour. Kairos theology is appropriately recognised as a form of liberation theology within and outside South Africa (Bruyns, 2015). John de Grouchy categorises the Kairos paradigm as a component of 'prophetic theology,' which is integral to the liberation fight. Its liberation focus, however, cannot be confined to the South African struggle against Apartheid. The South African Kairos Document serves as a foundational reference, as it is evident that this theological tradition has significantly influenced numerous different environments and contexts. It enabled prophetic practice about various domains of public life, including politics, economics, civil society, and the creation of public opinion (Leonard, 2020). In the context of the Zimbabwean COVID-19 pandemic management in which the state attempted to exclude the church, the Kairos paradigm as part to the liberation theology meant that the church had to fight for its space and stand for Christian values even during crisis and despite the existence of state theology.

#### **4.1.3 Church Theology versus State Theology**

The Kairos Document provides a critical analysis of state theology and advocates for proactive measures against the injustices perpetrated by apartheid governance. Its impact spread beyond

South Africa, serving as a catalyst for analogous critical investigations in various countries and circumstances. In that period, state theology functioned as the religious justification for the dominant social structure, encompassing racism, capitalism, and totalitarianism, all upheld by the apartheid system. The Church's involvement in national issues is governed by the dominant theological frameworks. Church theology is a limited theology that selectively utilizes Christian tradition in relation to themes like justice and reconciliation (Paradza, 2013:14). The danger in this theology lies in church leaders articulating personal ideas on critical national issues in the media, which are thus regarded as authoritative perspectives (The Kairos Document, 1985:11). During the 2015 Easter convention at the City Sports Centre in Harare, Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa of the United Family International Church (UFIC) and his alleged spiritual mentor, Kusi Boating from Ghana, characterized the leadership of the late President Mugabe, as "God-given" (Sunday Mail, 2015). This is evident in media reports in Zimbabwe on how most prominent church leaders support ZANU PF. Other notable leaders include Andrew Wutawunashe of the Family of God Church and Nehemiah Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC). The prominence of church theology has reduced the presence of Kairos theology in Zimbabwe.

In essence, state theology amalgamates religious ideas with governmental aims. As a result, this legitimizes state authority and regulates religious practices. Conversely, church theology focuses on the doctrines and practices of a certain religious denomination, emphasising the interpretation of sacred texts and the church community's role in spiritual development. Kairos theology is a form of liberation theology that highlights the "right time" for action, advocating for social justice and the church's prophetic role in addressing societal issues. State theology supports the existing political order, whilst church theology maintains religious traditions. Conversely, Kairos theology adopts theological concepts to fit the community's circumstances and promoting social transformation as well as liberation.

#### **4.1.4. Kairos theology and the church theology in Zimbabwe**

The church in South Africa was bifurcated into two entities: a white church that upheld the apartheid-based status quo in the name of faith, and a black church that was grounded in the same Gospel but advocated for racial transformation (Verstraelen-Guilhuis, 1992:24). In addition to state theology, there existed white church theology, which advocated for peace and reconciliation; yet the oppressors remained unrepentant. Christians existed on both sides of the battle, and the demarcation line between them did not necessarily align with the colour boundaries. The Kairos Document (1985) outlines the circumstances. "We are present in the

same church while outside, Christian law enforcement and military personnel are assaulting and murdering Christian children or subjecting Christian detainees to fatal torture, while other Christians passively advocate for peace” (Vestraelen-Gilhuis, 1992:11). The circumstances in Zimbabwe partly parallel the situation in South Africa when the Kairos Document was composed. Numerous church leaders in Zimbabwe were and are still holding a connection with the state for the purpose of validating controversial governmental stances. This reached its zenith during the COVID-19 epidemic when the government utilized the church to advance its COVID-19 policies. However, it is essential to note that churches in Zimbabwe remained predominantly rooted in African church theology by way of practice. Although there were influences from Western Christian practices, churches in Zimbabwe practiced their religious beliefs in line with their local cultural and theological contexts. While in lockdown, the African church maintained collective fellowshipping through robust virtual spiritual activities. This is in contrast with white theology which treats salvation as a personal journey and therefore advocates for individualism. Churches in Zimbabwe embraced individual faith, however, communal faith and collective faith was the backbone through which COVID-19 sought to be conquered.

#### **4.1.5. Prophetic Theology**

Prophetic theology is grounded in action and brings the bible into real situations. This theology uses the Bible to dismantle oppressive structure of the society as cited in Jesus’ manifesto to the oppressed, set at liberty the captives and denounce poverty as expressed in Luke 4:18. Prophetic theology engages the liberation principle of God who takes sides with the oppressed (The Kairos Document, 1985:25). This theology also offers a very brave critique which has made it a threat to the status quo. The Zimbabwe We Want (2006) has been viewed as a prophetic document by citing challenges bedevilling the Zimbabwean Society (Paradza, 2013:15). This was the way the church was viewed as insignificant by the president. He was not willing to take any solutions from the church that addressed the economic, political and social challenges being faced by the citizens.

In Zimbabwe, several contextual matters can be used to explain the relevance of the Prophetic Theology in this study. This speaks to the issues of abuse of human rights, rife corruption, and economic/political instability. The Prophetic Theology is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. It is concerned with justice for the marginalized, accountability, and transparency in the ways government handles matters pertaining the public. This speaks to policies as well that govern the land that ought to enforce and maintain practices and laws that reflect integrity and

protection of human rights.

Zimbabwe has been plagued with political instability that has negatively impacted its form of governance. Elections have been characterized by brutality and infringement of human rights. The church has played a feeble role in countering the abusive acts of those in power positions. Instead of advocating for better and equitable reforms, the church has taken a back seat and adopted a neutral position in such matters.

Prophetic theology therefore seeks to provide ways in which the church can use its prophetic voice towards better reforms in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, promoting and availing isolation centres and adopting measures amongst the church measures that save **lives**. It offers a framework through which critical matters like poverty, human rights abuses, and marginalization of the vulnerable groups can be better mainstreamed into daily dialogue. The church can better achieve this by partnering with non-governmental organisations to educate the public and map forward ways to assist those affected by different atrocities. Power structures come under scrutiny when it comes to Prophetic Theology. The church has an active mandate of speaking on behalf of those whose voices seem stifled by government policies which seem oppressive to some members of society. According to Prophetic Theology, effective reconciliation and healing can be better facilitated if the church assumes an active role in bridging gaps and fostering oneness within societies.

#### **4.1.6 Kairos theology and the search for a “Prophetic Theology”.**

Kairos theology is defined by its pursuit of a prophetic theology. This inquiry involves "interpreting the signs of the times," reflecting on biblical perspectives of oppression and tyranny (Verstraelen-Guilhuis, 1992:22). This conception of time was prevalent in Hebrew culture and holds significance in African culture as well. This comprehension of time is essential to the objective and intent of the Kairos Document. In the quest to emancipate the church from subservience to forces contrary to the Gospel, individuals in South Africa articulate the struggle for a confessing church. Their objective is not to establish an additional denomination, but to support a church that opposes Apartheid and advocates for both political and economic liberation. Kairos theology is pertinent to modern Zimbabwean society as prophetic theology persistently examines the existing social, political, and economic conditions and advocates for change. The action is ascertained by a process of contemplation and evaluation of the situation considering the word of God (Anono, 2003:2). A prophetic theology is inherently confrontational, seeking to reveal evil and sin. It lacks negotiations, as it is

judgmental and is based on the liberation history of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage.

The biblical narrative of the Hebrews illustrates the saga of a tenacious country persevering through adversities imposed by several ruling powers, reflecting the contemporary struggles encountered by Zimbabwean society. Zimbabwe has faced political, economic, and social challenges over the past two decades, a condition further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Kahlombe (1999) contends that Kairos theology holds significant relevance in the Zimbabwean context as it articulates faith within distinct historical circumstances. Moreover, theology is reflective as it contemplates the expressions, behaviours, and practices of the faithful. Moreover, it has a descriptive quality since it clarifies the beliefs and practices of religious' communities. Moreover, it is scientific since it necessitates a precise comprehension, strict compliance with logical thinking, and coherent assertions. Kairos theology is characterized by its steadfast dedication to direct involvement, exemplified by Kahlombe's concept of "engaging in theology at the local level" (Kahlombe 1999:20).

#### **4.1.7 The link between Kairos Theology and Liberation-Black Theology**

It is important to note that Kairos Theology is a unique brand of black theologies of liberation. In the Kairos Document (1985) the drive was to enhance the process of freedom of the people of South Africa during the Apartheid era. That means the Kairos theology engages liberation principles in its operation. The starting point for the Black theologies of liberation is the plight of the poor who constitute the marginalised group of the society (Brown, 1978:60). It is important to note that the marginalised are the majority in the Zimbabwean society especially a Zimbabwean society in turmoil. The brand of liberation theology is praxis in nature, which means it has a transformation action. Gregory Baum is of the view that "praxis involves a total dynamic social transformation" (Brown, 1978:72).

It is also important that liberation theology takes cognisance of the term oppression and to be oppressed means to be in a situation of dependency. Oppressed individuals, to some extent, do not have agency in shaping their own rights, but instead rely on the decisions made by others. Oppression and the one who enforces it might also adopt different appearances and attire. Boesak (2017) expresses this by posing the following question: "are we truly living in post-racial, post-apartheid societies where the word struggle is now out of place?" This may mean even after liberation one may be placed under a different form of oppression. In both Zimbabwe and South Africa, the identity of the oppressor might frequently shift. The concept of the post-colony, post-colonial state, and post-colonial rulers is therefore equally significant in this

context. This is shown by Fanon as he explained how oppression is somewhat a state of the mind where he gives examples of the White and the Black (Silverman, 2005). He contends that even in post-colonial South Africa, the Black people remain in inferior circumstances than the White colleagues. Kairos theology emphasises delivering justice to individuals who are unjustly treated, so serving as an instrument of God's compassion, kindness, and righteousness (Luke 4:18-19). Most political, social, and economic analysts in Zimbabwe concur that the nation's issues are predominantly the result of the ruling party's corruption, ineffective policies, and the appointment of inept individuals to critical positions. The impoverished are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rieger and Silva (2023) also asserts that the black theology of liberation is a Christian theological paradigm that prioritizes social justice and the emancipation of marginalized communities. Originating in the late 1960s and 1970s, especially in Latin America, it views the teachings of Jesus Christ as a mandate to confront social disparities and injustices. It contends that the Church ought to assume a prophetic role in championing the impoverished and oppressed, challenging unjust systems, and striving for social transformation (e. g. women, blacks etc.). Black theologies of liberation amalgamate religious conviction with activism, compelling adherents to oppose economic, political, and social structures that sustain suffering and inequity (Rieger & Silva, 2023). It employs a contextual methodology, considering the historical, cultural, and social conditions of marginalised communities to formulate pertinent theological answers and actions.

#### **4.2. Role of the Church**

The contribution of churches to fostering social cohesiveness is essential. Lamle (2013) (quoted in Mang 2014:102) contends that the [Pentecostal] church unites individuals from diverse socio-political and socio-economic backgrounds into a single community. They unite in a singular brotherhood that enables them to endure the socio-political and economic turmoil. This link serves as the foundation that enables individuals to unite as a cohesive family unit and collaboratively address their challenges.

While Lamle (2013) aimed to articulate a broader commentary on the role of churches within African cultures, he elucidated that religion frequently exerts social and economic influences. By examining this from various perspectives, one can comprehend religion as both a vehicle for liberation and a means of societal unification. This topic has demonstrated religion's vital involvement in numerous social, political, and economic difficulties. Religious institutions

play a crucial role in fostering societal harmony. The prevailing notion is that religion plays a pivotal role in the societal, cultural, and economic fabric of Zimbabwe, leading to the assumption that religious organisations may significantly influence societal transition. Consequently, their involvement is complex, raising concerns regarding the appropriate exercise of political power. It is asserted that faith and its adherents will thrive in a less restrictive environment, allowing it to fundamentally transform society if liberated from established traditions that hinder its advancement. Consequently, the government and religious organisations must foster a critical perspective regarding the social and economic frameworks in Zimbabwe.

Interfaith dialogue and collaboration, such as what was done by the Catholic Bishops when they wrote letters expressing a solid approach, the church may employ it to promote oneness across different religious groups. Churches ought to put aside sectional differences for a greater cause, which is, addressing concerns within societies. In Zimbabwe, there is little participation in political matters by the public. The church can therefore cover this gap by bringing together people of religious backgrounds and encouraging them to participate in matters concerning social justice, human rights, and good governance. This has the greater potential of amplifying the voice of the marginalised and influencing radical but effective change.

#### **4.2.1 Scriptural interpretation vis-à-vis Church –State Relationship**

Scriptural interpretation of the Bible has incited controversy and debate, particularly regarding Church-state relations. This is often influenced by a biased perspective from non-theologians on theological issues. It has resulted in the nationalist discourse of “leave politics to the politicians” as a means of constraining the church to pulpit preaching. Togarasei (2009:149) contends that the biblical foundation of this intrinsic dispute lies in the historical interpretation of the Bible, which has been utilised to meet the existential requirements of the Christian community. It has been employed to rationalize slavery, to abolish slavery, to defend colonialism, and to advocate for liberation. The Bible can thus be characterized as an 'all-weather book.'

Guti (1994: 11) asserts that the church and government ought to collaborate, as illustrated by the Old Testament's theological account: “Historically, nations had a head of state who governed under God's guidance through the prophet.” A prophet would be utilised by God to admonish the nation in times of transgression. A prophet would approach the head of state to convey divine messages, and he will heed the admonition. This averted famine, starvation, and

potential calamities for the nation, as the leader and the populace exhibited humility before God, as stated in 2 Chronicles 7:14. However, should they defy the admonition of God, calamities would ensue. Consequently, Zimbabwe's socio-economic and political issues reflect a rift that has distanced the state from the church's guidance, prompting a re-evaluation of the adverse consequences of this separation. Romans 13:1-7 has been misinterpreted to suggest an uncritical support of all authorities, akin to the ZCC's appeasement during the 2008 election violence, which stated: "We are not anti-government; we will not condemn our leaders merely because imperialists desire it." (ZCC, 2008) We desire a Church community, and we aim to support our leaders via prayer rather than disparagement.

Politicians occasionally marginalise Christians by assigning them the task of offering opening and closing prayers at conferences and national events, while failing to address the significant issues pertinent to political issues such as economic structures that affect the poor in Zimbabwe. Therefore, politicians predominantly participate in church services for political advantage, whilst Christians are cautioned against engaging in politics. This connection is inherently contradictory and seeks to subordinate the church's objective. Mtata (2007:16) contends that in the presence of injustice, the church is obligated to support the underprivileged and oppressed, aiding them in their quest for emancipation, equity, and dignity. When individuals reside in poverty and lack the requisite financial resources to disseminate their message, reliance simply on preaching will yield only a spiritual effect. Policymakers disregard aboriginal churches as they do not provide a viable solution (Guti, 1994:49).

In the contemporary context of poverty and political turmoil, there are few, if any, prophets or pastors who challenge the prevailing status quo. Numerous preachers are praising the merits of affluence, salvation, and liberation. The church and its clergy confront a substantial challenge at this era of socio-political and socio-economic turmoil. As disciples of Jesus, we are duty-bound to assist the ill (Pieterse, 2013:4). Pieterse asserts that Jesus urges us to engage with and assist the impoverished in a manner akin to his own actions. Moreover, he emphasizes his ongoing presence in the struggles of the impoverished, asserting that by attending to their needs, we are attending to Jesus (Mt 25:31–46). Consequently, in this context, the primary requirement for prophetic preaching is solidarity with the marginalized. One must align with them and observe their existential condition (Pieterse, 2004:85–87).

#### **4.2.2 A representation of prophetic preaching**

According to McMickle (2006:5), prophetic preaching shifts worshippers' focus from local

church events to community occurrences. “What is the responsibility or appropriate response of our congregation, our alliances, and our denomination to the changes occurring in our country and globally?” states prophetic preaching. In this context, McMickle (2006) characterizes prophetic preaching as an endeavour to convey God's word to individuals via their senses. Pieterse articulated his perspective while formulating his homiletical theory, which regarded preaching as contextually relevant and opportune (Pieterse, 2013:4). Pieterse (2013) asserts that it is challenging to disregard the impoverished in a society while advocating for religion as a personal, moral issue. Clerics interpret the Bible via the lens of their personal experiences (Pieterse, 2004:80–82).

An exemplary instance of biblical preaching underscores the false deities of convenience and the absence of humility and validation under adversity, which can readily supplant the true God of scripture, who urges genuine believers to ardently advocate for impartiality and fairness for all societal members. Likewise, the prophets proclaimed truth to the monarchs, admonishing the sovereigns and ruling elite for placing their faith on militias and alliances instead of the God who had established their presence in the land. The prophets would challenge the Israelites, who maintained that God would never abandon them, regardless of how significantly the state deviated from the long-standing covenant with God. Pieterse (2001:88) employed Gadamer and Ricoeur's hermeneutics to elucidate prophetic preaching, reaching the pinnacle of the hermeneutic era, specifically the concept of application. Pieterse characterises prophetic preaching as engaging with the biblical text with the aim of distorting its meaning. The perspective of the oppressed reveals their pursuit of peace and justice (Pieterse, 2001:88). De Gruchy (1991:19) articulated a perspective on prophetic preaching, characterizing South African prophetic theology as a spiritually discerning and transformative theology that directly correlates the Biblical text with the prevailing social and political milieu, as exemplified in preaching through the Kairos Document methodology (Pieterse, 1995:96). De Gruchy asserts that the prophetic preacher must not hesitate to identify inequalities, exploitation, and the origins of colonialism within the framework of their sermon (De Gruchy, 1991:19).

#### **4.3 The Church and Politics**

The discord between the powerful and the powerless, alongside the marginalised and oppressed, elicits profound worry among certain sections of the global society. The supplementary difficulty arises when religious icons employed by the devout are regarded as malevolent entities. When religious leaders trivialize their own detrimental acts, they assert

that the exploitation of African nations by industrialists and politicians results in suffering for the African populace, with their policies exacerbating economic deprivation and corruption. The main objective of this investigation has been to investigate the correlation between religion and socio-political and economic development, with the goal of alleviating poverty and enhancing the existing condition of governmental corruption in Zimbabwe. This kind of alleviation was to be addressed during COVID-19, the circumstances in which a lot of people were not engaged in some livelihood activities.

In this case I contend that religion, be it African traditional or Christian, should not be important to the worldview of the population of Zimbabwe. It is regrettable that overt religiosity appears to be a prominent concern in certain neighbourhoods, while the underlying realities of pervasive poverty and corruption persists, often camouflaged as alternative problems. Poverty endures among religious, political, and financial elites due to a confidence characterized by complacency, both in themselves and in others. The persistence and intensity of poverty, together with its consequences, have reinforced Zimbabwe's structural entrenchment. A religion that promotes values such as openness, frankness, sincerity, and tolerance perform a significant service to the world. Such notions are essential for the development of a comprehensive specificity in economic and political contexts. When a religion surpasses other institutions, its adherents are more equipped to confront and manage the challenges in Africa, including economic, social, and governmental difficulties; hence, it should endeavour to enhance its societal function.

Religious institutions should enhance their accountability over core values and simultaneously improve their connectivity. Moreover, religious institutions, such as churches, ought to prioritize the advancement of technologies and the economy on a comprehensive scale. Educators ought to engage actively in the development of curriculum and governance strategies, encompassing the support of higher education institutions by state and federal governments through technological, economic, social, financial, and civil sector activities. These may advance their curricula development, commencing from elementary school through to postsecondary levels. While the rise of churches in Zimbabwe has been remarkable, educational institutions have also flourished, contributing significantly. If the churches in this region leverage their current institutional and technical advantages to strengthen their presence in Zimbabwean society, they can undertake numerous valuable initiatives, including the enhancement of political and economic institutions and civil society.

A case can be made for emphasizing socio-political, economic, and technological progress, as these are vital for socioeconomic advancement. Additionally, greater attention should be given to societal issues concerning the social capital of faith, considering the active role religion plays in these areas; it may positively influence the economy and alleviate poverty. Consequently, it must be argued that religion cannot solely focus on disseminating religious principles; it influences the spiritual, political, economic, and technological dimensions of Zimbabwean society. The Church's forthcoming pastoral care program may explore the capacity of faith to facilitate significant social transformation in Zimbabwe.

#### **4.3.1 Churches in Zimbabwe and political violence**

The church's early response to the political violence was ineffectual and delayed, attributable to fragmentation, a loss of faith, and a lack of courage (Kalu, 2011). The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) was incapacitated by a leadership crisis and increased alienation from both local and international partners. The ZCC terminated its initial efforts at the end of 1990. Before that time, it was a prominent entity in civil society movements championing economic justice, institutional reform, and equality. The Zimbabwe Civil Controversy Commission (ZCCC) was surprised by the emergence of civil unrest and refrained from endorsing the victims. They addressed criticism from its global allies by leading an international ecumenical peace monitoring mission that facilitated the observation of the parliamentary elections in June 2000.

In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church was typically candid and unequivocal in its public endeavours for peace and democracy in the region (Kalu, 2010). After compromising its integrity by aligning too closely with governmental power during the initial years of liberation, the Catholic Church restored its prophetic voice and actively championed the underprivileged and oppressed during the civil disturbance in Matabeleland in the 1980s (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2012). The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop Conference (ZCBC) issued incisive pastoral letters addressing many aspects of the national crisis and revealing the falsehoods propagated by state media. The Catholic Commission on Justice and Peace (CCJP) persistently engaged in its commendable efforts both locally and nationally, partnering with broader civil society and ecclesiastical organizations to underscore human rights violations and imploring government officials to heed calls for reform.

In 2000, the Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter denouncing the pre-election violence that resulted in numerous fatalities prior to the June 2000 legislative elections, urging voters to publicly support candidates who would champion human rights and equality. Notwithstanding

Africa's unsuccessful administrations and economic structures, faith fosters optimism and prosperity. African Pentecostalism exemplifies the profound hope that emanates from the intersection of faith and culture within African Christianity. Hope and optimism are facilitated by an emphasis on the significance of God's Word in ethical formation and opposition to malevolent forces (Kalu, 2010:77).

Consequently, numerous Christian denominations routinely utilize notebooks during their services to elucidate the text or narrative presented that day, enabling individuals to connect the truths acquired during Sunday services to their daily lives and to commemorate the faith they demonstrate throughout the week. They aggressively encourage individuals to abandon their victim mentality and become advocates for justice. Kalu characterises this method of fostering optimism as a hermeneutics for conscientisation. The objective is to connect the biblical promises to the existential challenges faced by individuals, ensuring that no worshipper departs the service encumbered with 'the burdens of yesterday' (Kalu, 2010:77). Following her motive responses in hermeneutic interpretations, religion aids others in hermeneutical traditions and renders the religious individual susceptible to social challenges. The religious figure, having attained popularity, has become a significant entity in society.

#### **4.4 The relevance of Kairos Theology to Zimbabwean society in turmoil**

The research indicates that contemporary society in Zimbabwe faces numerous challenges. Theology must respond to the questions raised by persons in modern society (Villa-Vicencio, 1992:40). Gutierrez (1974:13) asserts that theology is all-encompassing in its promotion of freedom from every type of oppression. The focus must broaden beyond church legislation of the state and governments of the day to capacity building and growing institutional initiatives that raise the standards of life of the people far beyond the COVID-19 and HIV AIDS pandemics and usher in a 'free from poverty generation. Kairos theology, therefore, elucidates the importance of time. A Kairos moment involves not only timing in politics but also in health, social dynamics, economic situations, and climate change, among other issues. Kairos theology utilises sociological analysis for its understanding of society (The Kairos Document, 1985:18), hence, its broad framing should gaze towards social justice and life with an egalitarian echoed society. The argued in this thesis concurs with Brown (1978) that a clear understanding of the frameworks of society societal frameworks that does not justify violence, poverty, and dependency and inequality ought to be established first. Then the Kairos theology with its roots in biblical scripture such as Isaiah 1: 17 liberations of the oppressed scriptures take its further and beyond. In that sense, the bible would be functioning as tool of and a source of liberation.

By critically examining crucial factors that represent reflect the socio-economic and political activities in Zimbabwe, one may begin to understand ways in which the black theologies of liberation as the basis and foundation for a reconciled state. In the Zimbabwean context, the issues include the coexistence of pervasive poverty and cynicism with religion, exploring how the beliefs of the populace could not and could be discouraged. A study of this relationship between economic capital and the role of churches in social transformation, aims to ascertain how capital from both religious and secular sectors may be utilised in society. The COVID-19 pandemic falls upon a background of turmoil in Zimbabwe. It is imperative to trace the history of Zimbabwe from when it attained its independence to have a better appreciation of the political, economic and social aspects that influenced the response of the church during the COVID-19 pandemic. The post-independence liberation of Zimbabwe is understood in terms of Vellem's liberative-reconstruction theology that emphasises the need to embrace the indigenous aspects that shape the identity of a nation.

#### **4.4.1 Kairos Consciousness as a panacea to the Zimbabwean populace**

The resurrection of Kairos Consciousness, as expressed by Boesak (2015), is essential for Kairos theology to address and provide solutions for the Zimbabwean populace in times of crisis. Kairos consciousness is a liberationist framework stated by Boesak (2015)- Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid: The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance. Paradza (2020:23) asserts that Boesak offers an extensive understanding of the reinvigorated Kairos Consciousness or the resurgence of a Kairos theological tradition. Thus, the assertion to possess "a humanity with a Kairos Consciousness" that discerns, responds to, and critiques our current circumstances. The enduring anguish of the Zimbabwean populace stems from a deficiency in Kairos awareness.

Boesak (2011:11) asserts that the Bible can serve as "a history of faithful resistance" to oppression. The Bible can thus serve as a pertinent text in ensuring that Zimbabwean ecclesiology adheres to the principles of liberation theology. Furthermore, Boesak's (2015) work acknowledges the perils of reverting to religious, theological, and biblical justifications for systems of oppression, highlighting the resurgence of 'Church and State' theologies in post-colonial societies. Kairos consciousness will empower the oppressed to recognise their subjugation and devise methods of resistance. Swart (2013:2) posits that the resurgence of Kairos consciousness is a wider movement among ecclesial groups, not solely a South African response, but rather a network rooted in prophetic heritage.

According to Paradza (2019) Kairos theology has been utilized in Zimbabwe to confront the socio-economic and political challenges that have impacted the nation, especially since 2000. The Christian church in Zimbabwe has embraced a Kairos conscience, highlighting its responsibility to advocate for the underprivileged, oppressed, and impoverished. This method corresponds with the notion of 'chimurenga', or the armed struggle, which historically entailed the church aiding most Zimbabweans in their battle against racial injustice. The church has assumed the role of the "Church of Struggle," aligning itself with the populace and confronting their everyday adversities and pervasive poverty (Paradza, 2019). In doing so, the church has emerged as a mediator and advocate for the underprivileged, positioning them at the core of its theological debate. This has entailed confronting the political elite and championing justice and emancipation, even after the achievement of political independence. Kairos theology in Zimbabwe has enabled the church to serve as a prophetic voice, responding to the urgent needs of the populace and advocating for social change amid persistent crises. The study then aims to build from this consciousness to foster a framework that can be applied in situations like the C02COVID-19.

#### **4.5 Zimbabwe- a society in turmoil**

In 1980, Zimbabwe transitioned from British colonial rule to a black leadership under Robert Mugabe. Zimbabwe possessed significant potential to evolve into a robust independent African state due to its formidable colonial infrastructure, elevated social cohesion, and several governmental commitments to reform, equality, a stable economy and African autonomy (Besada and Moyo, 2008:1). However, in the initial decade of independence, President Mugabe violated his commitments to furnish Zimbabweans with essential government services, satisfactory living conditions, and a democratic, representative government that upheld the rule of law and fundamental human rights, leading the nation into disarray.

In the years that followed, Zimbabwe has become known as a former prosperous and dynamic nation as it saw and experienced succession of intricate disasters (Mlambo and Raftopoulos, 2010). Mlambo and Raftopoulos agree with Besada and Moyo (2008) that Zimbabwe's political instability, lawlessness, miss-governance, and significant economic deterioration have rendered the country an outcast in the international community. This was characterised by a swift economic decline, resulting in the emergence and re-emergence of ethnic conflicts rooted in regional and political divisions (Besada and Moyo, 2008:1). By 1999, Zimbabwe had commenced a profound economic collapse of unparalleled magnitude. The crisis was ascribed to several political, economic, and environmental issues, primarily linked to the detrimental

actions of the Mugabe administration. These policies can be classified within the framework of inadequate governance, economic mismanagement, and diminished international support, after persistent human rights abuses, manipulated electoral processes, and unsuccessful elections, exacerbated by drought periods (Besada and Moyo, 2008:2). The collapse was started by the government's 1997 decision to disregard fiscal limitations by disbursing substantial rewards to veterans of the liberation struggle, aiming to secure their loyalty and political backing in the forthcoming elections. This led to the establishment of the Movement for Democratic Change, an opposition party against the governing ZANU-PF party.

The crisis denotes the political, economic, and social instability that has impacted the lives of several Zimbabweans in recent years. The Zimbabwean issue has ignited international debate, with numerous scholars striving to identify the causes and key figures responsible for the downfall of a nation that was once a source of pride for Africa. The analysis indicates that the socioeconomic decline can be attributed to a sequence of events that transpired between 1980 and 2020. ESAP, Zimbabwe's involvement in the DRC conflict, land reform, electoral turmoil, the Murambatsvina clean-up program, corruption scandals, and economic sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe are but a selection of these instances.

#### **4.5.1 Zimbabwean coup d'état which is not a coup**

In November 2017, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe was ousted by a 'soft coup' as president and leader of ZANU-PF and was succeeded by Emmerson Mnangagwa (Asuelime, 2018). A bit of background to it was that on November 14, 2017, components of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces (ZDF) assembled in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, and commandeered the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) along with strategic locations in the city (Nyathi, 2020). The following day, the ZDF released a statement asserting that it was not a coup d'état and that President Mugabe was secure, although normalcy would only be restored once the ZDF addressed the "criminals" surrounding Mugabe accountable for Zimbabwe's socio-economic issues (Asuelime, 2018:6). ZDF's remark accurately depicted Zimbabwe as a society in upheaval. On November 13, 2017, General Chiwenga, the then commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, had a press conference during which he made several objectionable statements (Nyathi, 2020). He asserted that there was instability within ZANU-PF, the ruling political party, and further indicated that the Zimbabwe Defence Forces were the principal stakeholders regarding the achievements of the liberation struggle, emphasizing that the Zimbabwe Defence Forces would implement corrective actions when these gains are jeopardized.

There has been significant disagreement regarding whether the political events of November 2017 constituted a military coup (Asuelime, 2018:8). Nonetheless, it was unequivocally a coup and illegal according to Zimbabwe's legislative framework (Nyathi, 2020). It contravened both the letter and the essence of many African regional treaties pertaining to unconstitutional alterations of governance. The military undoubtedly orchestrated a governmental transition through coercion and the fear of violence, so influencing the makeup of the incoming administration, which is likely to be indebted to it. Emmerson Mnangagwa, whose removal as Vice President instigated the coup, was subsequently appointed President. The individual who orchestrated the coup, Commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces General Constantino Chiwenga, assumed the role of Vice President, while the figurehead of the coup, Lieutenant General Sibusiso Moyo, was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs (Nyathi, 2020).

Although it was ostensibly portrayed that a series of marches and the prospect of impeachment compelled Mugabe to resign, the truth is that the military effectively abrogated the Constitution and exerted a blend of military power and the intimidation of its application upon the Zimbabwean populace (Nyathi, 2020). The marches were facilitated, if not orchestrated and authorized, by the military; and it is indisputable that the abrupt change of loyalty inside ZANU-PF was predominantly a result of force rather than an expression of free political will. The irony of the coup primarily resides in the reality that its architects and beneficiaries have consistently been integral to ZANU-PF's repressive and murderous rule. A closer look at the Zimbabwe political context is essential in the understanding of how the Kairos theology could best assist the church beyond Covid-19.

#### **4.5.2 The Zimbabwean Crisis from 1980 – 2023.**

It is critical to examine Zimbabwe's political and economic context mostly during period under review. The power and influence that characterize and define Zimbabwe's current political economy can be traced back to the country's white settler history and the corresponding pathology of the state. These two factors contribute to an understanding of Zimbabwe's current socio-economic situation, that is the state's acute susceptibility to western forces and the issue of ZANU-PF party's succession politics (Kavanagh, 2014:68).

Zimbabwe's narrative begins in 1980 when the government proclaimed independence from the United Kingdom. This signified the conclusion of an almost 16-year conflict. A multitude of Zimbabweans battled and perished for their nation's independence. The arrival of the Pioneer Column in Zimbabwe in 1890 signified the onset of colonialism and dispossession. (Kavanagh,

2014:6). Consequently, monitoring the evolution of Zimbabwe's structural crisis post-independence is essential. Key factors that landed Zimbabwe in turmoil are economic mismanagement, rampant corruption, and political injustices. The country began to experience challenges like inflation, poverty, social divergences, and a fast-declining economy. It is important to note that the Zimbabwe crisis was not an overnight event, rather it involved several stages that led the country's political, economic, and social landscape to its knees.

In the 1980s, Zimbabwe was ranked among economically stable countries owing to its rapid economic growth. The Zimbabwean dollar also had significant power. However, several factors contributed to the disruption of this economic standing. In the early 1990s, Zimbabwe experienced drought. The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) was another contributing factor that led to the failure of Zimbabwe's economy. In the late 1990s, the Zimbabwean dollar plummeted and resulted in a chain reaction of economic decline. The nation began to experience declines in manufacturing and production. Hyperinflation also became the order of the day.

The study also looks at the contribution of the Land Reform Program. This was introduced with the aim to redistribute land back to the native Zimbabweans from foreign white commercial farmers. This was viewed as an attempt to solve inequalities that had been created during historical times. The program was partly resisted by the white farmers leading to a decline in agricultural production was part of the country's economic backbone. Politically, there was also brewing upheaval as political parties jostled for political power, that is, the MDC and ZANU PF parties. This eventually resulted in the 2009-2013 Government of National Unity. For that period, the country experienced brief economic recovery and political stability. This is not to say the country's economy miraculously turned around. There were still on-going challenges like low productivity capacity in agriculture as well as manufacturing. The dissolving of the GNU saw the economy tumbling further being characterized by high unemployment, and alarming decline in standards of living. An appreciation of the international community concerning the Zimbabwe situation sheds light on some of the challenges the nation experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. It brings to surface the need for the church to assume an active role in transforming the Zimbabwean society and the best possible approach to do so.

#### **4.5.3 Zimbabwe's economic and political climate after independence**

After gaining independence from the former British province of Rhodesia in 1980, Zimbabwe

experienced political and economic stability (Mlambo, 1997). Despite being under sanctions, Smith successfully industrialized the nation, transforming it into Africa's gem. Zimbabwe was a significant agricultural powerhouse, which is why it was considered the breadbasket of Africa upon its independence. The newly established democratic government confronted the challenge of assimilating and advancing a complex, industrialized economy following the shift from minority white governance to majority black leadership (Mlambo, 1997:29). At that time, the Zimbabwean dollar was reportedly more valued and potent than the American dollar in terms of exchange rate. This economic stability rendered Zimbabwe one of the most affluent nations in Africa, as concurred by Verstraelen (1998), Mlambo (1977), and other scholars. The Zimbabwean currency and the British pound depreciated relative to one another. The leaders of the Liberation movement rose from the periphery to prominent roles within Zimbabwe's administration, positioning themselves to convert the colonial state into a nation (Verstraelen, 1998:45).

Citizens were, arguably, politically subjugated immediately following the democratic election. "Martin Luther King advocated the notion that democracy is not genuine independence without economic prosperity and access to socioeconomic resources," Nieman (2006). Post-independence, Zimbabwean wealth continued to be concentrated within a limited number of White capitalists. The black population achieved political independence, however not economic autonomy. In the early 1990s, Zimbabwe's social conditions began to reflect adverse economic transformations. Most individuals were negatively impacted by the implementation of an Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP). The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) forced a free-market system on the Zimbabwean government (Verstraelen, 1998:25; Rutoro, 2007:163). Numerous economic and political analysts assert that, in addition to the Economic Structural Adjustment Program, corruption and ineptitude significantly contributed to Zimbabwe's economic decline.

Perrons (2004:56) asserts that this constitutes the origin of neoliberalism. Perrons (2004) asserts that neoliberalism fosters wealth and progress via open markets and free trade. This viewpoint posits that the government's role should be confined to ensuring a secure environment for the flourishing of free markets and private capital; hence, it should refrain from regulating salaries or prices or engaging in productive endeavours (Perrons, 2004:56). The nationalist government of the liberation movements inadvertently repudiated socialism policies and adopted neoliberal policies. This marked the commencement of the populace's affliction. The advancements of the decade in sectors such as education and healthcare

persisted in their decline, but inflation escalated, disadvantaging low-income workers (Verstraelen, 1998:58; Rutoro, 2007:163).

Zimbabwe underwent a significant economic and political decline at the close of the 1990s and into the early 2000s. This era nearly incapacitated the nation. Scholars include Raftopoulos (2009b), Hammer, MacGregor, and Landau (2010), Jones (2010), Musoni (2010), and Chiumbu and Musemwa (2010) have recently published research on the topic. This time was characterized by street protests organized by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU).

The study concurs with Chiumbu and Musemwa (2012) in dismissing the idea that Zimbabwe's crisis is regionally based, hence framing Zimbabwe's political situation as a mono-crisis. This perspective obstructs an accurate assessment of the many and urgent basic challenges prompted by Zimbabwe's civil upheaval from 1998 to 2009. Chiumbu and Musemwa (2012:10) assert that the political strife triggered numerous additional crises, predominantly resource-related, including a water crisis, health crisis, monetary crisis, fuel crisis, energy crisis, food crisis, and cholera epidemic. Chiumbu and Musemwa's (2012) work concentrated on these crises, providing an impartial analysis and meticulous evaluation of their temporal and spatial interconnections, as well as their impact on the Zimbabwean populace. It can be contended that Robert Mugabe had exceeded his tenure as the President of Zimbabwe.

The purpose of detailing the occurrences is to underscore the political instability that beset Zimbabwe from 1980 to 2020, which influenced religious communities through neo-Pentecostal Church sermons. The historical narrative is significant as it delineates the context in which COVID-19 emerged within an already vulnerable society. This literature review will examine the potential causes of Zimbabwe's economic collapse from 1980 to the present, including the Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP), land invasions that ZANU PF promotes as the Land Reform Program, the political climate, and sanctions. The impact of these events on the economy is examined in relation to manufacturing, land conflicts, the media landscape, the constitution, the legal system, and humanitarian issues, as well as the exacerbation of these conditions by COVID-19.

#### **4.5.4. The rise of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC)**

The MDC's party history dates on 26 February 1999. A collective of over 700 individuals, representing diverse backgrounds, convened to establish party structures and chart their course into Zimbabwe's political landscape (Chipato, 2019). The emergence of the MDC is regarded as a significant consequence of ESAP, among other factors. They established multiple

committees and subcommittees to investigate a wide range of Zimbabwean concerns, ultimately concluding that the sole solution was to confront ZANU-PF politically. The party was formally inaugurated in September 1999 at Rufaro Stadium in Harare. Most of the leaders involved in the organization were "Trade Unionists" from the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), student leaders, white commercial farmers, educators, intellectuals, and youth (Chipato, 2019). The MDC was established to continue the people's struggle for sustenance and employment, peace, dignity, decency, democracy, equitable resource allocation, justice, transparency, and equality for all Zimbabweans (Besada and Moyo, 2008:3).

A coalition of labour groups and civil society subsequently contributed to the formalization and enhancement of the party structures, with Morgan Tsvangirai serving as president. In 2000, the party historically secured a limited number of seats against ZANU-PF, obtaining 57 out of the 120 House of Assembly seats (Chipato, 2019). By the 2008 general election, Zimbabwe was in turmoil, characterized by hyperinflation and escalating repression by the ZANU-PF regime. The inflation rate was 1184.6 percent, the highest in the world at that time. By July 2008, the inflation rate escalated to an astonishing +11,000,000 percent (Makumbe, 2009:4). Electoral violence intensified when Tsvangirai narrowly defeated Mugabe in the presidential election, leading to a runoff between the two contenders. The government reacted by deploying security forces to intimidate opposition supporters, leading many to seek refuge and Tsvangirai to withdraw from the second round, Makumbe (2009:11). A solution mediated internationally was achieved through the establishment of a "Government of National Unity" (GNU).

Following the conclusion of the GNU in 2013 and the subsequent demand for a general election, Robert Mugabe had revitalised his party's influence and adeptly instigated discord among opposition MPs, who were inadequately prepared for the campaign (Biti 2014:22). ZANU-PF had an unexpected landslide victory, resulting in demoralization among MDC members and disillusionment among the Zimbabwean populace over the prospects of opposition politics, according to Biti (2014). Subsequently, as time progressed, Tsvangirai's health deteriorated, culminating in his death in February 2018, which transpired after the MDC endorsed a coup in 2017 that legitimized the governance of Zimbabwe's new president, Emmerson Mnangagwa.

#### **4.5.5 Elections and violations of electoral processes**

Like in most parts of Africa, elections in Zimbabwe are often linked to corruption, bloodshed, and manipulation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2012:7) asserts that elections in Zimbabwe have

historically been tumultuous, characterized by violence and fatalities during electoral campaigns and post-election politics since the inaugural vote in 1980. The primary difficulty was that regional organizations like SADC and AU endorse these elections primarily because most leaders within these entities originate from revolutionary parties. Individuals who adopt an opposing perspective are labelled as instruments of the West with a regime change agenda.

Following the General Election conducted on August 23, 2023, election observers from the European Union, the Commonwealth, the African Union, and the 16-member Southern African Development Community (SADC) reported that the elections did not meet regional and international standards. They enumerated several concerns, including the prohibition of opposition rallies, discrepancies in the voters' roll, partial state media coverage, voter intimidation, voter suppression, and command voting (Aljazeera, 2023). Opposition leader Nelson Chamisa has urged regional allies to unite against a vote he termed a "gigantic fraud" that reinstated Emmerson Mnangagwa in power in Zimbabwe (The Guardian, 2023).

The administration of President Mugabe faced allegations of electoral manipulation from 2000 until 2013. Kriger (2005) chronicled a campaign of intimidation during Zimbabwean elections commencing in 1980. She asserts that ZANU PF secured victory in the 1980 elections via bribery and repression. The identical technique was employed in future elections, including the 1985 elections, which occurred amidst the Gukurahundi crisis (Hove, 2013:79), suggesting they transpired during a period of escalating violence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012:7) and oppression of opposition leaders. ZANU PF dominated the elections; nevertheless, PF ZAPU secured all seats in Matabeleland. This enraged President Mugabe, who retaliated by massacring the Ndebele people. According to Bratton and Masunungure (2011:15), ZANU PF employed violence against Tekere members in 1990. Sithole and Makumbe (1997:135) assert that "the violence perpetrated against the opposition during the 1990 election was the most severe in an election year since independence."

In 2008, the MDC secured a majority of the votes in the elections. President Mugabe experienced his inaugural official defeat since the nation's independence. The ZANU-PF party declined to acknowledge its defeat. ZANU-PF implemented a series of violent, harsh, and unjust political tactics to suppress all opposition (Goudzwaard, Vennen & Van Heemst, 2007:62,82). Tsvangirai retracted his participation in the re-run election, attributing his decision to a severe outbreak of violence perpetrated by the ZANU PF party, which resulted in the deaths of numerous MDC members and injuries to hundreds more. The brutality, torture,

and murder of individuals facilitated Mugabe's acquisition of the run-off vote in June 2008. The nation descended into chaos due to the MDC's rejection of the run-off election outcome. The year 2008 was the most challenging in terms of social, economic, and political conditions in the nation's history. The populace confronted malnutrition, vacant stores, an absent welfare infrastructure, the disintegration of the education system, widespread unemployment, hyperinflation, and political instability.

Shale (2006) predicted that Operation "Murambatsvina" might re-emerge in future election campaigns unless measures were implemented to address electoral fraud. Shale (2006:122) asserts that the historiography of Zimbabwean elections indicates a pattern of violent confrontations, suggesting that similar conflicts between the two parties may arise prior to the next presidential elections in 2008. In 2008, the issues raised by Shale (2006) were substantiated. The civil turmoil in Zimbabwe in 2008 is regarded as the most severe in the nation's history. The election date for 2008 was established as March 29th. Prior to the election, criminal activity was pervasive. The Save Zimbabwe Campaign convened a prayer meeting on March 11, 2007, which was attended by opposition figures. Tsvangirai and his adherents were assaulted and detained. The Tsvangirai stronghold in Harare was subsequently targeted for abduction, kidnapping, and police abuse (Alexander and Tendi, 2008:7).

In anticipation of the elections, the ruling ZANU PF party sought to expand the political landscape by permitting opposition parties to campaign in regions that had historically been ZANU PF rural strongholds. During the election, the MDC-T obtained most of the seats. The most catastrophic impact on ZANU PF occurred in its rural bastions" (Alexander and Tendi 2008:8). The principal causes have been recognized as a succession of crises, with economic challenges being paramount. Chitando and Togarasei (2010:153) precisely delineated the context surrounding the 2008 elections. They assert that "inflation remains difficult to control, compelling Gideon Gono, the beleaguered governor of Zimbabwe's Reserve Bank, to engage in perpetual money printing. The Zimbabwe dollar depreciated, prompting most employees to find it more convenient to remain at home rather than commute to work.

Chitando and Togarasei (2010:154) stated that ZANU PF's inability to formulate a persuasive appeal to voters contributed to their loss, having depleted the potent strategy of estate, "land of people," during the 2000 general elections and the 2002 presidential contest. The official narrative, currently under scrutiny, asserts that Tsvangirai did not secure the presidency by a significant margin, notwithstanding the MDC's parliamentary majority. In December 2014,

Mugabe, when addressing the security forces, stated that Tsvangirai had defeated him by 73 percent, marking what is considered the first acknowledgment of defeat in the 2008 presidential election; however, his party promptly rejected this as a verbal error. Some interpreted the postponement of the presidential results announcement as evidence that Tsvangirai had secured an outright victory, while ZANU PF intended to manipulate the results to facilitate a rematch. The results were suspended for five weeks, significantly over the time required for conducting the run-off election. The administration postponed the date of the second-round election from 21 to 90 days following the announcement of the results Masunungure (2009:80).

In Zimbabwe, the extension has been interpreted as ZANU PF's attempt to compel the population to endorse their candidacy. On May 2, 2008, the official results revealed that none of the presidential candidates had secured the necessary 50% plus one vote to avoid a run-off election. It was then revealed that the run-off will take place on June 27, 2008. The campaign season from April to June was marked by unprecedented violence. Masunungure (2009:82) defines it as "militarized time," whilst Chitando and Togarasei (2010:153) refer to it as "hell on Earth." Historians depict the Joint Military Command, which includes the military, police, prisons, and intelligence, as crucial in the pre-election period (see Alexander & Tendi 2008:11; Masunungure 2009:79; Chitando & Togarasei 2010:155; Sachikonye 2011). Sachikonye (2009:79) contends that the militarization of the 27 June election was an element of the state's militarization that began many years earlier. The armed forces functioned as both orchestrators and executors of violence, frequently using youth party organizations and war veterans to carry out severe beatings, intimidation, and torture.

Chitando and Togarasei (2010) assert that the interval from March to June 2008 was one of the most sombre periods in Zimbabwe's post-war history. MDC lefties who spoke their opinions during the "window era" of political transparency faced murder, imprisonment, sexual assault, and brutality. They asserted that during the reign of terror, MDC members and campaigners had limb amputations. As Mugabe prioritized the preservation of his rule, the state engaged in hostilities against its own populace. For the first time in post-war Zimbabwe, urban areas experienced systemic violence, with 'bases' created in densely populated regions. Moreover, when ZANU PF endeavoured to re-educate individuals, it accused of seeking to 'restore sacred Zimbabwe to the whites,' there was no assurance of safety in the affluent neighbourhoods. Two hundred MDC political figures were assassinated due to this violence (Chitando and Togarasei, 2010:155).

Rumours circulated regarding a hit list targeting prominent grassroots activists, several of whom were abducted and killed with calculated brutality, while numerous MDC leaders and their families were assassinated (Alexander and Tendi, 2008:13). On 5 July 2008, Tsvangirai reported that 1500 activists, comprising 20 Members of Parliament and parliamentary candidates, had been arrested by police on allegations of political offenses, 103 supporters had been murdered, and 5000 supporters, including certain polling agents and council candidates, had been kidnapped (Alexander and Tendi, 2008:14). Masunungre (2009:97) characterizes the nation's political atmosphere during that period as tense, hostile, and volatile, resulting from an election campaign fraught with provocations, animosity, disenfranchisement, kidnappings, and fatalities. In summary, the abuse transformed the run-off election into a contest between violence and democratic process (Museumgoer 2009:84). Tsvangirai ultimately withdrew from the election, citing an inequitable playing field due to the assaults and a wish to safeguard his supporters from additional mistreatment. Although he was the sole candidate, Mugabe proceeded to dominate the elections. Although pronounced the victor, prominent global organizations that observed the elections refrained from deeming them free and fair. The run-off election intensified the legitimacy issue that emerged during the 2005 elections, rather than resolving the issue (Masunungre, 2009:97).

The 2008 outcomes did not alleviate Zimbabwe's issues. Following South African mediation in following discussions with Zimbabwe's principal political factions, the National Unity (GNU) Treaty was executed in 2009. ZANU PF, Tsvangirai's MDC-T, and Welshman Ncube's MDC-N established the Government of National Unity (GNU) (Masunungre, 2009:97). The populace anticipated the cessation of political violence due to the cooperation agreement among the political parties. Nonetheless, due to the financial support from the Inclusive Government, political engagement rose in 2011.

#### **4.5.6 2018 post-election violence**

Following Zimbabwe's August 2018 presidential election, the country experienced violent assaults in most parts of the country. In Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe, uniformed soldiers indiscriminately discharged live bullets at individuals protesting the postponed election results (Mavhinga, 2021). President Emmerson Mnangagwa urged for an impartial inquiry into the events in Harare and stated that those accountable must be identified and prosecuted. Mnangagwa subsequently established the Motlanthe Commission of Inquiry, which determined that six individuals perished and 35 sustained injuries due to state security personnel (Mavhinga, 2021). Three years later, Mnangagwa has failed to execute the

commission's recommendations. This includes holding accountable security forces responsible for atrocities and compensating families of the deceased or those who lost property (Mavhinga, 2021). On January 14, 2019, the government of Emmerson Mnangagwa executed a coordinated crackdown on protestants against the price hike of petrol. This resulted in numerous fatalities and several arrests. Dzirutse (2019) states that several individuals vanished during this protest and are still unaccounted for.

#### **4.5.7 Zimbabwe's Politics and the Church**

Since the onset of the political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe in 2000, ZANU PF, under President Robert Mugabe's leadership, has strongly criticized the church both domestically and internationally. The party claims that the church has neglected its prophetic mission and exhibits passivity and complacency in response to severe human rights abuses and authoritarian governance. The church acknowledged that it became aware of its involvement in Zimbabwe's religious, political, and economic matters around the year 2000, coinciding with early signs of state intolerance manifested through violent assaults on dissenters and systematic repression (Zakeyo, 2011: 8).

A long-dominant party in Zimbabwe faced its first electoral defeat in February 2000, when voters dismissed a new Constitutional Draft approved by a commission appointed by President Mugabe (Zakevo, 2011). President Mugabe's early goodwill in recognizing the people's choice was rapidly followed by a barrage of state-sanctioned political violence, which has since marred the nation's reputation. Members of the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association and ZANU PF initiated an offensive, attacking farmers and labourers while encroaching upon predominantly white-owned commercial farms. Advocates for crime victims were hesitant to speak out against the police (Zakevo, 2011). President Mugabe expressed his endorsement of the militia, declaring that their activities marked the commencement of the Third Chimurenga Rebellion, an anti-colonial struggle. Several agriculturalists died, while others sustained serious injuries and endured tremendous suffering. Expulsions impacted more than 300,000 agricultural labourers, although just 300 of the 4,500 white farmers who once owned land in Zimbabwe left (Zakevo, 2011).

Confronted with a formidable political challenge from the nascent opposition faction, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), ZANU PF resorted to violence against opposition supporters and civilians in the lead-up to the June 2000 legislative elections. A significant number of civilians sustained injuries. President Mugabe discreetly published a comprehensive

pardon decree absolving all individuals accused of political offenses committed between January and July 2000. The phenomenon of electoral violence during the June 2000 presidential elections involved President Mugabe and his adversary, MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai. After months of severe political violence, civil society documented several instances of beatings, abductions, and assaults, with over 50 activists reported deceased.

#### **4.5.8 Sanctions on Zimbabwe and implications on state-church relations**

Brown (1985) categories sanctions into three basic types: political, diplomatic, and commercial. This research analyses trade restrictions as a means of compelling the target to behave in a manner favourable to the government or groups imposing the sanctions. Godon (1993) identifies trade sanctions as a cost-effective method for penalizing unethical behaviour and resolving disputes. Conversely, Patson (2006) contends that diplomatic pressure constitutes a distinct mechanism that is not regarded as a viable option. The notion of economic sanctions is derived from its objectives, with which most authors concur. Sanctions are characterized by the infliction of financial hardship aimed at attaining the objectives of the targeted nation (Ibid). They can also be characterized as a policy instrument employed to compel a transgressing nation to alter its conduct, so addressing or facilitating the resolution of international issues. Numerous scholars think that the primary objective of sanctions is to enforce international ethics and urge a target to reconsider its diplomatic decisions (Naylor, 1992). Economic sanctions are employed to modify behaviours, either retributively or punitively, or to convey a message to the target or a third-party state (Alexander, 2009). Academics generally concur on the acts that define international sanctions, which encompass the freezing of financial assets, issuance of freezing orders, and imposition of export restrictions (Alexander, 2009).

Sanctions employed to coerce an adversary into compliance with regulations are not a novel technique in documented history. A considerable amount has been documented to elucidate the motivations behind the imposition of sanctions and its repercussions. Three options are available to address an international crisis. They involve minimal action, considering military intervention, and striving to implement economic embargoes (Renwick, 1981:2). Each of these three options is employed to impose suffering on the transgressing government. Trade sanctions aim to penalise lawbreakers while safeguarding the economic interests of the imposing entity (Miyagawa, 1992:9). Sanctions may be employed to deter states from misconduct to attain national stability. Kurebwa (2000: 3) asserts that a delinquent state jeopardises international stability by acts of aggression or by creating domestic conditions that

foster international and local disorder (Kurebwa 2000:3). In the context of COVID-19 state-church relations, the state adopted a more hardened stance not only to international players but internal too inclusive of anyone posing critical voices against the state. Churches and pastors who criticised Zimbabwe's COVID-19 response were labelled as 'sell outs'.

In the 1960s, sanctions were imposed on Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesia, due to allegations of human rights violations. The punishments exacerbated the plight of people whose rights had been violated, rather than easing their suffering (Strack, 1979:44). Two primary perspectives exist regarding the rationale behind the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe by the European Union (EU), the United States (US), and Australia. Europhiles say that these are simply targeted initiatives against President Mugabe and his party officials. This institution asserts that the sanctions are mostly unrelated to the economic collapse, as they primarily target individuals. Critics of Mugabe attribute to him responsibility for his land policies, pervasive corruption, Zimbabwe's involvement in the DRC conflict, the absence of the rule of law, and other flawed economic strategies (Hondora, 2010). President Mugabe's political intolerance, electoral manipulation, and egregious human rights abuses are believed to have exacerbated the nation's economic decline (Ibid).

The United States and the European Union imposed and reinstated sanctions on Zimbabwe, alleging that ZANU PF committed human rights abuses, invaded white farms, engaged in electoral fraud, demolished low-income housing during Operation Murambatsvina (Clean-up campaign), and suppressed opposition activists (Chogugudza, 2009:8). ZANU PF asserts that sanctions were designed to cause suffering for Zimbabweans to compel them to vote against their government, so effecting a legislative change (Chenga, 2009:6). ZANU PF asserts that MDC legislators advocated for sanctions to manipulate Zimbabweans and forward their objective of regime change in favour of a legitimate land reform initiative. The Land Redistribution Program aimed to rectify colonial disparities. The sanction policy is believed to aim at excluding regimes that adopt methods harmful to the economic interests of Western nations.

Sanctions have significantly harmed Zimbabwe's economy, causing widespread hardship, but economic difficulties existed even before sanctions, particularly after the Economic Structural Reform Plan (ESAP). While many scholars have studied Zimbabwe's macroeconomic issues, less attention has been paid to how Churches have responded, though they appear to have taken action.

#### **4.6 The Economy and state-church relations**

Ndlovu (2008) examines the repercussions of 2008 in the paper titled “Economic Migration and the Socio-Economic Impacts on the Emigrant's Families: A Case of Ward 8, Gweru Rural District, Zimbabwe,” highlighting significant migration of Zimbabweans to adjacent countries in pursuit of employment, resulting in familial disintegration and profound poverty. Fenga (2008) asserts, "To understand Zimbabwe's historical context, one must recognise that by early 2007, life had devolved into a harsh struggle for survival for the populace." The state did not provide solutions and answers to national problems; rather, they merely presented those issues from a propaganda position. Numerous enterprises were compelled to diminish their operations, some were mandated to cease functioning, while others relocated to adjacent nations. This led to a significant unemployment rate, causing a decline in the quality of life for those in Zimbabwe. This post identifies current difficulties but also propose solutions for how the church should have intervened and how it should aid in the event of a recurrence similar to 2008.

##### **4.6.1 The Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP)**

The Economic Structural Adjustment Program (ESAP), as noted by Chipika, Chibanda, and Kadenge (2000), is a neoliberal, market-oriented reform initiative enacted in Zimbabwe as a remedial response to the economic crises of the 1980s. Moyo (2017) asserts in her article "ESAP was never suitable for Zimbabwe" that ESAP involved decreasing government expenditure by reducing the civil service by 25%, eliminating subsidies, commercializing and privatizing specific state-owned enterprises, and implementing user fees in the health and education sectors, among other measures. The economic policy was fundamentally solid but executed in an inappropriate context, as the majority of individuals nominated to manage parastatals were affiliated ZANU PF party members, particularly retired army generals lacking the requisite qualifications to oversee such enterprises.

Chipika, Sibanda, and Kadenge (2020) assert that although ESAP was recognized as a vehicle for attaining sustainable economic growth in most African nations, many economists deemed its outcomes as unsatisfactory. The authors assert that there has been considerable discourse in Zimbabwe over the adverse impacts of the changes, particularly concerning the manufacturing sector's response and the volume of manufactured exports. Zimbabwe's development policy has historically emphasized the pivotal role of the private sector in the nation's success. The government has considerably contributed to the expansion of the social sector to rectify imperial, social, and economic inequities. Nonetheless, rather than yielding the anticipated

outcomes, ESAP intensified Zimbabwe's economic predicament (Makwara, 2021:40).

UNICEF (1991) asserts that the ESAP is devoid of a human dimension, resulting in greater suffering for the vulnerable populations. The authors assert that the modifications failed to protect goods and services utilized by the vulnerable, including government health and education provisions. The primary issue of the program was its inability to rectify the economic disparity between the black majority and a small group of white capitalists who exerted remote control over the economy.

#### **4.6.2 ESAP's Effects**

The initial findings of UNICEF (1983) investigations indicated a declining situation for children and women in Ross country, with the overall GDP adversely affecting the weak and vulnerable populations. Chipika, Sibanda, and Kadenge (2020) assert that the reinstatement of medical and school fees incited panic and outrage, disproportionately impacting the impoverished and women (Moyo, 2017). During that period, basic education in Zimbabwe was free, establishing the foundation for the nation's elevated literacy rate. The introduction of school fees by ESAP impeded progress. It exacerbated gender prejudice by favouring the education of male children over female children. It has resulted in gender disparities in the political, health, and industrial domains, among others.

ESAP is perceived as a World Bank initiative with limited involvement from aid recipients. Chipika, Sibanda, and Kadenge (2020) assert that ESAPs are imposed on host governments as a condition for obtaining donor funding, and African politicians, recognizing the ineffectiveness of ESAPs, have enacted them under coercion to secure essential loans (Makwara 2021:51). President Mugabe was bold and resolute in his beliefs, rejecting the IMF and World Bank stipulations as incongruent with the growth needs of Zimbabwe and other emerging nations. President Mugabe's stance, coupled with the land invasions, has rendered it untenable for Zimbabwe to garner support, resulting in an economic crisis.

#### **4.6.3 The Church and Unemployment**

The lack of employment opportunities, both formal and informal, is a significant factor contributing to urban young unemployment in Zimbabwe, particularly in rural areas (Mpofu and Chimhenga, 2016:8). The political stalemate is the primary cause of unemployment, and the perceived illegitimacy of the current President is deterring direct investment. Research conducted in 2008 revealed that, out of the nation's 12 million inhabitants, hardly 480,000 had prior employment (Mpofu and Chimhenga, 2016:9). Most social and economic analysts concur

that the jobless rate in 2023 exceeds 92%. A clear factor contributing to heightened and unregulated teenage unemployment is an uncertain future for the nation. The rise in drug and substance addiction is attributable to unemployment and the elevated expense of living. Numerous organizations, including the government, are reducing employment due to economic underperformance. Most Zimbabweans experience severe poverty, evident in instability, deprivation, and social inequality. This condition has resulted in a populace that is socially desperate and willing to consider any form of sustenance hope. The traditional economy has collapsed significantly, leading to elevated institutional unemployment, causing numerous professionally qualified Zimbabweans to be unemployed on the streets. The prestige of Zimbabwe's prestigious educational and technological program was significantly undermined (Mpfu and Chimhenga, 2016:11). Moreover, trained and competent individuals have forsaken formal employment for demeaning informal occupations, such as vending and peddling. It is disheartening that universities and professional graduates have transitioned to becoming vendors and engaging in the informal sector. Educators in Kuwadzana offer confections to students, and some even abscond from class to engage in extracurricular pursuits. The limited number of graduates fortunate enough to secure employment continue to encounter inadequate compensation, with instances of delayed or absent payments. The worth of an advanced professional degree has significantly diminished. During the colonial era, the primary methods of evading urban adversity were education and unemployment. Their professional reputation would be the first casualty if highly talented, highly professionalized, and highly educated individuals were compelled to engage in unethical conduct.

#### **4.6.4 Complexities arising from the Land Reform Program**

The issue of land reform was a prominent element of the MDC manifesto, indicating that it was to be prioritised immediately upon assuming power (Makwara, 2021). On realising the decline of support and popularity amongst the voters, ZANU PF party hastily appropriated the land reform program to their advantage and allowed its supporters and the 1970s war of liberation veterans to arbitrarily invade and occupy white owned farms. The entire process devolved into mayhem. Land invasions significantly impacted the economy; the surge in agricultural encroachments occurred shortly after Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai's inauguration on February 13, 2009, constituting a blatant violation of the principles outlined in the Global Political Agreement (Makwara 2021:60). In 2000, war veterans commenced the appropriation of properties owned by white commercial farmers following President Robert Mugabe's directive for them to abandon their fields without compensation. In Mazowe, alleged

Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) agents and military personnel encroached over Mazowe Citrus Estates, seizing a segment of the land, marking the first occurrence of contemporary invasions (General Agricultural Plantation Workers Union of Zimbabwe (GAPWUZ) 05 March 2009). The operation resulted in the displacement of 400 out of around 2000 farm employees (GAPWUZ, 05 March 2009).

The objective of the farm occupations and take over was to recover land which was appropriated during British colonial rule. This method was employed by Robert Mugabe to maintain his grip on power, as there existed a scheme called "willing seller willing buyer," and a significant amount of state land was left unused throughout the nation. The ZANU PF government intentionally delayed land distribution from 1980 to 2000, anticipating an opportunity to exploit land as a political tool. Moyo (2001:313) asserts that ZANU-PF employed the land war as a strategic tool for maintaining control. The land reclamation by ZANU-PF has severely disrupted the nation's economy.

In addition to the farm invasions, the newspapers reported on another matter. The liberty of the press is advantageous to society. In a democratic society, the press functions as the "fourth estate," overseeing the three departments of government: executive, legislative, and judiciary. The Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition (2010: 3) document states, "the mainstream media's function is to serve not only as a guardian of public interests but also as a regulatory authority on government actions," as described on the website Australian politics.com. Citizens and their elected representatives predominantly engage through the media to inform and influence each other (Mughan & Gunther, 2000:23). The media is crucial for ensuring accountability among the elite and preserving civic oversight of the executive branch in contemporary democracies (Mughan & Gunther, 2000:23).

The current administration must acknowledge the significance of media in any region and ensure that both public and private media are safeguarded from exploitation while being motivated to fulfil their primary objective of promoting reform and democracy. In the future, it is crucial to recognize that state-controlled or state-owned media persistently obscures matters concerning minority parties while favouring the ruling party, ZANU-PF. Hopewell Chin'ono (Facebook page 2023) states that Zimbabwe, alongside Nigeria, was the inaugural country in Sub-Saharan Africa to establish a television service in 1960; 63 years later, it possesses only that single television station. The Zimbabwean government is reluctant to facilitate free communication as it depends on a single television station to disseminate its

propaganda to the rural population.

As previously stated, Zimbabwe's service distribution infrastructure was dismantled in 2008 because of the economic and political crisis. Prior to the establishment of the GPA, over 12 major government referral hospitals were closed, the cholera pandemic proliferated, and educational institutions were shut down. Food shortages grew prevalent as the nation's road infrastructure deteriorated. "The lives of millions of Zimbabweans were endangered due to severe food and water shortages, the deterioration of the health-care system evidenced by hospital closures, and the emergence of cholera" (Kasambala, 2008:2). Under the specified requirements, it is evident that the Zimbabwean economy has been unable to generate employment for the entire people for the past forty years. The pursuit of refuge in the supernatural amid social and socio-political misery has led to an increase in paranoia and anxiety, culminating in profound spiritual awareness. In this context, one would observe the emergence of prosperity gospel from newly established ministries or African Indigenous churches, which are frequently utilized by the government in Zimbabwe to support ZANU PF propaganda. A multitude of individuals have sought divine intervention, counsel, and sustenance due to their employment hunt and apprehension of severe adversity.

A new generation of prophets and apostles is emerging in the contemporary Zimbabwean society. Johannes Ndanga, President of the Zimbabwe Apostolic Christian Council, informed the nation that Robert Mugabe at the aged of 93 was to remain in government till his death (Bulawayo24news.com, 2017). Johannes Ndanga's profile has been about persistently championed Robert Mugabe rule, asserting that God designated him to lead the nation till his death: "Men may be vexed by attempts to displace Mugabe, but they should understand that he was divinely appointed by God, President Mugabe, to govern the country, and only God will depose him" (Bulawayo24news.com, 2017). Voices such as Ndanga's were permitted to function in the country to counteract any rational discourse from the established mainstream organizations.

#### **4.6.5 Operation Murambatsvina (Clean-up Campaign)**

In May 2005, the state's suppression of its electorate was evident during Operation "Murambatsvina". Diverse individuals interpret this phrase in various ways (Shale, 2006:11). It has been referred to as "Operation Pick Up," "Operation Throw Away the Garbage," and "Operation Clean the Mud," but it is officially designated as "Operation Restore Order." The designation "Operation Tsunami" gained prominence among residents owing to the rapidity

and severity of the initiative, which led to the devastation of residences, commercial establishments, and vending locations in Zimbabwe's urban areas (Chibisa and Sigauke, 2008:39). The term "tsunami" originated from the catastrophic catastrophe following the Indian Ocean earthquake on December 26, 2004, which caused widespread fatalities and infrastructure damage throughout numerous Asian nations. Zimbabweans regarded Operation "Murambatsvina", which transpired barely four months following the Asian Tsunami, as a distinct reference point. The government dismantled all "illegal" street vendors and "illegal" structures, including shacks, businesses, and houses, during this operation (Shale, 2006:117).

The event transpired after to ZANU PF's triumph in a disputed legislative election conducted in March 2005, which was vehemently opposed by the MDC. The urban populace also endorsed the resistance. Mhiripiri (2008) posits that the 2005 evictions should be evaluated within the framework of Zimbabwean national politics and dynamics (Mhiripiri, 2008:152). The election prompted inquiries on the credibility and esteem for individuals in authority. The state's primary rationale was to halt "disorderly and chaotic urbanization, including its health repercussions; to prevent illegal parallel trading activities, especially foreign currency transactions and the stockpiling of scarce consumer goods; and to rectify damage inflicted by improper urban agricultural practices" (Chibisa and Singauke, 2008:39).

The state claimed that the operation aimed to cleanse the country of filth; however, Murambatsvina may serve as a punitive measure by the government against the urban poor for their defection from the ruling party, as well as a strategy to diminish MDC support in urban areas by relocating substantial populations to remote regions for more effective management and surveillance (Shale, 2006:119; Mlambo, 2008:21 and Potts, 2008:53). It was presumed that all black individuals born in urban areas of Zimbabwe possessed a rural domicile and, thus, a destination to return to. Individuals raised in urban and suburban environments, as well as those of foreign descent, were overlooked.

Chibisa and Sigauke (2008:42) found that foreign nationals, especially from Mozambique, were rendered homeless in a study done in Mutare Urban. If the objective of the operation was to penalize MDC urban supporters, it also adversely affected ZANU PF supporters. Given that members of the ruling party were impacted by the operation, it is generally believed that post-Murambatsvina government initiatives like "new places for insightful traders" and "new housing projects" under Operation Garikayi/Hlalani Kuhle were designed to support them (Shale, 2006:121). Eligibility for these programs required clear demonstration of ZANU PF

membership, highlighting the issue of patronage politics. Operation Murambatsvina, as noted by Shale (2006:120), is a "continuation of the ruling party's historical propensity for violent confrontations against opposition parties since the 1980s." This assertive tendency is expected to persist in forthcoming elections.

#### **4.7 Social Environment: Brain drains and global migration.**

A significant number of Zimbabweans have sought refuge in the diaspora because of the nation's political and economic turmoil, as previously mentioned. Zimbabweans are perceived as economic refugees wherever they are. Zimbabwe, possessing one of the highest literacy rates in Africa, is strategically positioned to cultivate talent that can be exploited (Castles, 2000). The political and economic collapse since 1997 has significantly impacted outward migration. Zimbabwe has experienced a significant economic slump, compelling numerous Zimbabweans to emigrate in pursuit of better opportunities, leading to the exodus of many trained professionals to developed nations and neighbouring SADC countries, particularly South Africa, Botswana, and Zambia. Amidst the upheaval, Zimbabwe's educational infrastructure deteriorated. Teachers at the school level exited the classroom to engage in the informal economy. Migration, remittances, and demographics are significant factors contributing to instability dynamics. Approximately five million Zimbabweans have emigrated from the country. As stated by Borjas (1990) in Castles (2000:2), "the primary impetus for migration is the individual's endeavour to enhance their earnings by transitioning from low to high wage economies." This is largely correct, considering Zimbabwe's migration narrative. South Africa is considered the most economically viable country in Southern Africa, attracting numerous Zimbabweans and other Africans who want improved prosperity, especially in the southern region. The induced socio-economic instability in South Africa as locals perceived their plight as directly linked to the influx of outsiders, resulting in increased cases of xenophobic violence against foreigners in South Africa. The UNICEF (2007:3) states, "migration is also regarded as a domestic survival strategy, wherein one family member emigrates to ensure the support of the entire family." This is especially accurate in Zimbabwe. Traditional Shona and Ndebele cultures make decisions that impact individual family members as a collective, including migration choices. Certain family decisions were made because of broader socio-economic conditions in the country rather than deliberate intent. From a Kairos liberation theological perspective, COVID-19 has been identified as a significant period for potential change. In this context, some have argued that churches should not remain silent when government measures taken under COVID-19 management may affect citizens' rights.

#### **4.7.1 Cyclone Idai Effects**

On March 16, 2019, the eastern regions of Zimbabwe experienced intense rainfall and powerful winds and flash floods which became known as Cyclone Idai Chatiza (2019). Cyclone Idai, marked by floods and landslides, caused fatalities and inflicted extensive damage to infrastructure and livelihoods. The nocturnal timing of the attack intensified the communities' vulnerability, including the governmental response, as many individuals were unprepared and asleep, resulting in less reaction time to organize and seek refuge from the danger. The torrential rains persisted until 20 March 2019, obstructing all rescue operations. The President of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Mnangagwa, proclaimed a state of calamity due to the hurricane. The hurricane impacted almost 270,000 individuals, resulting in 341 fatalities and numerous others unaccounted for.

Cyclone Idai, despite its numerous adverse impacts, offers valuable lessons for the Zimbabwean government and its populace. The country's socio-economic fragility, resulting from a strained and ineffective political economy, renders it susceptible to disasters and pandemics, as natural hazards swiftly escalate into humanitarian crises (Chatiza, 2019). Prior to the crisis, an estimated 5.3 million individuals in Zimbabwe required humanitarian aid, according to Chatiza (2019). Cyclone Idai struck a vulnerable ecosystem already burdened by escalating reliance on natural resources and insufficient environmental management. The emergence of Cyclone Idai revealed deficiencies in capacity and strategy within Zimbabwe's disaster risk management (DRM). The severity of this disaster revealed the inadequacies in national and local disaster risk management systems, together with other community variables that heighten household vulnerability to hazards (Munsaka 2021). Approximately nine months later, reports on the emergence of coronavirus were disseminated.

#### **4.8 The Church and socio-economic crisis in Zimbabwe**

In the late 1990s, as economic difficulties in Zimbabwe intensified, more young professionals and specialists in health and education commenced emigration. Information technology, finance, and other sectors departed the country in exasperation due to inadequate income, an uncertain future, and the search of enhanced career prospects. Amidst the exacerbation of brain drain, Zimbabwe experienced significant and quick development in Pentecostalism, particularly throughout the 1990s. A series of predictions commenced circulation within primarily Pentecostal/Evangelical congregations. Accounts of divine visions and declarations of the nation's potential to serve as a successful exemplar for Africa and the globe were

widespread. The faithful were to remain resolute in anticipation of the realization of heavenly prophecies.

Yasaya (2017:54) has demonstrated a significant correlation between charismatic Pentecostalism and the political economic crisis confronting the nation. The nation has experienced severe economic difficulties, characterised by a high inflation rate that led to the abolition of the native currency in favour of the United States Dollar and the South African Rand. Pentecostalism, as articulated by Yasaya (2017), arises amidst significant economic difficulties that have adversely affected a select few and substantially hindered economic growth. The crisis has exacerbated poverty, misery, unemployment, fear, scepticism, and uncertainty. The United Family of International Church (UFIC), led by Emmanuel Makandiwa, has established a presence in the country under these circumstances. The UFIC emerged and proliferated during a period of economic hardship in the country. This aspect, coupled with a significant emphasis on the prosperity gospel, has demonstrated a robust correlation between charismatic Pentecostalism and Zimbabwe's economic and political deterioration. The question of whether Pentecostalism effectively addresses the nation's socioeconomic issues has provoked varied responses. Makandiwa has been lauded as the Moses of this generation, with his church serving as the sole beacon of hope for an improved Zimbabwe (Yasaya 2017: 54).

Biri (2016) asserts that a key appeal of the Pentecostal charismatic movement lies in its ability to address the existential and pragmatic requirements of modern urban populations, including domestic and socio-economic challenges. In many regions of Africa, they emerged during structural transformations, low income and living standards, insufficient social care, and the retreat of governmental health services. In the 1980s and 1990s, a period of economic stability, new church construction was limited (Yasava, 2017). Following the year 2000, new churches began to emerge, primarily due to the deteriorating socioeconomic circumstances. This perspective is grounded in Karl Marx's assertion that religion serves as an opiate for the masses and a form of resistance to genuine suffering. Karl Marx believed that religion was conceived by the affluent and influential to manipulate the vulnerable and compel them to recognize their circumstances. This is especially evident in Zimbabwe, where Emmanuel Makandiwa participated in an anti-corruption initiative, highlighting his political connections to people in authority. Makandiwa has advised Zimbabweans to refrain from protesting against the nation's economic turmoil, stating that such actions will lead to a "bloodbath." Consequently, individuals are evading engagement with the nation's genuine economic and political issues (Yasaya 2017:50).

Pentecostals in Africa, especially in Zimbabwe, do not categorically reject the past; instead, they interact with it, reinterpreting and assimilating it. Zimbabweans responded to missionary systems and assimilated the gospel in this manner. The impurities introduced by the missionary gospel, which justified African suffering and slavery on Earth with the promise of a superior existence in Heaven, were reinterpreted by the Pentecostal gospel of spiritual validation and empowerment through baptism in the Holy Spirit. Muzorewa (1985:24) notes that "the essential point to recognize is that the introduction of Christianity coincided with colonization." The distinction between missionary intent and colonizer intent appeared to be closely intertwined. Gutti (1994:11) emphasizes the necessity for the church to alter its stance on a unilateral salvation gospel, stating that: "The focus of the church and its theology has been preoccupied with heaven." It must be altered, as upon receiving Jesus as your personal Saviour and being born again, one should walk in reverence of the Lord; eternal life in paradise is assured. Pentecostalism, with its remarkable expansion and impact, has transformed the nature of Christianity in Zimbabwe (Vusumuzi Tshuma 2018:228).

#### **4.8.1 The Church, Politics, and Zimbabwe's Future**

In September 2006, a prominent church institution in Zimbabwe published what is likely the most significant text produced by the nation's religious leaders. 'The Zimbabwe We Want' paper thoroughly examined the essence of both the nation and the Church, particularly in the context of the escalating political, economic, and social crisis that is fracturing the country 25 years post-independence from white minority governance. Observing the nation's decline and the profound suffering of many ordinary citizens, the church leaders contemplated their role, responsibilities, and deficiencies in upholding good governance and the rule of law within society. These questions remain pertinent six years after their inception. The plight of Zimbabwe remains unaddressed, leaving the existence of its populace uncertain. The Church's involvement in advocating for democratic governance and the rule of law, together with the importance of its prophetic function, remains a contentious subject both within ecclesiastical circles and in the broader society. During the study, Zimbabwe was undergoing a precarious democratic transition and was on the brink of another violent election and economic collapse. Stakeholders within the church and society are now scrutinizing the church's present stance. It is pertinent to examine the normative and qualitative contributions of the church in Zimbabwe to the promotion of good governance and democracy in the region, as well as its prospective role, informed by its historical performance. To respond to the inquiry, it is essential to first examine the historical context of the church in Zimbabwe and its role in national matters.

#### **4.9 The advent of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe-a society in turmoil**

There are few, if any, prophets or pastors who openly critique the prevailing conditions of poverty and political unrest in Zimbabwe. Numerous preachers espouse the advantages of wealth, renewal, and salvation. During this era of socio-political and socioeconomic turmoil, the church and its ministers confront a significant challenge. As disciples of Jesus, we bear the obligation to aid the infirm (Pieterse, 2013:4). Pieterse asserts that Jesus urges us to unite with the impoverished and attend to their needs like he did. Could it be that suffering, particularly severe poverty, compels the Christian church to acknowledge that its existence is at risk? Will we remain in the church if we falter in our ability to detect, accept, and understand this? The relationship between perception, action, identity, and integrity is explored by Smit (2003:57–58), who discusses whether perceptions can influence actions, actions can shape identity, and omissions can impact integrity. According to Smit, when the church overlooks the suffering of those experiencing poverty or oppression, it does not align with its foundational principles. Furthermore, Smit argues that the church neither confirms nor denies the scientific nature of pain. Smit (2003:58–59) also notes a paradox between the concept of God's greatness and the suffering experienced by believers, referencing Karl Barth. This paradox emerges when the dignity of humanity, considered a core aspect of creation, is diminished, which in turn raises questions about the understanding of God as creator. Poverty is fundamentally opposed to God because it stigmatizes and undermines His splendid creation. It is important for organizations to recognize and address factors such as starvation that negatively affect individuals by causing fear, hardship, and deprivation, ultimately impacting their quality of life (Smit, 2003:59). To help reduce urban poverty in Zimbabwe, a proactive and effective policy should be implemented. James notes, "The mission is to bring positive change and hope to the urban environment" (James, 2015:58). In a nation where numerous Zimbabweans perceive cities as perilous and unliveable foreign environments, the church must offer not just refuge but also an empowering and transforming space for the urban impoverished to respond effectively to their destitution. Wherever Jesus is present, there exists life; the church is tasked with recalling abundant, vibrant, cherished, and eternal life (Moltmann, 1978:19). The church, situated in a deteriorating urban environment, ought to invoke the dominion of Christ by confronting savage suffering, malevolence, and repressive social and political systems that foster early mortality and convert cities into perilous zones.

By acknowledging the significant impact of poverty on the dignity of the vulnerable, by offering a supportive environment for the marginalised urban poor, and by addressing the social

and political frameworks that perpetuate urban poverty, the church assumed a vital role in the discourse surrounding urban poverty during the COVID-19 era. Consequently, "the church serves as a vital urban mechanism in sustaining joy within our cities" (James, 2015:59). The church must acknowledge the impact of religious transgressions on humanity and the terrible repercussions of social injustice, particularly in the context of acute poverty in Zimbabwe. Poverty must not be neglected but vigorously addressed since it relegates individuals to the periphery of society.

#### **4.9.1 Effects of lockdowns on informal workers and vendors**

At the household level, residents' daily lives appeared to lack the benefits of progressive economic policies and social protection measures. The government's failure to implement rules concerning rent in a country with minimal public housing was conspicuously insufficient (Makombe, 2021:283). The economic measures implemented to enhance job security were inadequate. Several private sector organizations implemented mandatory leave for employees, with some resorting to the termination of "non-essential workers," thereby augmenting the population of informal workers and vendors. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted millions reliant on the informal economy and casual workers in formal sectors, with women being disproportionately affected (Nyabeze and Chikoko, 2021). The sudden declaration of the lockdown afforded vendors minimal opportunity to arrange their finances and procure food supplies. The closure of the informal sector, marketplaces, and vending locations stripped individuals of their livelihoods and income sources. Vendors and small-scale food producers indicated disruptions in supply chains, diminished sales, elevated rates of unsold and spoiled produce (particularly for perishable goods), jeopardizing profitability, and a reduction in client visits to vending locations or informal marketplaces (Nyabeze and Chikoko:2021). Vendors expressed that they could not afford to remain at home, but venturing out for business subjected them to police aggression and the risk of disease transmission, placing them in a precarious predicament.

"If I do not labour, my entire family will perish from starvation—what difference does it make?" "It is preferable to risk contracting the coronavirus than to witness my family perish from starvation," claimed Jane (pseudonym) in a telephone interview (Makombe, 2021:283). Interviewees demonstrated a reasonable awareness of the disease; yet many articulated a prevalent adage in Zimbabwe, "Kusiri kufa ndekupi?!" which translates to, regardless of the circumstances, one is doomed. For the majority, the informal economy's characteristics implied that most citizens could not afford to remain at home, as they relied on subsistence work

(Makombe, 2021). Despite the government's commitment to utilize an informal sector cushion fund to support merchants during the lockdown, no financial aid has been provided to date (Gukurume, 2020).

#### **4.9.2 Brutality from security forces during COVID-19 lockdowns**

The rapport between Zimbabwe's security forces and its inhabitants has been strained for an extended period, attributable to the escalating political and economic challenges, which have previously incited violent public protests (Zenda, 2020). On April 4, 2020, the Zimbabwean government sent the military to assist police in enforcing a national lockdown to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. By mid-July 2020, law enforcement and military personnel persisted in collaboratively manning roadblocks and executing patrols across all metropolitan areas and residential neighbourhoods to guarantee public adherence to lockdown regulations (Amnesty International, 2020). However, claims of brutality indicate that certain security personnel were misusing their power during the lockdown (Mutongwiza, 2020). Images proliferated on social media of the injuries sustained by two sisters who, while queuing for food in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, were allegedly arrested, verbally harassed, and physically beaten with batons for several hours (Tshili, 2020). Three individuals filed a lawsuit against the police commissioner general, alleging they sustained a fractured arm, auditory impairments, and dislocated shoulders due to police beatings (Ncube, 2020).

Police records indicate that over 2,000 individuals were apprehended during the initial week for violating lockdown regulations throughout Zimbabwe (Mutongwiza, 2020). A multitude of individuals has been apprehended and confined in police vehicles to multiple police stations. The 2020 report by Amnesty International states that the Zimbabwean government employed COVID-19 legislation to legitimize stringent limitations on the rights to freedom and peaceful assembly. Security forces are purported to have been dispatched to abduct, attack, and torture alleged opponents, as well as opposition members and leaders. Law enforcement and security personnel fatally shot a minimum of 10 individuals. Women were deprived of crucial maternal healthcare, and violence against women and girls was pervasive.

The epidemic intensified, and had impact on the economic situation, and the authorities failed to deliver social security to at-risk individuals. The United Nations study indicates that approximately 7 million individuals required humanitarian assistance, while 4.3 million individuals experienced extreme food insecurity (Amnesty International, 2020). In July 2020, opposition members urged the public to engage in the nationwide "July 31" rallies against purported official corruption, economic difficulties, and to demand the President's resignation

(Mutongwiza, 2020). The authorities employed COVID-19 limits as a pretext to curtail civic space and infringe upon human rights. Section 14 of Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 regarding Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment and Treatment) Regulations criminalized the dissemination of false information about COVID-19, with a penalty of up to 20 years' imprisonment and/or a substantial fine (Amnesty International, 2020). The government implemented further measures that penalized individuals harshly for peacefully expressing their right to freedom of expression, such as "undermining the authority of the President" or "insulting" him, to deter criticism on social media (Amnesty International, 2020). The nation persisted in a condition of upheaval.

#### **4.9.3 COVID-19, housing, and urban development in Zimbabwe**

Densification strategies for housing in Zimbabwe, as outlined in spatial planning documents such as Circular 70 of 2004, which decrease plot sizes and promote vertical development to house more individuals per unit area, have heightened the risk of disease transmission among the population (McFarlane et al., 2013). Housing construction induces alterations in land use and increases transport demand, resulting in deforestation and climate change repercussions. Research demonstrates that land-use and climate change generate possibilities for infections to transfer from wildlife to humans (Pfaffle et al., 2015) and establish conditions that promote the persistence, reproduction, dissemination, and transmission of pathogens and diseases. This analysis indicates that housing is a significant factor in the emergence and transmission of the coronavirus, as its provision and utilization foster conditions conducive to zoonosis and disease propagation (Chandran, 2020).

The number of slum areas in Zimbabwe is on the rise. The slums are a consequence of politicians seeking to appeal to the public and garner support from the needy voters. The slums are marked by overcrowding and insufficient access to potable water, among other difficulties (Svedlik, 2011). The slum regions hindered the implementation of hygiene procedures. The elevated population density rendered slum inhabitants susceptible to epidemics and the transmission of infectious diseases. The characteristics of informal settlements and slums in Zimbabwe rendered COVID-19 management techniques difficult. Issues such as social distance, maintenance of basic hygiene practices, self-isolation and lockdown became tricky. This study shares Chrisa's (2021) view that all the basic rules of WHO were contradicted in informal settlements during.

Two decades of economic turmoil and political instability, including a coup in 2017 and rampant inflation, have hindered Zimbabwe's government from delivering essential services to

its citizens. The nation confronts an anticipated deficit of 1.4 million housing units (Mazvarirwofa, 2021). The situation has been particularly severe in Zimbabwe's big cities, where many have relocated in pursuit of employment prospects. This has stretched services, resulting in multiple families residing in homes designed for single family (Mazvarirwofa, 2021). Self-isolation would be exceedingly challenging if an individual in a communal residence test positive for COVID-19. Housing overcrowding is a significant influence in the transmission of diseases, particularly acute respiratory infections such as COVID-19.

#### **4.9.4 COVID-19 and water shortages**

The nation's water scarcity exacerbated the situation. In major cities like Harare and Bulawayo, water scarcity is a persistent issue due to insufficient chemicals for water treatment and inadequate funding for infrastructure repairs (Mazvarirwofa, 2021). Numerous urban Zimbabweans get sporadic access to running water or are required to queue daily at communal pumps. The congregation at community pumps was identified as an additional factor promoting the propagation of the disease. The scarcity of water hindered the full execution of the World Health Organization's hygiene guidelines, which mandated regular handwashing. Dewa Mavhinga, Southern Africa director at Human Rights Watch, stated, "Enforcing social distancing is essential to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19; however, access to clean water for drinking, handwashing, and hygiene is imperative." More than two million individuals in the capital city, Harare, and the surrounding metropolitan region, including Chitungwiza, Epworth, Ruwa, and Norton, lack household access to safe drinking water and sufficient waste and wastewater disposal services (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Numerous women and school-aged children may endure eight to nine hours, and even overnight, in queues at congested boreholes or narrow water wells to obtain potentially unsafe water.

In a public health emergency, the government may impose restrictions on specific rights, including freedom of movement, when deemed strictly essential, grounded in scientific facts, non-arbitrary and non-discriminatory in application, of limited duration, and respectful of human dignity (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Nonetheless, the administration is duty-bound to guarantee the fulfilment of fundamental wants for those in lockdown, encompassing access to sustenance, water, and healthcare facilities. Zimbabwean authorities must promptly supply alternate sources of potable water, including boreholes and protected wells, and instruct households on economical and effective techniques for safe water storage and distribution (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The government must guarantee the availability of adequate water points nationwide to avert congestion and facilitate social separation.

Communal wells had dried up due to the advent of the dry season in April 2020 and heightened demand, with some boreholes also beginning to deplete, Makombe (2021:282). This heightened congestion at the limited operational community water points. In Harare's high-density regions, including Mabvuku and Glenview, reports suggested that youngsters predominantly occupied their daily hours at the water stations. In addition to children, women engaged in unpaid domestic tasks, such as collecting water, faced a heightened risk of getting COVID-19 at these water access locations, according to Makombe (2021:281). This had the ability to transform water points into hotspots for the transmission of COVID-19.

Moreover, most water points in High-Density Areas, including Mabvuku, Glenview, and Dzivarasekwa, lacked hand sanitizers (HRT, 10/06/2020). In April 2020, the Combined Harare Residents Association (CHRA) initiated a donation of liquid soap, hand sanitizers, and masks to the Harare City Council (HCC). At the handover ceremony, CHRA Director Loreen Mupasiri noted that CHRA had concerns regarding congestion at water points in the city, especially community boreholes. As a result, CHRA donated liquid soap and sanitizers to help residents reduce the risk of spreading or contracting COVID-19 in high-density areas (CHRA, 2020). In some communities, after the initial donations were used up during the early stages of the lockdown, borehole committees began charging fees for access to hand sanitizers (Makombe, 2021:282). Additionally, residents were incurring borehole upkeep fees. This situation left impoverished families trapped, with no alternative but to collect water from open and unprotected sources, hence increasing their vulnerability to waterborne infections throughout the global epidemic. A typhoid outbreak re-emerged in Hatcliffe, a densely populated area in Harare, as a direct result of these conditions (Makombe, 2021:283).

#### **4.9.5 COVID-19 Lockdown and increased domestic violence**

Worldwide, the incidence of domestic or family violence reports has escalated during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the enforcement of lockdown measures (Lewis, 2020). Family violence encompasses threatening or aggressive actions within familial relationships, which may manifest as physical, sexual, psychological, or economic abuse, including child maltreatment and intimate partner violence (Peterman et al., 2020). Family violence during pandemics correlates with various characteristics, including economic strain, disaster-induced instability, heightened vulnerability to exploitative relationships, and less support alternatives (Peterman et al., 2020). Social isolation methods enacted worldwide to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 have confined individuals in precarious circumstances of domestic

violence to their residences. Social isolation clearly intensifies individual and communal risks while constraining available help from friends and family (van Gelder et al., 2020).

The lockdown compels individuals to remain at home, affording families increased time for togetherness. This fortifies relationships but also exacerbates stress, tensions, and disputes, particularly when individuals are in close quarters for extended periods. In countries where women predominantly manage domestic responsibilities, research has indicated that during crises, such as armed conflicts or natural disasters, household tensions escalate due to spouses being confined together at home (Kadi, 2020).

The confinement and restriction of movement with the offender during quarantine impede survivors' ability to flee, report domestic violence, and seek assistance. Survivors report being prohibited from leaving and facing threats if they contract COVID-19 and transmit it to the abuser (Godin, 2020). They are also unable of initiating phone conversations or seeking support due to a lack of privacy. Moreover, those women and girls said that they would face violations at home but dreaded being subjected to brutality by security agents for lingering without justification, even when attempting to seek protective services. These women were raped not only in their homes but also when attempting to obtain essential resources such as water at communal boreholes. Literature indicated that women, as primary caretakers, were occasionally harassed by security agents when located in public spaces seeking water and essential supplies (Godin, 2020).

Research indicates that the COVID-19 lockout adversely affected parent-child connections. The lockdowns led to the shutdown of schools, resulting in parents and children spending the majority of their time restricted to their residences. The closing of schools resulted in heightened unpaid caregiving responsibilities for women, who bear the obligation of caring for children and other family members. Parental instinct for responsibility compels them to oversee their children's activities to safeguard against the sickness. In certain cases, children perceived it as an infringement on their right to mobility, resulting in disputes with adult caretakers. Certain youngsters were unable to comprehend the economic pressures induced by the epidemic, leading them to make excessive demands on their parents and caretakers without recognizing the unusual nature of their circumstances.

#### **4.9.6 COVID-19 and psychological challenges**

The mere contemplation of the sickness was a nightmare for many, resulting in feelings of fear and anxiety (Chigevenga et al., 2020). The state-wide lockdown constituted a significant

psychological experiment, leading to a secondary epidemic of burnout and stress-related symptoms in the latter half of 2020. Confinement and movement restrictions resulting from lockdowns or quarantine were perceived by some women as an infringement on their freedom, subjecting them to poverty and other forms of violence (Chigevenga et al., 2020). Considering this context, it was observed that COVID-19 precipitated numerous mental health issues, particularly among women, encompassing concern about the future, elevated tension and anxiety, along with intensified worry and fear regarding the condition. Chigevenga et al. (2020) states that research conducted in China about the effects of COVID-19 indicated that gender consistently predicted psychological outcomes, with females experiencing greater psychological anguish and anxiety than males.

Chirisa (2020:6) indicates that certain Zimbabweans exhibited increased health anxiety, to the degree that they became excessively concerned about even trivial flu symptoms. The primary source of stress was the insufficient availability of essential items, as the majority depended on informal economic activity; hence, the lockdown resulted in a loss of income for them. Their stress was exacerbated by the necessity to comply with national regulations imposed due to the pandemic, such as lockdowns and physical distancing, while simultaneously seeking essential supplies to avoid starvation, which in some instances compelled them to contravene the established guidelines (Chirisa, 2020:7). In their quest for essentials, they experienced tension and anxiety due to visiting locations where physical distancing was impractical, so exposing themselves to harm. Others experienced stress due to the disease's overwhelming demands, since they were the exclusive providers of essential requirements. Concerns arose regarding the future of their children due to the extended closure of schools and the lack of resources for home schooling.

#### **4.9.7 Returning residents and quarantine centres**

The COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected numerous global economies, leading to corporate downsizing or closures. This impacted numerous Zimbabweans residing abroad as migrant workers. It is hypothesized that adolescents infected with SARS-CoV-2 may stay asymptomatic for COVID-19 and serve as vectors of transmission (Murewanhema, 2021). During the early stages, most cases were verified among young individuals returning from abroad. The major objective of the quarantine centres was to accommodate returning residents throughout the incubation period and to contain any potential diseases within these facilities to prevent local transmission. Nevertheless, the facilities in the quarantine centres were reportedly inadequate (Murewanhema, 2021). Moreover, owing to the scarcity of test kits and reagents,

the initial test was frequently conducted several days post-arrival. This adversely affected both current and new returnees at elevated risk of illness and delayed their quarantine completion date. Furthermore, the findings were returned 5-13 days later, indicating the amalgamation of unidentified positive and negative cases at the centres. Instances of overcrowding, communal use of facilities, and sexual conduct within the quarantine centres were seen. Numerous reports indicated that inmates fled from inhumane circumstances in the facilities and escaped into surrounding villages. Administrative considerations, such as the amalgamation of various cohorts and the protracted distribution of results, exacerbated the problem, resulting in convicts exceeding 21 days without receiving their findings (Murewanhema, 2021). In the initial epidemic in Zimbabwe, most cases were identified in quarantine centres; thus, they may have been the sources of the infection.

The existence of porous boundaries presented an extra challenge in efficiently managing the spread of COVID-19. Zimbabwe shares its borders with several neighbouring countries, including South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, and Mozambique. Although the exact numbers are not revealed, numerous individuals successfully found a way across porous borders and circumvented mandatory quarantine. Several individuals, recognized by their communities, subsequently tested positive for SARS-CoV-2 and may have served as sources of infection for the community (Murewanhema, 2021). Tendai Biti, Vice President of the opposition MDC Alliance, promptly condemned the new regulations, expressing on social media his sense of “hopelessness” following a “foolish decision” by the government mandating a compulsory 14-day quarantine for returning residents after the emergence of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus in South Africa in December 2021. Doctor Norman, the leader of the Zimbabwe Doctors for Human Rights, asserts that the government has been vigilant in preventing the spread of Omicron, previously designated as B.1.1.529, across borders, Mavhunga (2021). “However, we are also concerned about the restrictions, particularly the decision to quarantine returning residents, citizens, and travellers who test negative for COVID-19 based on two PCR tests,” stated Matara. “We believe that these restrictions serve solely as a form of punishment.” These are impulsive decisions driven by emotion rather than empirical evidence or rationality. They also devastate the tourism sector and commerce in Zimbabwe. Kudzai Mutisi, an independent political pundit, agrees that the measures were excessively severe and may exacerbate tiredness regarding the vaccination program in Zimbabwe, Mavhunga (2021).

#### **4.10 Responses to COVID-19**

On 11 August 2021, the Minister of Information informed reporters in Harare that the

government permits churches to host sit-in congregants under the condition that only individuals who have received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine may attend (Mavhunga, 2021). Political journalist Rejoice Ngwenya, located in Harare, asserts that this event should not be misconstrued as the government's fear of God under President Emmerson Mnangagwa and the ZANU-PF party. Negative! They have begun to focus on the 2023 election. Ngwenya expressed hope that the apostolic movement may provide support. Conversely, schools remained closed, taverns were not operational, sports had not yet begun, and weddings and funerals continued to be restricted. Ngwenya asserts that the initiative pertains to ZANU-PF's astute strategy to commence vote solicitation, utilizing churches as a platform for populist generosity.

In Zimbabwe, it is widely recognised that prior to the authorisation of sit-in services for vaccinated individuals, church leaders, particularly from the white garment churches and the Zionist movement, were enlisted to promote the vaccination due to its insufficient uptake. Notably, leaders from the churches affiliated with ZANU-PF were utilized. On July 21, 2021, Bishop Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church encouraged his congregation to receive vaccinations for COVID-19 (Mazango, 2021). Bishop Nehemiah Mutendi made this statement while delivering a sermon to honour the 45th anniversary of the death of the church's founder, Reverend Samuel Mutendi, who passed away in Defe, Gokwe, on July 20, 1976. He stated, "I was vaccinated for coronavirus several months ago and once again urge all members of Zion Christian Church to do the same. How can one take pride in being a Christian while simultaneously disseminating the virus, whether knowingly or unknowingly?" he inquired (Mavhunga, 2021).

#### **4.10.1 Government's response to COVID-19**

A national disaster was declared at the onset of the epidemic, resulting in a complete lockdown. On Friday, March 27, President Emmerson Mnangagwa declared that a state-wide lockdown would commence on Monday, March 30, lasting for 21 days to mitigate the further transmission of the coronavirus disease outbreak in Zimbabwe (Maulani, Nyadera & Wnadekha, 2020). Throughout the lockdown, all informal markets will remain closed, while formal markets will operate for only four hours each day; exceptions will be granted solely for food markets, pharmaceutical enterprises, and critical services. Domestic and international travel was prohibited, necessitating exemption letters at checkpoints. Mass assemblies, including religious congregations, were prohibited. All public transportation, apart from the Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO), would be suspended. President Mnangagwa

announced that security troops will be mobilized to implement the lockdown (Maulani, Nyadera & Wnadekha, 2020).

MacWorth-Young et al. (2021) outlines guidelines that were put in place after the declaration. These included the authorisation of retail establishments to function for limited hours during the day, with mandatory screening and hand sanitisation at entry points. The selling of alcoholic beverages was prohibited. On April 4, 2020, the compulsory use of face masks in all public areas was mandated. Returning residents were required to undergo quarantine at specified facilities nationwide. Rapid response teams were mobilised to promptly address rumours and alerts, while surveillance teams were established to enable contact tracing, follow-up, and case investigation. An enhanced testing method was implemented in April 2020 to broaden surveillance, identify and isolate confirmed cases, and safeguard healthcare staff and patients (MacWorth-Young et al., 2021). Notwithstanding a thorough testing plan, execution has been hindered by frequent shortages of critical testing reagents. Zimbabwe relies on imported COVID-19 test kits, and provincial testing enhancement via GeneXpert has not been sufficiently realized.

The initial lockdown, originally scheduled to conclude on April 19, 2020, was prolonged until May 3, 2020, by Statutory Instrument 93 of 2020. The modification of Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020 mandated that all individuals wear face masks in public settings. The amendment defined "face mask" as a protective covering that encompasses the wearer's nose and mouth. Most of the World Health Organization's sanitary rules and restrictions were implemented, significantly hindering congregants from gathering in their church halls and other places of worship. The government rationalised all its Acts by referencing the statutes that empower the state to implement its programs. It is essential to acknowledge that the Zimbabwean government has three fundamental Acts available to invoke during a national emergency. The Emergency Powers Act is the primary and most extensive legislation accessible to the government of Zimbabwe. The provision activates solely upon the President's proclamation of a state of emergency pursuant to section 113 of the constitution, necessitating parliamentary assembly within two weeks to ratify the declaration by a two-thirds majority, as stipulated in section 113(2) of the Constitution. In this instance of COVID-19, the President did not invoke this act. The church was further kept out of being an influential institution by these state actions. State theology peripherally could be noticed while the Kairos liberation theology remained on the margins.

Secondly, it is "The Civil Protection Act." According to section 27 of this act, the President may proclaim a state of disaster if he deems extraordinary measures necessary to aid or safeguard individuals against a disaster, which is defined in the Act to encompass epidemics such as COVID-19. It is essential to recognize that, in contrast to a proclamation of a state of emergency, a declaration of a State of Disaster under the Civil Protection Act does not require parliamentary approval. A proclamation of a state of calamity is valid for three months.

Thirdly, there is "The Public Health Act," which was enacted in 2018, granting the Government extensive authority to address "formidable epidemic diseases," with COVID-19 classified as one such epidemic. According to section 68 of the Act, the Minister of Health and Child Care possesses extensive regulatory authority concerning severe epidemic diseases. This authority includes the power to mandate quarantines, isolations, and patient detentions; to close schools and churches; to restrict gatherings; to shut down entertainment venues, including bars and liquor stores; to mandate medical examinations; to establish isolation hospitals; and to order the evacuation or destruction of buildings. Regulations mandating quarantines and isolations may be enforced, if required, using coercive measures and, in instances of "absolute necessity," using guns. In the face of numerous issues confronting Zimbabwe, the "Public Health Act" was enacted on March 27, 2020, when the President declared a nationwide lockdown commencing on March 30, 2020.

#### **4.10.2 Zimbabwean ecclesiological responses to the Crisis**

The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), comprising Protestant churches; the Catholic Bishops Conference (CBC); the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ); the Pentecostal Union of Zimbabwe (PUZ); the Anglican churches; and other Protestant organisations are collectively represented in the (UDACIZA) (Hallencreutz and Moyo, 1988). These organizations originated through various means that exceed the parameters of this inquiry. This study must examine the responses of umbrella ecumenical organizations representing Zimbabwe's churches to the crisis. The Zimbabwean church has engaged in state relations since the colonial period of 1890, as previously illustrated. This conversation analyses the church-state connection, focusing on the church's action and prophetic opposition to the state. This occurs within the context of Zimbabwe's difficulties from 2000 to the present. Church-state relations have consistently developed over time due to changing conditions (Hallencreutz and Moyo, 1988), and churches have not uniformly responded to the state. While some denominations sought to engage with the state through the umbrella groups, others

opted to interact with the state independently. Consequently, Zimbabwe's churches have responded diversely, with certain religious leaders being co-opted to endorse the ruling party.

In relation to pragmatic endeavours, social ethics, pedagogy, and the practices of human dignity, it posed a significant challenge to the Church's existence in 2000, among the tumultuous conditions in Zimbabwe. Chitando (2011:43) asserts that the church has addressed Zimbabwe's political problem in numerous ways since 2000, especially following incidents of political violence. Some church leaders condemned the state's repression in this instance, but others expressed scepticism. Reverend Obadiah of the Destiny Network (DANet), Nolbert Kunonga of the Anglican Church, and the former leader of the EFZ have all demonstrated their support for Mugabe and ZANU-PF. Numerous church leaders have endeavoured to enhance the President's reputation, much to the dismay of those adversely affected by his administration. In numerous instances where the church has criticized the state, the Zimbabwean government has sought to restrict the church's activities to fasting, morality, and charity. Before 2000, the church in Zimbabwe mostly adhered to this concept, as demonstrated by the CCJP.

Nonetheless, the extensive human suffering, escalating national crisis, governmental assaults, and disapproval from congregants and affiliates in the post-2000 period compelled Zimbabwean churches to engage in profound reflection and decisive action (Zakeyo, 2011). Consequently, amidst a highly polarized political landscape, Zimbabwean church leaders declined to support the government (Chitando, 2011:43). Since 2000, the Zimbabwean church has endeavoured to vocalize its opposition to government atrocities and to seek solutions for the nation's pervasive political violence. Andrew Wutawunashe established the Populist Party 'Faith for the People,' which is grounded in Pan-African principles akin to those of President Mugabe (Togarasei, 2006:223). His effort sought to integrate Christian ideals into the political framework of the nation and to motivate citizens to assume accountability for the country's welfare. It was imperative for him that all Zimbabweans set aside their ideological divergences and cooperate.

#### **4.11 Preliminary Conclusion**

This chapter assessed the significance of Kairos theology in the troubled Zimbabwean society and explore how it can serve as a solution to the crisis. Zimbabwe was already a vulnerable nation, both socially and economically, even before the arrival of COVID-19. The impact of COVID-19 worsened the existing problem in the country. Zimbabwe is facing numerous issues that arise from the government's unsuccessful policies, the incompetence of public officials,

nepotism, corruption, a divided nation, contested elections, and natural calamities such as Cyclone Idai. Utilising the praxis cycle as a framework, this chapter offers a thoughtful analysis of the actual issues emphasised in chapter one. The formidable obstacles confronting the nation rendered it arduous for the bulk of Zimbabweans to comply with the imposed lockdown measures. The government also neglected to offer social safety nets to the impoverished and informal sector, even though their livelihoods were impacted. The chapter determined that the Zimbabwean crisis offers a favourable environment for the flourishing of Kairos theology, particularly in relation to its principle of prophetic theology. This makes Kairos theology highly applicable to the Zimbabwean community. Chapter 5 is an attempt at constructing the Zimbabwean Kairos liberation theology applicable in the context COVID-19 pandemic and in future settings.

## CHAPTER 5

# CONSTRUCTION OF A ZIMBABWEAN THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION AND RECONSTRUCTION, AS WELL AS A KAIROS THEOLOGY OF RESILIENCE, POST COVID-19

### 5.0 Introduction

Chapter five examines the fundamental aspects of constructing a theology of liberation and reconstruction in the context of COVID-19 and the future of faith. The chapter addresses the issue of: “What essentials of the Christian faith are?”—the elements that are indispensable for Christians. A crisis of faith necessitates re-evaluation. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided the Christian church with an opportunity to re-examine the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. The chapter further formulate a theology of liberation and position its pertinence to the contemporary state-church relations, the management of pandemics and the future.

### 5.1 What is Theology?

The term theology is challenging to define because to its resistance to a singular interpretation. An additional complexity arises from the evolution of the term, resulting in the formation of numerous theologies. Streng (1985:145) asserts that a definition should encapsulate the core of a thing, which he defines as its immutable character. The dilemma lies in the fact that theology continually evolves in response to the modern issues of each age. Moreover, there is a propensity to define terms based on contemporary interpretations of the word. In this discourse, I intend for theology to be articulated and delineated within the context of COVID-19. The term theology is inherently vague, as it pertains to wholly distinct genres or literal forms. As a result, the term has undergone attempts at definition from multiple intellectual traditions.

Connolly (1999:227) asserts that the term theology lacks a singular, uniform definition; despite its origins tracing back to the Sumerians, it is derived from the Greek term *theologia*. This could result in an etymological definition. The term theology derives from two Greek words: *theos* (God) and *logos* (word) (McGrath, 1996:117). Theology is the examination of God or the divine word, a conversation concerning God. The etymological definition presupposes an unwavering conviction in the existence of a singular deity, specifically the Christian God, leaving no space for polytheism. From the Greek standpoint, the term *theologia* denoted a discourse concerning the gods or God (McGrath, 1996). The Greek term 'theos,' which is masculine, presents a dilemma about masculinity, according to McGrath (1996:118). The term theology appears to suggest a male deity, which is objectionable to some feminist authors.

Moreover, the proof for the existence of God is requested, which Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages formulated arguments for, without specifying which deity he referred to. Another difficulty is that theology was received by Christians from the Greeks and utilized in a specific manner. The term was absent in the Old Testament, the Septuagint, and the New Testament; yet the concept of *theos* in the texts served as the foundational basis for subsequent Christian theology. Connolly (1999:228) and Stacy (1990:23) characterized theology as discourse concerning God.

The issue with Stacy (1990)'s definition is that numerous sources contain references to God. The Bible encompasses both divine revelation and human expression. The Christian God is described as infinite, because it is impossible for anybody to articulate or fully understand that which is limitless through language. An endeavour to discuss the infinite will undoubtedly result in a deficiency of expression. I believe that the term theology requires a definition contextualized within a particular historical period and circumstance. The ambiguity of the term theology renders definitions deceptive. Hodgeson et al. (1989:1) assert that theology can be defined in two ways. Theology refers to the personal understanding of God and associated concepts. Theology is, therefore, an individual's understanding of God. Secondly, theology is regarded as a discipline that employs suitable methodologies and results in a corpus of teachings. This notion implies that theology is merely one of several sciences, such as philosophy, sociology, and psychology, among others.

Macquarie (1977:1) characterised theology as the discipline that, by engagement with and contemplation of a religious faith, endeavours to articulate the essence of that faith in the most lucid and coherent language possible. Macquarie's definition is thorough, progressive, and engaging as he highlights involvement and contemplation of a religious religion before attempting to elucidate that faith. By synthesizing Macquarie's definition with Parratt's (2000:2) characterization of theology as speech concerning God, I propose the following working definition: Theology systematically articulates humanity's response to God's revelation within a specific context, aiming to express the essence of a religious faith logically and coherently through participation and thought.

I believe that theology cannot occur in isolation, and a theologian must inherently serve the faith community to which they belong. Consequently, the number of theologies is equivalent to the number of religions. To develop a Zimbabwean liberation and reconstruction theology in the post-COVID-19 age, I shall primarily concentrate on Christian theology. No theology

can be deemed authentically Christian unless it presents Jesus Christ as the solution to human societal issues. The discussion adopts a theological perspective rooted in liberation theologies that confronts suffering, poverty, oppression, marginalization, and political challenges. The approach to post COVID-19 Zimbabwean liberation and reconstruction theology is grounded on praxis-oriented thinking. Liberation theology advocates for Zimbabwean ecclesiology to operate in a continually critical manner, evaluating current conditions through the lens of the Bible within a specific context. This study utilises the praxis cycle as its research technique, aligning closely with the principles of theology and serving as a foundation for developing a post-COVID-19 liberation and reconstruction theology. A significant component of adherence to a particular religion is that the repercussions may not be immediately apparent; yet, prolonged exposure to external influences might render one a victim of their own beliefs. The analysis of theology helps in the development of pastoral methodology of caring for those caught in the COVID-19 pandemic mix especially when it involved loss of life.

## **5.2 Theology is contextual**

Theology is contextual as it articulates faith within a particular cultural and historical framework. Theology is contextual and historical, tailored to address the needs of a certain community situated inside a particular historical framework. The practice of theology transcends mere academic inquiry, involving the derivation of smaller principles from overarching ones, as noted by Phiri et al. (1996:13). It is a proactive dedication to engage with one's faith in a critical, inquisitive, affectionate, and optimistic manner. The lived experiences of particularly the marginalised or oppressed plays a pivotal role in bringing to surface ways in which faith intersects with their experiences. Latin American theologians have characterised this process as the pastoral cycle, perpetually evolving from experience to analysis to reflection to action, according to White and Tiongco (1996:13). The emergence of COVID-19 and its repercussions provide the setting for liberation and reconstruction theologies to formulate a response, thereby establishing a post-COVID-19 theology in Zimbabwe. By critically evaluating cultural assumptions, theological expressions can be adopted in a more meaningful and practical manner in line with the new normal ushered in by the COVID-19 pandemic.

When it comes to the Christian faith, the encouragement to care for others within its doctrine bring to surface reasons why the church needs to be placed under scrutiny for its role during the COVID-19 pandemic. The religious quietism assumed by the Zimbabwe churches instead of actively standing in solidarity as different religious groups serves as a starting point of reviewing the position of the church in a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 5.2.1. Theology is reflective

Theology is contemplative, examining the statements, actions, and lived experiences of religious adherents. The contemplative aspect of theology is crucial, as COVID-19 is not the inaugural pandemic to affect the world, and specifically Zimbabwe. HIV and AIDS represent a pandemic that has elicited responses from theologians. "Troubled but not destroyed" by Chitando (2009) aims to document the reactions of African theology and the continent to HIV and AIDS. The book was inspired by the theme of the 7th General Assembly of the All-Africa Conference of Churches, convened in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in October 1997. The topic "Troubled but not Destroyed" is derived from II Corinthians 4:8-9 (Chitando, 2009:5). The title recognises the catastrophic effects of the pandemic, while simultaneously reflecting the resilience and perseverance of the populace. This perspective on the theological activity related to a comparable epidemic serves as a foundation for developing a COVID-19 Zimbabwean ecclesiology of liberation and rebuilding theologies. It calls for critical and thoughtful engagement with spiritual activities and lived experiences with the objective of seeing beyond doctrines into deriving their actual meaning and impact.

Theology's objective is to examine the church's modes of operation, encompassing both the collective actions of the church as the people of God and the specific activities of its numerous constituents, including bishops, ecclesial communities, and laity as given by Boff (1989:44). It is essential to ascertain the functional relationship between the church's actions (both theoretical and practical) and the societal dynamics, whether they pertain to dominant or subordinate classes. Leonard Boff, as cited in Ellis and Maduro (1989:45), asserts that the church is undeniably fragmented by societal struggle, with several factions seeking its endorsement. In summary, the theology of liberation, akin to any other theological framework, addresses the concept of God. The glorious Trinity, Christ, the Spirit, grace, sin, and the church encompass the entirety of theological discourse; yet its distinctiveness and uniqueness stem from addressing these subjects through the lens of the oppressed individual yearning for freedom. Boff (1989:42). The prevailing perspective of the Bible is that of the impoverished. This analytical approach imbues liberation theology with a robust scriptural foundation and situates it alongside the teachings and actions of Jesus Christ, who regarded the impoverished as the determinants of his messianic identity. Religious and spiritual guidance proved to be of great need during the COVID-19 pandemic. Steyn, Wepener, and Pieterse (2020: 1-20) pointed out that during the pandemic, preachers called for congregants to reflect and see through faith and discernment God's divinity as a comfort and hope.

### **5.2.2 Theology is descriptive**

Theology delineates the beliefs of a specific community. Descriptive theology aims to elucidate the tenets and practical ramifications of the Christian faith: what Christians profess and how they ought to conduct themselves considering those convictions, Thompson et al. (2010:18). The spirituality of Zimbabwean Christians during COVID-19 is critically significant. Spirituality pertains to addressing challenging and dire circumstances arising from COVID-19. Theological beliefs influence our perceptions and experiences of the world. At the core of theology with regards to this approach, is the historical development of a religious tradition. Our life experiences subsequently influence our religious views, prompting us to reassess, review, and potentially alter our beliefs regarding God, ourselves, and the world. Grenz (1996:124). Through primary sources like archaeological evidence, theological doctrines can be traced and offer a deeper understanding of influences behind practices over time. The descriptive nature of theology provides an accurate and objective description of different faiths possibly existing together thus enabling effective dialogue.

The need to describe the human experience and influences behind during the COVID-19 era makes the descriptive nature of theology of greater importance. The dynamics of the different experiences need to be interpreted in the context of religious beliefs and practices to understand the kind of influence the church may have on individuals. Using this perspective, respective communities have the opportunity of assuming an active role in describing their kind of suffering during the pandemic. This approach eliminates assumptions on how marginalized communities suffered. Rather, it paves way for dialogue that can effectively identify, interpret, address matters from the grassroots.

When pandemics like the COVID-19 take place, it is common for people to have a shift in perspective of their religious beliefs. In some cases, it can improve or decrease people's view of God. Descriptive theology can assist to explore such shifts and reasons behind them. It can provide a window into the souls, and mental aspects of religious followers. However, it is important to note that the aim behind this is not to bring about a new doctrine, but rather to have an in-depth understanding of what spirituality and religion is to individuals.

### **5.2.3 Theology is scientific**

I adopt McGrath's (2004:243) methodology in scientific theology. By "scientific theology," McGrath refers to an endeavour that does not seek to align specific Christian doctrines with scientific theories. He considers such efforts futile, as they become obsolete with scientific advancement and utilises the established principles and methodologies of the natural sciences

to enhance the practice of Christian theology. This approach is based on the core conviction that Christian theology aims to articulate the same God who, in any form, established the natural order that the scientific sciences endeavour to elucidate (McGrath 1998:52). The premise is that a theological examination of reality can be enriched by the methodology employed in a scientific inquiry of reality. The objective is not to turn theology into a natural science, but to foster a methodical rigor that facilitates dialogue between sciences and theology. In this context, scientific research and discoveries related to COVID-19 will guide liberation and reconstruction theologies in formulating responses to COVID-19 for a potential post-pandemic theology.

A structured methodology can be used to come up with an accurate hypothesis. By engaging with texts and traditions on the human nature, theology can assume a scientific position. The COVID-19 pandemic saw different sectors interacting with each towards developing an effective response. For instance, the public sector came together with the private sector. Psychology worked together with bioethics and public health sectors to influence adoption of vaccines and COVID-19 safety regulations. Considering this, the convergence of these different disciplines shows a scientific attitude not only into enquiring about the pandemic, but also influencing external attitudes based on scientific evidence gathered.

#### **5.2.4 Theology is hermeneutical**

Biblical hermeneutics is the discipline concerned with interpretation. The term frequently pertains to the interpretation of the Bible or other sacred writings from many religions. This should not be conflated with exegesis. Exegesis pertains to the interpretation of a particular Biblical text, whereas hermeneutics involves determining the rules employed for text interpretation. Hermeneutics is the discipline including the art and science of interpreting the Bible and confessional declarations. I focus extensively on confessional declarations, namely the pastoral letters and communiqués from Churches in response to COVID-19. As no theology can be deemed Christian without placing Christ at its core, Mark 8:29 is important in shaping post-COVID-19 Zimbabwean liberation and reconstruction theology. “Who do you assert that I am?” (Mark 8:29). What is Jesus' significance to the Zimbabwean community and Zimbabwean ecclesiology during and after the COVID-19 pandemic? The Christian depiction of God in the 19th century is presented in the pastoral letters.

Gutiérrez (1988) underscored the significance of theological contemplation on praxis. He says theology must not solely focus on abstract concepts but rather critically interact with tangible social practices and realities. Gutiérrez's (ibid) methodology entails a dialectical synthesis of

historical and theological viewpoints, utilizing the writings of philosophers like as Hegel and Marx to build a framework that encompasses both temporal and eternal dimensions (Gutiérrez, 1988). In his influential work, "A Theology of Liberation," Gutiérrez (1988) contends that emancipation from oppression is a core element of Christian religion. He delineates three tiers of freedom: liberation from oppression, liberation of human consciousness, and liberation from sin. Gutiérrez advocates for a transformation of personal and societal institutions to attain genuine justice and salvation by anchoring his theology in the experiences of the impoverished and disadvantaged. He further on says, lived or active faith transcends mere theoretical beliefs or religious rites, being profoundly embedded in the actions and commitments of individuals (Gutiérrez, 1988). It underscores the significance of manifesting one's faith via tangible actions that confront the realities of injustice, poverty, and marginalisation. According to Gutiérrez (1988), lived faith encompasses a dedication to the welfare of others and the pursuit of a more just and equitable society. Essentially, it involves aligning one's beliefs with significant and transformative activities in the world.

Theology as hermeneutical considering the COVID-19 pandemic is therefore concerned with breaking down events of the pandemic to a level that individuals and communities at large can understand. This essentially means explaining in—depth things taking place, ways in which it affects their faith, and ways of responding without compromising one's religious beliefs. A look at the pandemic from the lens of theology as hermeneutical brought to light racial, economic, and global inequalities. The approach therefore helps religious leaders to take time to review the voices that are amplified over those that are suppressed. Stories being mainstreamed are also viewed in different lens questioning their motive. Above all, focus lies in what these stories seek to reveal about God and justice to believers. The aspect of suffering is viewed in a whole new dimension when it comes to the perspective of theology being hermeneutical.

#### **5.2.5. Towards a working Definition.**

Having observed that the term theology is resistant to a single definition it is therefore imperative to come up with a working definition for the sake of this study. The trouble is that definitions differ. The contents and scope that they imply may also differ. In this case, my definition is informed by the branch of practical theology. Theology is the study of God's self-revelation, attributes, actions in the world, and relationship with humanity along with human responses. Practical theology is therefore the study of the church's response in its own life

towards society, in response to the activity of God or the self-revelation of God (Campbell 1990:201)

### **5.3. Contextual Theology as liberation theology**

Victor Hugo asserted that an idea whose time has arrived is more potent than armies as cited by Richardson and Bowden (1991:328). During the 1950s, the concept of emancipation emerged in colonial Africa and proliferated across developing countries. The concept appeared to be conceived almost immediately, prompting the imperial powers to hastily extricate themselves from territories for which numerous individuals had perished (Richardson and Bowden, 1991:328). Upon the articulation of the concept of liberation, its inherent righteousness became undeniable, leading to the disintegration of the resolve to retain control over the colonies. Richardson and Bowden (1991) assert that if this were universally applicable, a theology of liberation would not exist.

Liberation theology has emerged due to the absence of universal liberation; the battle persists as long as it is just. Some Christians have articulated its biblical foundations and their rationale for supporting the movement, according to Richardson and Bowden (1991). The same perspective applies to COVID-19, which did not universally depart from the African continent, particularly Zimbabwe. It produced varying effects on individuals, some of which were short-term and others long-term. While some assert, they are free from the COVID-19 epidemic, others strive for emancipation from its enduring effects, underscoring the necessity for a post-COVID-19 ecclesiological liberation and reconstruction theology in Zimbabwe.

The subjugation of individuals by other individuals is an undeniable fact on Earth. The oppressor and the oppressed, the master and the slave, the exploiter and the victim, the victor and the subjugated are identified (Maimela, 1991:31). In the African setting, the concept of liberation was straightforward: the objective was to attain freedom from colonial domination. Decolonization, whether by military conflict, non-violent protest, or negotiation, resulted in liberation (Richardson and Bowden, 1991:328). Nevertheless, liberation struggles in other regions globally have engaged in more intricate circumstances. Liberation theology emerged in Latin America and was significantly impacted by the region's liberation struggles, according to Ellis and Maduro (1989:234). However, these nations had been decolonized long before. From what did they require liberation? Reliance. The conditions of international commerce dictate that developing nations are not only reliant on affluent countries but are also fated to continue this dependency (Richardson & Bowden, 1991:329). Economic colonialism persists via international investment organizations. However, reliance also occurs within nations. The

disparity in living standards between the affluent and the general populace is substantial, evident in both the illicit slums surrounding urban areas and rural regions (Ellis and Maduro, 1989:235).

In summary, contextual theology in Zimbabwe, when approached as liberation theology, gives a different meaning of what faith is. Considering the oppressive social, political, and economic nature of the Zimbabwe society, the approach interprets faith through the eyes of the underprivileged and marginalized members of the community. It hinges on historical struggles and the legacy left behind by the colonial era. These have had direct influence on ways in which issues of justice, freedom, and human rights are addressed in Zimbabwe. It has also influenced ways in which the Bible is often interpreted. Theology is therefore knitted together from below, that is, from a point of struggle not independent theory. Theological material is pieced together from the lived experiences of colonial rule as well as those after gaining independence.

### **5.3.1 The theological perspective of liberation**

Currently, there exists a global demand for emancipation from various types of oppression and the myriad challenges that complicate existence, Otieno (2008:24). African Americans seek emancipation from white Americans. Latin Americans seek liberation from North American imperialism or from their own military regimes. Eastern Europeans seek to eliminate Russian dominance (Otieno, 2008:25). The impoverished seek to eliminate poverty. Zimbabweans seek emancipation from the repercussions of COVID-19. When individuals experience persecution, they can assume the demeanour of a submissive or that of a defiant rebel. Liberation commences from the urgent human necessity to eliminate any threats or enslavement. The objective of history is to emancipate humanity from all that obstructs or threatens life in its entirety. Liberation addresses human necessity and aligns with the biblical concept of redemption; in fact, liberation serves as the contemporary equivalent of redemption, according to Otieno (2008:26).

Additionally, Vellem (de Beer, 2020), a distinguished South African theologian, underscores the significance of Black Theology of Liberation (BTL). He contends that BTL should deliberately "un-think" the West, implying it ought to dismiss Western-centric conceptions and frameworks as the definitive standard for existence. Vellem (2018) champions a spirituality that underpins and sustains resistance to diverse forms of oppression, fostering a life-affirming democracy and societal reconstruction. His work examines the interconnectedness of various types of violence and injustice, advocating for a spirituality that amalgamates piety with

politics, and prayer with public life. Vellem (2018) contends that BTL ought to be a moral obligation and a unifying force that promotes both individual and societal reform.

It is said that complete liberation is unattainable, as every community is regulated by rules and laws. This argument overlooks the distinction between rules voluntarily accepted and enacted by individuals for their mutual coexistence and achievement, and rules imposed upon them to benefit others at their expense as discussed by Otieno (2008:26). An example is the curfews that the Zimbabwean government persisted in enforcing under the pretext of safeguarding civilians from the COVID-19 outbreak. The majority perceived that the ruling class needed to impose curfews consistently to prevent any protests the government, (Dzirutwe, 2021). During the level four lockdown in January 2021, President Emmerson Mnangagwa of Zimbabwe said that businesses will operate from 8 AM to 3 PM, with a curfew imposed from 6:30 PM to 6 AM, according to Veritaszim (2021).

#### **5.4. What is Reconstruction theology?**

Mugambi (1995:112) recognises that the terms construction and reconstruction are part of technical terminology. An engineer fabricates a structure in accordance with the provided specifications and plans. Reconstructions are performed when an existing complex becomes non-functional for any cause, although the user still necessitates its utilisation. New specifications may be incorporated into the new designs while certain elements of the old complex are preserved in the new. The phrase is sufficiently adaptable to encompass social reconstruction, which entails the reorganisation of certain societal features to enhance responsiveness to evolving conditions (Mugambi, 1995:12). In Mugambi (1995)'s academic discourse, freedom precedes rebuilding in African Christian theological contemplation. His initial article on reconstruction was authored in February 1990, immediately following Nelson Mandela's release, and presented to the AACC general committee meeting on March 30, 1990.

Reconstruction addresses the challenges that nations and cultures must confront following the decline of foreign domination. During the 1970s, Mugambi (1995) was at the forefront of the freedom struggles in Africa. However, after two decades of that perspective, he realized it was imperative to transcend the rhetoric of emancipation. Liberation is often centred on historical contexts. Reconstruction emphasises the future. The exile narratives offer an alternative framework through which marginalised individuals may derive inspiration. Ezra and Nehemiah presents a paradigm distinct from that of Exodus. The leadership of Moses and Joshua in the Exodus narrative significantly differs from that of Ezra and Nehemiah in the exile narrative. Reconstruction prioritizes a good future over a harmful past (Gothogo, 2006).

Mugambi (1995) has engaged with several intellectuals from the North Atlantic, Asia, and Latin America during his studies, research, and writing. Mugambi aligns with Karl Jasper's favourable evaluation of myth in the formulation of worldviews. A myth narrates a tale and conveys specific insights, rather than universal principles. Mugambi posits that a culture unable to create new myths or reinterpret its existing ones will ultimately face extinction (Gothogo, 2006). Mugambi (1995) characterises the goal of African reconstruction theology as a re-mythologisation endeavour, wherein committed theologians identify new symbols and metaphors to convey the core message of the gospel.

Reconstruction theology in Africa is a recent theological initiative that commenced in 1990. It has progressively gained prominence, with several books emerging on the topic since 2003 (Gunda, 2009:1). Mugambi, Villa-Vicencio, and Ka Mana (1995) advocated for theologies of reconstruction, but with varying emphases, all contending that African Theology should reorient itself towards the idea of rebuilding, Chitando (2009:39). Reconstruction theology would guarantee that the church significantly contributes to the continent's development. It is essential to recognise that reconstruction theology parallels and seeks to expand upon previous movements in African theology. Like African liberation theology, reconstruction theology asserts that political independence has not improved the lives of ordinary African citizens, contrary to previous expectations as proposed by Chitando (2009:40).

While the Exodus metaphor (Exodus 3) predominates in liberation theology, reconstruction theology draws upon the texts of Ezra and Nehemiah. These publications are chosen for their ability to elucidate the obstacles and opportunities of reconstruction. Chitando (2009:40) informs that advocates of liberation theology contend that the liberation initiative has not enhanced the quality of life for most African residents. The continent urgently requires the reconstruction of its ruins. Reconstruction theology compels theologians, churches, and communities in Africa to endeavour in the establishment of new communities. In Ka Mana (2002), reconstruction theology arises from the destruction primarily inflicted by "truly insignificant" African leaders. He writes:

At the dawn of independence and during the period characterized by military dictatorships, we saw Africa undergo a crisis because of truly insignificant people who usurped power and occupied leadership positions in many of our African states, as the guides of our destiny. Apart from a few who left behind fond memories of their reign, many of our leaders of state did not have what it takes to build for the future. The leaders

were totally ineffective, mentally bankrupt and lacked any political will, deficiencies camouflaged by pompous and verbose speeches. They resembled puppets who repeated formulae prepared elsewhere, and implemented measures planned in other countries. They appeared shallow and lacked the strength of character needed to enable them to lead the people, Ka Mana (2002:10)

Ka Mana's (2002) incisive criticism of African political leaders underscores reconstruction theology's challenge to the liberation paradigm within African theology, as noted by Chitando (2009:40). In the present context of Zimbabwe, rebuilding theology must arise from the devastation of post-COVID-19 Zimbabwe. Zimbabweans must assume a central role in the reconstruction of Zimbabwe. The idea of reconstruction is particularly compelling in the backdrop of Zimbabwe striving to recover from the devastation wrought by COVID-19. Ka Mana's scathing critique of the mediocrity exhibited by numerous postcolonial African politicians is rendered even more pertinent in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak. Leadership is undeniably a critical element in the endeavour to deliver effective responses to the epidemic.

Reconstruction theology compels Zimbabwean ecclesiology to earnestly embrace its prophetic role by urging the leadership to exhibit the necessary vision in revitalising livelihoods, the economy, social transformation, and the health sector, among other areas. Mugambi's multi-layered reconstruction framework (personal, cultural, ecclesiastical, and socio-economic) is especially significant in the aftermath of the COVID-19 epidemic. It is essential to inquire how COVID-19 mandates reconstruction at various stages. Mugambi asserts that liberation theology focuses on eliminating repressive systems but fails to advance the continent. For him, reconstruction theology positions the continent on a progressive platform and transcends the intrinsic constraints of earlier theological frameworks. Mugambi says of reconstruction theology is a:

Theology should be reconstructive rather than destructive, inclusive rather than exclusive; proactive rather than reactive; complementary rather than competitive; integrative rather than disintegrative; program-driven rather than project driven; people-centred rather than institution centred; deed oriented rather than word-oriented; participatory rather than autocratic; regenerative rather than degenerative; future-sensitive rather than past-sensitive; co-operative rather than confrontational; consultative rather than imposition, Mugambi (1995:XV)

Reconstruction theology is perfectly positioned to answer COVID-19, as it focuses on the theme of restoration following devastation. COVID-19 has inflicted mortality and destruction upon Zimbabwe, persistently ravaging the nation's young adult population. It has resulted in the orphaning of hundreds of children. Zimbabwe's economy was already in distress before the onset of COVID-19, which further aggravated the circumstances. The objective of post-COVID-19 rebuilding theology is to alleviate the effects of the epidemic.

#### **5.4.1 Reconstruction Theology and the Zimbabwe situation**

The Christian mission encompasses not merely the expansion of churches, but also the church's role in manifesting God's presence in the world. This indicates that God's mission is focused on reality. The mission is not isolated, as noted by Balia and Kim (2010:12); rather, it is rooted in a specific context and responds to distinct challenges and issues. The reception of the Gospel of Christ is rooted in human history and experience (Banana, 1991:1). The framework of mission experience establishes a robust basis for rebuilding discourse. The post-COVID-19 experiences in Zimbabwe serve as a significant basis for reconstruction theology. The ecclesiology of Zimbabwe necessitates a dual commitment to draw from both historical and contemporary experiences while striving to affect and inspire individuals towards a progressive goal.

The issue of Zimbabwean ecclesiology's involvement in the reconstruction of Zimbabwe is not novel. The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) represented the Zimbabwean ecclesiological landscape at the fifth assembly of the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) in Lome, Togo, where the theology of reconstruction was adopted as the preferred paradigm for African Christian Theology in the twenty-first century (Anono 2003:3). Reconstruction is crucial in the post-COVID-19 context, as it is imperative to address the socio-economic and political conditions in Zimbabwe. This endeavour should not solely rest with politicians and development experts but also necessitates a theological rationale for the active involvement of Christians.

#### **5.4.2. Reading the Bible for reconstruction**

The Bible motivates a specific community to engage with God's transformative endeavours and to address their circumstances in improving life (Bosch, 1991:15). The re-examination of the Bible in various contexts has revealed the frameworks of biblical criticism, as shifting circumstances influence testimony, comprehension, and involvement in God's mission. This has led to the understanding that the Biblical texts are 'polysemic', encompassing numerous layers of meaning, beneficial for mission (Togarasei, 2008:72). The Bible serves as the

authoritative basis for theological discourse and, thus, for reconstruction theology. The re-examination of Ezra and Nehemiah within the Zimbabwean post-COVID-19 environment demonstrate the necessity for the church to recommit to its vocation of promoting reconstruction. Nehemiah's exhortation 'let us begin building' serves as a potent emblem of proactivity and optimism in the face of comprehensive human calamity, (Dedji, 2001:258). It should, however, be underscored that Nehemiah's idea of rebuilding does not disregard emancipation. Zimbabwe requires emancipation and reconstruction. The theme of liberation is a fundamental aspect of Christian theology that should not be underestimated. Reconstruction is integral to human development and is inseparable from emancipation (Anono 2003:3). Theologies of creation and freedom are intrinsically linked, precluding any possibility of polarization. Anono (2003) asserts that they are significant elements of God's ongoing engagement with His creation. These paramount inquiries, from a definitive perspective, emerge and highlight the significance of reading the Bible.

#### **5.4.3. Rebuilding individuals and Families**

The COVID-19 pandemic inflicted severe consequences on a personal level. The stigma, trauma and discrimination faced by numerous individuals infected with the virus have led to a decline in confidence. Others have lost their means of subsistence and are burdened by self-stigmatization. Zimbabwe cannot progress if millions of its inhabitants are hindered from achieving their full potential owing to the adverse impacts of COVID-19. Reconstruction theology must mobilize individuals who were infected and impacted. Theology must empower individuals to embrace constructive lifestyles. Reconstruction theology ought to collaborate with Jurgen Moltmann's theology of hope. The most effective approach to grasping the theology of hope is to delineate what it is not, so facilitating a comprehension of what it is by contrast (Carter, 1992:22).

The theology of hope does not assert that society is necessarily improving, nor does it obligate theologians to highlight affirmative, hopeful occurrences that may inspire individuals. The theology of hope is not predicated on an evangelical proposition that inviting Jesus Christ into one's heart will render life exhilaratingly hopeful. Carter (1992:22) asserts that the theology of hope does not maintain that humanity, being inherently hopeful, can consistently transcend life's sadness through its own resources. None of them accurately represents the theology of hope, particularly as articulated by Moltmann. He posits that humanity is afflicted by despair, stemming from the discord between the reality of human existence and our aspirations for it, as noted by Carter (1992:23). Amidst this hopelessness, God utters a promise that instils hope.

Moltmann asserts that God's revelation, as a promise related to future fulfilment, inherently possesses an eschatological nature. God is not 'beyond us' or 'inside us', but rather before us in the future vistas revealed via His promises (Carter, 1992:23).

To recuperate from such challenges, it is essential for both the church and the nation to acknowledge that most concerns stemming from the effects of COVID-19 can be addressed at an individual (level) and pastoral level. Individuals at many tiers of the socio-economic hierarchy acquired insights from the pandemic. Typically, acquiring knowledge is an unpleasant experience, as it often reveals personal shortcomings and flaws. These exemplify Jungian archetypes, indicating that prioritizing happiness diminishes one's experiences. To perceive anything as genuinely significant, one must also acknowledge its loss as profoundly meaningful, as evidenced by the pandemic. Lives of friends and family were lost, businesses failed, and relationships deteriorated in nearly every aspect of society. Accepting these losses entails exposing oneself to profound experiences of meaning while concurrently inviting the potential for significant pain and suffering.

Rebuilding individuals and families post the COVID-19 pandemic involves taking into perspective the spiritual and emotional aspects identified for effective communal healing. It is the duty of religious entities and its leadership to come up with ways in which individuals and families can have restored hope and faith. Healing from this perspective can help foster solidarity within communities through healing of trauma and grief, rebuilding of relationships within families, and reweaving the community.

### **5.5 From a Theology of Liberation to a Theology of Liberation-Reconstruction**

In the post-cold war theological discourses which can also be regarded as his post liberation works, Mugambi suggests that the Africa of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will have to preoccupy itself with the agenda of reconstruction as a new priority for Africa. The text in Ezra, Nehemiah, unlike that text of exodus must be the main text in the explication of African theological discourse in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This text motivates people of Africa to rebuild their continent from all sorts of ruins, based on ideas by other scholars like Velleman and the analysis by others like de Beers (2020). Mugambi argues reconstruction is the new priority for African nations in the 1990s and beyond.

The churches and their theologians need to respond to this new priority in a relevant fashion, to facilitate the process of reconstruction. Theology provided epistemological guidance at three levels of reconstruction according to Mugambi. Mugambi [1995:15]. The first is biblical

passages and songs like ‘take my life and let it be consecrated Lord, to thee’. The second level is cultural reconstruction which Mugambi takes to include politics, economics, ethics, and religions. When reconstruction happens at this level, social structures are finely tuned to the needs of the people. Mugambi, [1995;16-17]. The third level is ecclesial reconstruction. After all, the church is the organisational framework within which a people’s world view is portrayed and celebrated. Its dimensions include mythological reformulation, doctrinal teaching, social rehabilitation, ethical direction, ritual celebration, and experiential response. Broadly, ecclesial reconstruction should include management structures, financial policies, pastoral care, human resources development research, family education service and witness. Mugambi [1995;17] with their strong rural and urban links, churches can provide a strong basis for reconstruction action, provided the churches themselves undergo ecclesial reconstruction,

In Zimbabwe, the colonial legacy negatively impacted the political, social, and economic landscape. Liberation struggle should precede reconstruction as a means of dealing with grass-root problems to ensure reconstruction is successful. Firstly, it is crucial to break free from post-colonial oppression before the nation can be reconstructed in its respective forms. In essence, the ideological background for reconstruction is identifiable through circumstances a society needs to be liberated from. In Zimbabwe, this speaks to the past inequalities and injustices that continue to be perpetuated in the contemporary society. Reconstruction of the nation comes as a bid towards cultivating a sense of national identity and unity that better facilitates sustainable development.

Reconstruction flourishes in a post-liberation context whereby critical issues affecting the society have been thoroughly addressed. In Zimbabwe, this includes cases of land grabbing, political injustices, and social inequalities. Inclusive planning of urban areas offers an opportunity to dismantle economic injustices of the past that were evident in colonial urban centres. Supporting indigenous markets like Mbare in Harare contributes to fostering indigenous cultural identity while also improving the nation’s economy right from the foundations. This supports the notion of reconstruction that not only seeks to build infrastructure but to also heal the wounds of conflict. This reshapes the society towards a new identity that promotes inclusivity, and sense of shared belonging. It also serves as a reflection of a liberated nation that actively celebrates indigenous histories as well as the values that were previously ignored in the colonial era.

Independence in 1980 promised a great future for the native Zimbabweans but this was gradually distorted during the reconstruction process. Key issues like acknowledging past injustices and paying compensation still need to be thoroughly addressed to facilitate effective national healing and reconciliation. If these are carefully and thoroughly handled, the nation could experience effective reconstruction with economic diversification and enabled sustainable development. It takes reimagining the post-colonial era towards building a more equitable society to be able to adapt a multifaceted framework that can better facilitate moving from the liberation theology effectively towards reconstruction.

An interesting take is that by de Beer (2020) because of the reflection of the work by Vellem explained above is of interest. De Beer (2020) acknowledges that Vellem expresses the need for both liberation and reconstruction, with liberation taking precedence and that underscores the necessity for both emancipation and reconstruction in his Black Theology of Liberation. He contends that liberation encompasses not only the emancipation of individuals from oppression but also the reconstruction of society to cultivate a more just and equitable community. Vellem's notion of *imvuselelo* (revival) is important to this concept, embodying both the expulsion of repressive powers and the establishment of a new political society. de Beer (2020) contends that spirituality ought to underpin and bolster resistance against diverse types of tyranny while fostering life and freedom abundantly. This dual emphasis on emancipation and reconstruction is crucial for attaining genuine social transformation and justice. The relationship between liberation and reconstruction can best be defined as an on-going process. It is hinged on pulling down socio-political and economic structures of the colonial era into building a future that reflects unity, respect of individual uniqueness, freedom, justice, and equality.

### **5.6. Kairos Theology of Resilience: A Post-COVID-19 Theological Framework**

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated systemic vulnerabilities across the globe, particularly in the Global South. In Zimbabwe, churches were not only spiritual sanctuaries but also frontline responders to social, economic, and psychological crises. This context calls for a theological reimagining—*Kairos Theology of Resilience*—which builds on the prophetic urgency of Kairos theology, the emancipatory thrust of Liberation theology, and the restorative vision of Reconstruction theology.

### 5.6.1 Defining Kairos Theology of Resilience

*Kairos Theology of Resilience* is a contextual, prophetic theology that interprets moments of crisis—such as pandemics—as divine opportunities (Kairos) for spiritual, social, and structural transformation. It emphasizes the capacity of faith communities to endure, adapt, and transform in the face of adversity, while simultaneously challenging unjust systems that perpetuate suffering.

Rooted in the biblical concept of *Kairos*—a decisive moment in God’s time (Mark 1:15)—this theology reclaims the pandemic as a theological moment of reckoning and renewal. It draws from Paul Tillich’s interpretation of Kairos as a “crisis pregnant with possibility” (Tillich, 1963) and integrates the concept of resilience as both psychological endurance and theological hope (West, 2019).

Unlike traditional theologies that spiritualize suffering, Kairos Theology of Resilience insists on a dual praxis: resisting systemic injustice and cultivating communal healing. It is not merely about surviving crises but transforming them into catalysts for liberation and reconstruction.

### 5.6.2 The Zimbabwean Context and the Pandemic as Kairos

In Zimbabwe, the pandemic intensified pre-existing socio-economic fragilities: unemployment, healthcare collapse, political repression, and food insecurity. Churches became critical agents of resilience—offering food aid, psychosocial support, and digital worship spaces. Yet, they also faced internal contradictions: some perpetuated state narratives, while others remained silent in the face of injustice.

This ambivalence echoes the critique of “Church Theology” in the original *Kairos Document* (1985), which denounced theological neutrality in times of crisis. Kairos Theology of Resilience calls Zimbabwean churches to move beyond passive compassion toward prophetic engagement—naming injustice, advocating for the marginalized, and embodying hope.

### 5.6.3 Synergy with Liberation Theology

Liberation theology, pioneered in Latin America and contextualized in Africa by theologians like Allan Boesak and Itumeleng Mosala, emphasizes God’s preferential option for the poor and the oppressed (Gutierrez, 1973; Boesak, 1977). It critiques structural sin and calls for praxis-oriented faith.

Kairos Theology of Resilience complements this by focusing on how oppressed communities *survive* and *resist* in prolonged crises. While Liberation theology emphasizes confrontation and

emancipation, Kairos Theology of Resilience adds a layer of *adaptive agency*—how communities sustain hope, reimagine liturgy, and build solidarity under duress.

For example, during lockdowns, Zimbabwean churches developed WhatsApp-based worship, decentralized pastoral care, and grassroots mutual aid networks. These are not just survival tactics—they are theological acts of resistance and innovation.

Moreover, Kairos Theology of Resilience challenges the binary of victim and liberator by recognizing the agency of the suffering. It affirms that resilience is not passive endurance but a form of embodied liberation (West, 2021).

#### **5.6.4 Synergy with Reconstruction Theology**

Reconstruction theology, articulated by Jesse Mugambi (1995) in post-genocide Rwanda and post-apartheid South Africa, shifts the theological focus from liberation to rebuilding. It emphasizes healing, nation-building, and the restoration of dignity.

Kairos Theology of Resilience aligns with this vision but insists that reconstruction must emerge from within the crucible of crisis. It critiques top-down reconstruction models that ignore grassroots resilience and trauma. Instead, it proposes a *bottom-up ecclesiology* where healing begins with lament, memory, and communal storytelling.

In Zimbabwe, this means churches must not only rebuild infrastructure but also reconstruct trust, ethics, and prophetic imagination. Kairos Theology of Resilience offers a theological grammar for this task—one that holds space for grief while gesturing toward hope.

#### **5.6.5 Practical Implications for Theological Circles**

The practical outworking of *Kairos Theology of Resilience* within theological circles must be both transformative and contextually grounded. This theology is not merely a conceptual framework but a call to action—an invitation to reimagine theological education, ecclesial praxis, and public witness considering the pandemic's enduring impact. Theological institutions, churches, and ecumenical bodies must therefore engage in a deliberate reorientation of their structures, curricula, and liturgical life to embody the principles of resilience, prophetic engagement, and communal healing.

First, ecclesial formation must be redefined to include resilience as a core theological and pastoral competency. Traditional seminary models have often prioritized doctrinal orthodoxy and liturgical proficiency, but the pandemic has revealed the urgent need for leaders who are trauma-informed, contextually aware, and spiritually adaptive. As Carlo Serrano (2017) argues,

spiritual formation must be holistic, integrating emotional intelligence, relational depth, and vocational clarity alongside theological knowledge. In this light, seminaries and theological colleges in Zimbabwe and beyond should incorporate modules on trauma theology, community psychology, and crisis chaplaincy. These disciplines equip future clergy not only to preach and teach but to accompany communities through grief, uncertainty, and systemic disruption.

Moreover, ecclesial formation must be rooted in spiritual resilience—a capacity to draw from the deep wells of faith in the face of adversity. This involves cultivating spiritual disciplines that sustain hope and prophetic imagination. Practices such as lament, contemplative prayer, and communal storytelling should be central to ministerial training. These are not peripheral devotions but theological acts that affirm God’s presence in suffering and God’s call to justice. As Diane Chandler (2014) notes, spiritual formation is not a checklist of pious activities but a rhythm of divine intimacy that shapes leaders into Christlike witnesses amid crises.

Second, public theology must be reenergized as a mode of prophetic engagement. The pandemic has exposed the fragility of public health systems, the inequities of global capitalism, and the complicity of religious institutions in maintaining the status quo. In response, Kairos Theology of Resilience calls churches to move beyond charity toward structural advocacy. This means engaging in policy discourse, challenging state narratives, and amplifying the voices of the marginalized. As Clint Le Bruyns (2014) asserts, public theology must be contextual, critical, and catalytic rooted in the lived realities of communities and oriented toward systemic transformation.

In Zimbabwe, this entails a renewed commitment to ecumenical and interfaith solidarity. The pandemic has shown that resilience is not an individual virtue but a communal ethic. Churches must therefore collaborate across denominational and religious lines to address shared challenges such as vaccine equity, food insecurity, and mental health. Interfaith councils and ecumenical forums should serve not only as platforms for dialogue but as engines of coordinated action. This aligns with the vision of *Kairotic ecclesiology* articulated by Sasongko (2022), which emphasizes the church’s vocation to say “Yes” to life and “No” to death in moments of existential crisis.

Third, liturgical and worship practices must be reimagined to reflect the rhythms of lament and hope. The pandemic disrupted traditional worship formats, forcing churches to innovate through digital platforms and decentralized gatherings. While some viewed this as a temporary inconvenience, Kairos Theology of Resilience sees it as a theological opportunity. Worship

must become a space where communities can name their grief, express their anger, and affirm their hope. This involves integrating testimonies of survival, prayers of lament, and rituals of healing into the liturgical calendar.

As Marileen Steyn (2022) suggests, liturgy in the light of resilience must move beyond performative aesthetics to become a site of communal restoration. In Zimbabwean churches, this could take the form of contextual liturgies that incorporate indigenous music, oral storytelling, and symbolic acts of solidarity. For instance, a post-COVID memorial service might include the planting of trees to honour the dead and the reading of community testimonies as acts of collective remembrance. Such liturgies do not merely comfort—they empower. They affirm that God is present in the ashes and that resurrection is possible even in the ruins.

Fourth, theological research and scholarship must prioritize resilience as a hermeneutical lens. This means producing theology that is not only academically rigorous but pastorally relevant and socially engaged. Scholars must interrogate how doctrines such as theodicy, eschatology, and ecclesiology speak to communities in crisis. For example, how does the doctrine of the resurrection inform our understanding of communal recovery? How might eschatological hope inspire political resistance against necro politics and state violence?

Furthermore, theological research must be participatory and grounded in lived experience. This aligns with the methodology of *contextual theology*, which privileges the voices of the oppressed as sources of theological insight. In Zimbabwe, this could involve collaborative research projects between seminaries and grassroots communities, where theology is co-produced through Bible studies, oral histories, and community forums. Such an approach not only democratizes theological knowledge but ensures that it remains responsive to the Kairos of the moment.

Fifth, pastoral care models must be restructured to address the psychosocial aftermath of the pandemic. Theological circles must recognize that resilience is not merely spiritual but also emotional and psychological. Pastors and lay leaders need training in grief counseling, trauma-informed care, and mental health first aid. This is particularly urgent in Zimbabwe, where the pandemic compounded existing traumas related to political violence, economic collapse, and displacement.

Kairos Theology of Resilience proposes a model of public pastoral care that integrates theological reflection with psychosocial support. As Nanthambwe (2024) argues, public

theology must engage both the spiritual and emotional dimensions of suffering. This means that pastoral care should not be confined to the pulpit or the counselling room but extended to public spaces, clinics, marketplaces—where people live and struggle. Churches can establish resilience hubs that offer food aid, counselling services, and spiritual accompaniment, thereby embodying the gospel in tangible ways.

Finally, youth and lay empowerment must be central to the implementation of this theology. The pandemic disproportionately affected young people—disrupting education, employment, and social networks. Yet, it also revealed their creativity and resilience. From organizing mutual aid networks to leading digital worship, young people demonstrated that they are not merely the future of the church, they are its present. Theological circles must therefore invest in youth leadership development, digital literacy, and grassroots organizing.

This also involves rethinking ecclesial power structures. Kairos Theology of Resilience challenges hierarchical models of church leadership that marginalize lay voices. Instead, it advocates for a bottom-up ecclesiology where resilience is cultivated through shared leadership, participatory decision-making, and mutual accountability. In Zimbabwe, this could mean empowering lay catechists, women's guilds, and youth fellowships to lead community initiatives, shape liturgy, and contribute to theological discourse.

## **6.0 Preliminary Conclusion**

The *modus operandi* of the praxis cycle dictates that following reflection, there must be a strategy for action. A crisis of faith necessitates re-evaluation to ascertain the fundamental tenets of Christianity. The church is a theological entity; thus, the formulation of a theology to address future pandemics and crises is essential. The chapter sought to develop a Zimbabwean theology of Liberation and Reconstruction following COVID-19. The chapter asserted that any endeavour to supplant Liberation theology with Reconstruction theology is detrimental. Therefore, the liberation theology will persist to be influential indefinitely due to the continual presence of diverse forms of oppression in every generation. Consequently, Reconstruction theology ought to be regarded as a supplement to Liberation theology. This chapter embraced Vellem's concept of 'liberative reconstruction' as more suitable, as both Liberation theology and Reconstruction theology must prioritise the needs of the impoverished. Kairos Theology of Resilience is not a departure from Liberation or Reconstruction theology—it is their evolution in a pandemic-shaped world. It affirms that every crisis is a Kairos moment: a divine summons to resist, to rebuild, and to hope. For Zimbabwean churches, this theology offers a

prophetic compass for navigating post-COVID realities with courage, creativity, and compassion. For Zimbabwean churches, this theology is both a mirror and a map. It reflects the resilience already present in communities and provides a roadmap for deepening that resilience through theological reflection and action. It affirms that every crisis is a Kairos moment—a divine summons to resist injustice, to rebuild what has been broken, and to hope against

## CHAPTER 6

### GROUNDING KAIROS THEOLOGY IN SPIRITUALITY

#### 6.0 Introduction

Chapter six explores how Kairos theology can facilitate revival, restoration, and the emergence of a new spirituality in the aftermath of COVID-19, given that "action" constitutes the concluding phase of the praxis cycle. The emergence of COVID-19 significantly affected the global religious landscape, including Zimbabwean ecclesiology. Historically, pastoral ministry has been physically manifested in church edifices, residences, and communal worship venues, offering direct care and affirmation of God's love and presence. The congregation of Christians in a church for worship and fellowship, seen important to the Christian faith, has been neglected. The catastrophic emergence and rapid proliferation of COVID-19 generated unparalleled obstacles, resulting in stringent national lockdowns, the cessation of in-person gatherings, and profoundly disrupted conventional methods of ministering. Congregants used to certain liturgical spirituality experience a form of exile within their own country. Prior to the emergence of COVID-19 and the subsequent global lockdowns, Christians engaged in several actions, in addition to liturgical observances, to demonstrate their devotion to God and express concern and affection for their neighbours. In Zimbabwe, traditions such as physical gatherings, handshaking during meetings, hugging, laying hands on the sick, singing, ceremonies like Holy Communion, and sermons were included in the bans enforced by the WHO. This significantly unsettled the spirituality of numerous Christians. Chapter six establishes Kairos theology within spirituality to provide a framework for a spirituality resilient to pandemics such as COVID-19 and other future crises the church may encounter.

#### 6.1. Defining Spirituality

Spirituality is a term that has gained use to denote the attitudes, ideas, and activities that inspire individuals and facilitate their connection to transcendent truths (Richardson and Bowden, 1991:549). Its meaning in English has not always been consistent. Richardson and Bowden (1991) assert that throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it represented the clergy as a distinct societal order and occasionally referred to religious property or revenue. Subsequently, it differentiated the spiritual from the material or corporeal. The contemporary interpretation of spirituality denotes the acknowledgment of a belief or sentiment that transcends individual existence, suggesting that human experience encompasses more than

mere sensory perception, and that the larger entity to which we belong is of a cosmic or divine essence (Spencer, 2012:1).

Traditionally, the phrase denoted a religious process of reformation intended to restore humanity to its original form, aligned with the image of God as illustrated by the founders and sacred writings of various global faiths (Dorff, 2018:15). The word originated in early Christianity to denote a life focused on the Holy Spirit and expanded over the Late Middle Ages to encompass mental dimensions of existence (Cobb et al., 2012:10). The phrase "spiritual," meaning related to the spirit, is etymologically derived from the Latin word "spiritus," which signifies spirit. Nonetheless, a universally accepted concept of spirituality remains elusive. Research surveys indicate a wide array of definitions for the term, with minimal overlap, according to Hanegraaff (1996:5). A functional definition is essential for this discourse. Spencer (2012) posits that spirituality encompasses the understanding that our lives have importance within a framework that transcends the banalities of daily living, which are primarily driven by biological demands that foster selfishness and aggressiveness. It signifies the awareness that we are an integral component of a meaningful progression of existence within our cosmos.

Spirituality encompasses the examination of universal themes such as love, compassion, altruism, the afterlife, wisdom, and truth, acknowledging that certain individuals, like saints or enlightened beings, have attained and exhibited superior levels of development compared to the average person (Spencer, 2012:1). Striving to embody the qualities of inspirational figures frequently constitutes a significant aspect of the life path for spiritually inclined individuals. A contemplation on how the spirituality of the Hebrew people facilitated their endurance during periods of exile in Egypt, Babylon, or Persia is essential as I consider spirituality in relation to the COVID-19 context. In this discussion, I consider King's (2002: 27) definition which views spirituality as broadly defined as an individual's quest for ultimate or divine meaning and purpose in life. Furthermore, it may signify the pursuit of personal development, spiritual experience, belief in a transcendent realm or afterlife, or the quest to comprehend one's inner self. This study generates a broad understanding of spirituality in the context of COVID-19 by zeroing on how the church responded to the pandemic.

## **6.2 Spirituality of Liberation**

The spirituality of liberation is an essential notion in modern theological discussions, especially within the context of liberation theology. Grounded in the experiences and challenges of oppressed communities, it merges faith with the pursuit of justice, freedom, and human dignity

(Judkins, 2021). This study examines the fundamental components and consequences of liberation spirituality, highlighting its transforming influence in individual and societal realms. Liberation theology originated in the late 1960s and 1970s, especially in Latin America, as a reaction to structural oppression, poverty, and social injustice. Theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez created a theological perspective that is profoundly attentive to the everyday experiences of the downtrodden (Vellem, 2014).

This movement is founded on the conviction that faith should be manifested through acts that advocate for justice and liberation. It contradicts conventional theological paradigms that frequently distinguish spiritual convictions from social activism (Vellem, 2014). The core of liberation spirituality is the preferential option for the impoverished. This principle underscores the necessity of solidarity with the underprivileged and downtrodden, asserting that their emancipation is essential to the Church's mission. This is not only a plea for charity but a dedication to systemic reform that tackles the fundamental roots of inequality. In this case, brought about by the Zimbabwean history and COVID-19 experience, liberation spirituality demands a prophetic testimony that condemns injustice and champions the rights of the downtrodden. This prophetic position is rooted in the biblical history of prophets who confronted authority, questioned the existing quo, and advocated for societal change (Kobe, 2021).

Another fundamental principle of liberation spirituality is the amalgamation of faith and action (Kobe, 2021). It dismisses any binary distinction between the spiritual and the material, asserting that genuine faith must manifest in acts that pursue justice and liberation for everyone. The spirituality of freedom holds significant practical consequences for individuals and society alike. It necessitates a profound realignment of one's existence towards the pursuit of justice and the collective welfare. This entails both personal transformation and active engagement in initiatives aimed at rectifying institutional injustice (Vellem, 2014). Liberation spirituality cultivates a shared identity and purpose throughout communities. It promotes collective judgment and action, enabling communities to collaborate for social progress. The social dimension is especially crucial in situations where individuals encounter substantial obstacles to justice and emancipation (Vellem, 2014).

Notwithstanding its transforming potential, the spirituality of freedom encounters numerous hurdles (Judkin, 2021). A primary objection is that it may be regarded as excessively political, so alienating many who view the Church's function as predominantly spiritual. The focus on

social activism may result in burnout for someone profoundly dedicated to the pursuit of justice. These problems can be mitigated through a balanced strategy that fosters both the spiritual and activist aspects of liberation spirituality. This is the aim of this research, to show and establish the need for the combination in managing disasters or the pandemic. This entails cultivating spiritual practices that support and rejuvenate individuals and communities, empowering them to endure in the pursuit of justice (Vellem, 2014; Kobe, 2021). The spirituality of liberation presents a persuasive perspective on faith that is profoundly intertwined with the reality of oppression and injustice. It necessitates a comprehensive approach that amalgamates spiritual convictions with tangible efforts for societal transformation. By adopting this spirituality, individuals and communities can strive for a more just and equitable world, recognizing the transformational potential of faith in action.

Moreover, Brown (1988) examines the enduring conflict within Christianity: the distinction between the spiritual and the temporal, or between prayer and social engagement. Brown (1988) contends that this division is a misconception and advocates for a novel conception of Christian wholeness that synthesizes both elements. He asserts that spirituality must extend beyond individual devotion to encompass social challenges and injustices. Brown contends that faith can serve as a formidable catalyst for societal transformation, rooted in biblical doctrines and the incarnation of Christ. These arguments and discussions expose the need for the involvement of the church in societal functions and reforms.

Furthermore, Dorothee Soelle's notion of liberation spirituality, articulated in her work "The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance," presents a remarkable synthesis of profound mystical experience and dedicated political engagement (Soelle, 2001). As a German liberation theologian and peace activist, she contends that authentic mysticism is not an escape from the world but rather an imperative to connect more profoundly with it, especially in the pursuit of justice, peace, and ecological sustainability. According to Soelle (2001), mysticism basically pertains to the experience of unity with the divine. This union serves not as a conclusion but as a catalyst for transformational action in the world. She also asserts that mysticism encompasses a deep understanding of the interrelation of all existence, which inherently fosters a dedication to social justice and the emancipation of the marginalised (Soelle, 2001). This spiritual understanding drives the opposition to oppressive structures and advocates for a societal reorganization founded on justice and compassion.

The fundamental elements of liberation spirituality, as articulated by Soelle (2001), encompass selflessness, detachment from material possessions, and the principle of nonviolence. She asserts that mysticism necessitates the transcendence of the ego, which is essential for fostering solidarity with the oppressed. By transcending egocentrism, individuals can more effectively comprehend and address the suffering of others, establishing the basis for collective action and societal transformation. Liberation spirituality advocates for the rejection of material excess. Soelle (2001) emphasises the spiritual and ethical significance of voluntary simplicity, which confronts the consumerist and exploitative inclinations of contemporary capitalism. Adopting a lifestyle devoid of property allows individuals to foster a more equitable allocation of resources and promote sustainable living practices. Moreover, influenced by leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., Soelle (2001) emphasises the significance of nonviolence in the pursuit of justice. Nonviolent resistance is not solely a tactical option but a spiritual dedication to the intrinsic value and dignity of every individual, exemplifying the principles of love and compassion in the presence of violence and injustice.

An analysis of Soelle's work by van den Dool (2012) contends that resistance to repressive systems is a significant spiritual activity, intricately linking mysticism and activism. They posit that the transcendent experience of divine unity enables individuals to combat dehumanising influences such as materialism, nationalism, and environmental devastation. Liberation spirituality entails harnessing this profound connection with the divine to foster actions that advance justice, peace, and the welfare of all creation. Soelle (2001) thinks that community is fundamental to this spirituality, as collective action and communal support are crucial for maintaining enduring resistance initiatives. Spiritual communities offer the fortitude, motivation, and unity essential for advancing the pursuit of a more equitable world, acting as catalysts for spiritual development and societal change, while cultivating a feeling of belonging and collective purpose (van den Dool 2012). Soelle's approach urges folks to amalgamate their spiritual life with their activism. She implores readers to perceive themselves as mystics and participate in the quest for justice. By anchoring their acts in a profound mystical connection, people can access a reservoir of heavenly inspiration and courage to persevere through trials and setbacks.

### **6.3 The Jerusalem Temple and Jewish Spirituality-Parallels with COVID-19**

The Temple in Jerusalem, sometimes referred to as Solomon's Temple, was initially constructed in ancient Israel. It served as the national hub of Israelite religious practices, particularly for sacrificial offerings, while also functioning as a cultural and intellectual centre

(New World Encyclopaedia, 2022:2). The Bible indicates that before to Solomon's day, Israelite worship and sacrifice occurred in multiple "high places," overseen by both priests and prophets, until the construction of the Temple. The Temple's presence indicated Yahweh's presence among Israel (King, 2012:18). Jeremiah, abandoned in a devastated city by the Babylonian captives, posed incisive inquiries following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC (Hinson, 1992:140). What caused a city, once teeming with inhabitants and frequented by monarchs from several nations, to become desolate and abandoned? (King, 2012:19) There was no sound of people calling in the streets. This can be likened to the experiences of the Christian Church and the broader population of Zimbabwe during the onset of COVID-19. The closure of churches and public places of worship paralleled the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the exile of the Israelites, exemplifying the COVID-19 lockdown procedures.

The spirituality of the Jewish people was intrinsically linked to the Temple. This explains why they declined to perform songs of Zion in Babylon when requested by the Babylonians. "Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and lamented as we recalled Zion. We suspended our harps on the poplars, while those who enslaved us requested songs from us, and our tormentors insisted on melodies of gladness, saying, "Perform for us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we perform the hymns of the Lord when in a distant territory?" (Psalm 137:1-4). The Psalmist indicates that Jewish spirituality is linked to the temple in Jerusalem and the city of Zion. The annihilation of the temple in Jerusalem left the Israelites in despondency and devoid of hope. We observed a comparable scenario when places of worship were shuttered due to COVID-19. Conversely, the narratives of Daniel and his three companions in Babylon illustrate their spirituality and the sustenance derived from it.

In Babylonia, the Jews were unable to revert to the religion of the Patriarchs and offer sacrifices at any location. While a few individuals may have engaged in this activity, there is no evidence to suggest that it was prevalent (King 2012:35). The majority felt themselves confined within a faith devoid of sacrifice, yet lacking any sign of a new route to pursue. Ezekiel Chapters 40-48 demonstrate that they could conceive solely in terms of restoring the past. The desolate and somewhat despairing lamentation of Psalm 137 likely reflects the entirety of their remaining religious sentiments. A comparable despair among the inhabitants of Judea is evident in Lamentations (Hinson 1992:145). For those who stayed faithful to Jehovah, and the majority appear to have done so, only belief in the prophetic promise of restoration and anticipation of the renewal of the former remained. In contrast to the exile in Babylon, where Jeremiah was

instructed to communicate the duration of their stay (Jeremiah 29), the conclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic remains uncertain.

Even if COVID-19 hygiene protocols and lockdowns relegated worship to homes, the complication was that in homes people were expected to adhere to social distancing. Furthermore, singing was not allowed, especially in a closed room. It means the spirituality of Christians across the Zimbabwean ecclesiology was compromised, thus the need to appeal to Kairos theology to ground a spirituality post COVID-19.

However, some families and individuals turned to the Ancestral Reverence and African Traditional Religions instead. They sought for protection and guidance from their ancestors who they believe act as intermediaries between living beings and God. During the pandemic, these believers offered sacrifices and conducted rituals seeking ancestral intervention against the virus. Interfaith efforts also helped to promote awareness of the pandemic and ways through which individuals could best protect themselves from the virus. Together with UNICEF, the Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust took the initiative to train more than 1000 leaders from different spiritual backgrounds to educate on misinformation concerning the vaccine. These vastly benefited communities as the uptake of the vaccine improved as well as the spread of accurate information. In this regard, spiritual leaders played a significant role during the pandemic in Zimbabwe through the interfaith campaigns.

Frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic were able to conquer challenges through several spiritual practices. At the centre of this was prayer and communal support. By so doing, frontline workers like health and care providers gained emotional and psychological strength. Religious leaders continued to render crucial services throughout the pandemic through counselling sessions that sought to assist workers with mental-health related problems. This further re-enforced commitment to soldier on during the pandemic.

Throughout the COVID-19 outbreak, people in Zimbabwe sought solace and direction in Christian spirituality (Muyambo, Sibanda & Chitando. 2023) The pandemic incited considerable contemplation on theodicy (the rationale behind divine allowance of suffering) and resulted in an intensified involvement in religious practices. Christian groups perceived the pandemic as both a challenge and an opportunity for spiritual development. They believed that God was utilizing the circumstance to unite individuals and to encourage greater collaboration between the church and state (Muyambo, Sibanda & Chitando. 2023). Furthermore, the church embraced the modern era by transitioning religious worship customs

and activities to internet platforms. Christianity offered a sense of solace and an auxiliary treatment to address the issues presented by COVID-19. This spiritual foundation assisted numerous individuals in managing the uncertainties and adversities caused by the pandemic. The only difference the Babylonian exile has in comparison with COVID-19 is that the exile was a period of punishment. It is not sound for anyone to consider COVID-19 as a punishment from God.

#### **6.4 A Spirituality of Presence**

The Ministry of Presence constitutes a modality of spiritual and pastoral care dedicated to offering support via the fundamental act of companionship, particularly in periods of suffering or uncertainty. This practice prioritizes compassion, active listening, non-judgmental support, mindfulness, and service. Grounded in diverse theological and spiritual traditions, it emphasises the significant influence of companionship and sympathetic presence, frequently surpassing the efficacy of words or acts. Clinebell (1984) asserts that pastoral caregivers represent the "healing presence" that promotes emotional and spiritual well-being by their attentive and empathic interaction with those in need. This ministry emphasizes the importance of presence as a transforming and restorative element in spiritual care (Doehring, 2015).

At the core of the Ministry of Presence is being compassionately present for others during their time of need without being judgmental. According to, the spiritual roots of the Ministry of Presence are in imitating the compassion shown by Jesus Christ. In the Bible, Jesus exhibited empathy and compassion through the trials of individuals with the sole purpose of imparting peace and happiness. During his ministry, Jesus Christ did not immediately perform miracles but also spent time with them. Servanthood can also be understood to be an important phenomenon of the Ministry of Presence. This entails putting the needs of others first before one's own and being able to offer comfort and reassurance during a time of crisis. This is in alignment with the teachings of the Bible to love one's neighbour as one would love themselves.

The Ministry of Presence stipulates ways in which one ought to behave when it comes to spiritual accompaniment. As part of an individual's spiritual growth, one should be patient and hospitable towards others, particularly those going through a time of need. Despite the diverging religious traditions, individuals are expected to behave with much respect and regard to the spiritual journey of others. It is of the belief that, the more one is able to be present during the trials and tribulations of others, the higher their spiritual awareness. It is an opportunity to

encounter divinity as it enables one to commune with God as one interacts with those in need of support.

Tagwirei (2022) extensively discussed the significance of the ministry of presence as essential to spirituality, which was undermined by COVID-19, necessitating social separation during in-person interactions. The ministry of presence at the Temple in Jerusalem was abolished by the Babylonian exile. The ministry of presence asserts that the physical presence of gospel ministers among congregations promotes hope for the future and solace for the present, while also cultivating an awareness of God's authentic spiritual presence and providence. It also offers possibilities for biblical servanthood as one addresses the needs of their community. The ministry of presence encompasses both physical and spiritual dimensions (Tinsley 2012:14). Tinsley (2012:16) clarifies that the ministry of presence constitutes a tangible, physical collaboration with the spiritual and unseen presence of God, instil tranquillity among turmoil, triumph over hopelessness, solace in grief, and adequacy in times of need. Tinsley's remarks regarding chaplains are equally pertinent to pastors, as they embody the presence of God via prayer, rites, rituals, attentive listening, scriptural sharing, and acts of service.

According to Corrigan and Flanagan (2017:3-4), it is essential to integrate the interior and outside, visible and unseen, known and unknown, as well as the temporal and eternal, to maintain equilibrium. The ministry of presence involves the company of individuals. Consequently, it is essential to equilibrate physical presence with absence, facilitating the flow of spiritual presence while subsequently retracting bodily presence. The justification for this disengagement is to facilitate the unobstructed operation of the Spirit of God in an individual or circumstance, minimising the risk of interference from us. Consequently, both our presence and absence serve as a boon to others (Corrigan & Flanagan, 2017:3-4).

#### **6.4.1 Presence as spiritual**

Tagwirei (2022) contends that presence can embody spirituality. Paul states, "Although I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit (1 Corinthians 5:1)." This suggests that even although COVID-19 prohibited worship in specific places, there exists a spirituality akin to that of Paul, which emphasizes presence as spiritual. Consequently, the Israelites, including Daniel, prayed towards Jerusalem during their exile, recognizing that their time in Babylon represented a Kairos moment to maintain spiritual connection with the Temple in Jerusalem. Keeran (2017:2) posits that presence is spiritual, contrasting secular existence, which lacks

awareness of God, with sacred life, which is perpetually cognizant of the divine. This perspective perceives all experiences and moments within a spiritual framework, asserting that 'the God of the universe who holds everything together is fully and personally present right here, right now.' Consequently, God is perpetually present, consistently caring, continually guiding, nurturing, eagerly receptive to communication, unfailingly forgiving, unwaveringly loving, always extending a hand, and attentively observing, awaiting your return. Upon your turning to God, He rejoices and sings in celebration of you. Psalms 139 states: Where can I flee from your Spirit? Where can I escape from your presence? Should I go to the skies, you are present; should I descend to the abyss, you are there. If I ascend at daybreak, if I reside on the distant shore, even there your hand will direct me, your right hand will secure me (Psalm 139:7-10)

Keeran (2017:2) asserts that presence is inherently spiritual and persists regardless of fluctuating conditions. Simultaneously, Davida Foy Crabtree (2020) emphasizes the necessity for pastors to occasionally be physically absent, for the spiritual presence of God to influence the lives of congregations while maintaining online communication with them. Similarly, Woodworth (2018) refers to it as the ministry of absence, defined as 'the ministerial practice of facilitating an environment for God to engage with individuals directly, without the intervention of pastoral intermediaries.' He elucidates that human physical presence offers a more tangible alternative to interactions with God, whose touch and voice are far less palpable. Furthermore, he rightly asserts that 'the ministry of absence is the art of departure, emphasizing the capacity for articulate absence, and primarily for a creative retreat.' Practicing the ministry of absence entails a deliberate physical disengagement for a period, rather than a refusal to be present, while being accessible online.

Bockmuehl (2017) elucidates spiritual presence as the ongoing presence of Jesus Christ, representing God's unseen essence that believers experience through dreams, visions, and intangible manifestations in their everyday existence. Based on the previous arguments, presence is manifested in both physical and absent dimensions during human interactions, but the triune God remains spiritually present (Bockmuehl, 2017:59-60). It is unequivocally evident that physical and spiritual absence and presence are complementary and can be virtually facilitated. Gergen (2002:4) contends that internet mediation is fundamentally dismissive of tradition, established order, and hierarchy. As previously addressed in the part regarding the issues of online pastoring in Zimbabwe; the digitalization of ministry conflicted

with traditional, cultural, and liturgical norms. Appropriately, when physical presence is limited, it seems opportune for pastors to engage with the consistently accessible and impactful spiritual presence in whatever setting.

#### **6.4.2 Biblical conceptualisation of the ministry of presence**

The ministry of presence is exemplified by God as depicted throughout the Bible. The Bible suggests that God is invested in His fellowship, revealing His presence and engaging in human existence (Guild 1992:2). Thus, God revealed, prior to the definitive revelation of Jesus Christ and subsequent communion via Him, that He personally devoted Himself to His people. The presence of God was perceived and experienced throughout the Old and New Testaments as He intervened in human lives, addressed their needs, liberated them from bondage and afflictions, and manifested Himself among the people. Consequently, we observe the presence and actions of God with Israel, exemplified by His liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian enslavement to their promised land. Guild (1992:5) asserts that Israel's recounting of her religion consistently emphasized Yahweh's redemptive actions among her. The presence of God constituted a religious paradox. God was simultaneously transcendent and personally present to Israel. This constitutes the enigma and contradiction of the narrative. While maintaining His transcendence, God entered the domain of human experience and addressed the concerns of His people.

The Babylonian exile represented a pivotal period for the religious leaders of Israelite culture. Some individuals remained in Israel while others travelled to Babylon, and they also experienced sorrow. “Hanani, one of my siblings, arrived from Judah with additional men, and I inquired about the Jewish remnant that had endured the exile, as well as the condition of Jerusalem.” They informed me, “Those who endured the exile and have returned to the province are in significant distress and disrepute.” The walls of Jerusalem are in ruins, and its gates have been consumed by fire” (Nehemiah 1:2-3). The liberation of individuals in Babylon and those left behind was now essential, along with the reconstruction of the city and the Temple. Nehemiah's spirituality seizes a Kairos moment to return and reconstruct Jerusalem.

#### **6.5 Spirituality of reconstruction by Nehemiah**

I have chosen the book of the prophet Nehemiah as a starting point due to its relevance to the post-COVID-19 scenario in Zimbabwe. The book of Nehemiah is set in post-exilic Jerusalem. Jerusalem experienced a phase of humiliation; but, by divine chastisement, God facilitated their preparation for a return - a renaissance. The conquest of the Babylonian empire by the Persians

signified a pivotal moment in the history of the Jewish nation, Hinson (1992:88). God employs a strategic approach in addressing matters that impact his people. God utilised the contemporary political circumstances in the restoration of His covenant people. He established a strategic partnership with Cyrus, a Persian, to rescue his covenant people (Hinson 1992:92). The disruptions and obstacles presented by COVID-19 can be regarded as a Kairos time for the church to ascend and reconstruct.

Nehemiah resided in exile in Persia following the collapse of Babylon. He is thought to have been born in exile, with his understanding of Jerusalem stemming from his parents and compatriots. The processes of tradition and spiritual formation significantly influenced his life. Effective parenting is crucial for the development and restoration of communities. The commitments we undertake as parents and godparents during the baptism of new-borns should be regarded with utmost seriousness. God is indifferent to our beliefs regarding baby baptism. As Christian parents, we are obligated to provide a healthy Christian upbringing for our children, facilitating their faith development to the extent that they cultivate a profound dedication to God, which is evident in their community involvement, akin to Nehemiah.

#### **6.5.1. Nehemiah's Pragmatic Spirituality**

Nehemiah cultivated what I would like to term a "pragmatic spirituality." This spirituality transcends a mere desire for an afterlife. A spirituality focused on the present – 'Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven' spirituality. This spirituality aims to realize the Kingdom of God among us (Anono 2003:2). This opposes the spirituality of the Pharisees that Jesus confronted during his earthly ministry. They emphasised the adherence to laws, rituals, and ceremonies. Through their affectation and arrogance of heightened spirituality, they distanced themselves from the general populace. While it is simple to criticize the Pharisees of Jesus' era, we must not overlook the parallels with the 'holier than thou' demeanour exhibited by certain contemporary self-proclaimed disciples of Christ. At times, we become so preoccupied with spiritual matters that we fail to contribute meaningfully to the world, (Anon 2003:2). Nehemiah's pragmatic spirituality stands in stark contrast to that of the Pharisees, urging us towards a form of spirituality that necessitates active participation in the restoration of shattered aspirations.

My choice to use the narrative of Nehemiah as a foundation for establishing Kairos theology in spirituality is not only whimsical; it is deeply relevant to the current context of Zimbabwean ecclesiology and society at large. Colonialism, postcolonial mismanagement by autocratic regimes, economic collapse, social issues, and political division have rendered Zimbabwe

barren. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the issues confronting the nation. The Zimbabwean ecclesiology must recognise that collaborating with God is a privilege in the reconstruction effort. The Church's role is to actualise the rule of God in our era, enabling individuals, formed in God's image, to engage in the fullness of life promised by Christ. The call to reconstruction mirrors Nehemiah's appeal to his peers: "Come, let us rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, that we may no longer endure disgrace" (Nehemiah 2:17).

### **6.6 COVID-19 and Spiritual Health**

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted daily living and adversely affected mental health for all individuals. It significantly affected the spiritual well-being of numerous individuals. From a mental health standpoint, an individual with robust spiritual health is characterized as someone who perceives meaning and purpose in life, hence fostering hope, tranquillity, and satisfaction (Michelle, 2020:1). The Zimbabwean ecclesiology should regard the post-COVID-19 time as a Kairos moment to evaluate its commitment to the nation in supporting the government in providing healthcare services. The Church possesses numerous hospitals and clinics that require assessment to determine if these institutions continue to fulfil their Christian-social obligations. They can articulate self-acceptance as a valuable individual and assimilate change into their lives in a constructive way. Most Christians adapted to the shutdown of public worship locations owing to COVID-19, transforming their homes into private places of worship. Michelle (2020) asserts that individuals with robust spiritual health may articulate the connection between challenges in present circumstances and disruptions in prior religious beliefs and practices. This insight aids the spiritually healthy individual in adapting to the present environment. According to Michelle (2020), individuals with robust spiritual health can articulate their ideas and values regarding spiritual and religious matters and possess both the desire and capability to engage in the practices and activities of their chosen faith.

Research indicates that religion and robust spiritual health enhance physical and emotional well-being (Michelle, 2020:2). Individuals who engage with their faith possess a feeling of purpose, derive solace from their beliefs, maintain stability, and cultivate love and compassion for others. The pastoral letter from the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe addressed to its congregations emphasized the importance of being a caretaker for one another amid the COVID-19 outbreak.

### **6.7. Centrality of Prayer in Spirituality**

The pastoral letters from Zimbabwean ecclesiology consistently convey the message emphasizing the necessity of prayer to the congregants. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a pivotal opportunity for the Church to engage in prayer, which is fundamental to spirituality. In the story of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8), Christ instructed his disciples to engage in unceasing prayer. The fable posits that God's followers are individuals who engage in prayer; all of God's children maintain both regular and intermittent communication with God, regardless of the circumstances (Henry 2008:1506). The essence of Kairos theology for the faithful is that “the time is now.” In Luke 11:1-13, Jesus instructed his disciples on the method of prayer, imparting the Lord's Prayer to them. He elaborated on the essential qualities of prayer: patience and endurance. He employed the tale of the nocturnal companion to illustrate this point. “Imagine a man, in a crisis, seeks to borrow a loaf of bread from a neighbour at an inappropriate hour of the night, not for himself but for a guest (Luke 11:5). It is crucial to note that the event occurred at night, indicating a particularly harsh season. The COVID-19 period, and the subsequent seasons were exceedingly challenging, necessitating intercessory prayers from the church to restore the nation.

The pandemic sent through a wave of uncertainty and isolation that revealed the importance of prayer in Zimbabwe. Prayer became a source of not only hope but comfort for most considering a pandemic that rippled through the continent leaving behind footprints of destruction and uncertainty. Individuals, families, and communities were brought together by fear and lack of control over events that were taking place. As a result, seeking out divine presence in this situation became the most natural stance to take. It ushered in the aspect of religious practices like praise and worship as a communal practice despite the restrictive measures put in place as a result of the pandemic. People found ways to seek God as individuals and communities as discussed earlier. Virtual services became more common, families reverted to praying together within their homes, and communities managed to find ways of exchanging religious encouraging words across each other. The centrality of prayer can therefore be understood as not just an act of religion, but also a means through which individuals, families, and communities survived the pandemic through seeking out a divine connection.

### **6.8 A Kairos Moment for the Moravians**

Waller (2003) recounts John Wesley's voyage to Georgia, during which Moravian Christians and their children were aboard the ship. On 14 October 1735, John Wesley, an Anglican, travelled to Savannah in the province of Georgia in the American colonies, at the invitation of

James Oglethorpe, who established the colony in 1733 (Waller, 2003:31). In 1736, during the voyage, the ship encountered a terrible storm, instilling fear in John. As John Wesley and other English passengers cried out in fear, the Moravians persisted in singing, with men, women, and children appearing undisturbed (Waller, 2003:34). Subsequently, John Wesley inquired of a Moravian whether they had experienced any fear. The reply was that we are unafraid of death because we possess knowledge of God. John Wesley recognized his spiritual deficiency and sought guidance from the Moravian Bishop. The storm was an opportune occasion for the Moravians to exhibit their faith and spirituality. I contend that COVID-19 offered a pivotal opportunity for the Church to exhibit its spirituality in the public sphere.

Barnes (2016) insists that Kairos spirituality and liberation spirituality are profoundly linked, both highlighting the significance of time, context, and action in spiritual practice and social justice. Kairos spirituality emphasises the notion of "Kairos" time, representing the opportune moment for action, as contrast to "chronos" time, which refers to chronological or clock time (Barnes, 2016). It underscores the importance of being attentive and sensitive to immediate needs, frequently within the framework of social justice and reform. The spirituality of liberation is founded on the principle of emancipating oneself and others from all manifestations of oppression and injustice (Barnes, 2016). It frequently derives from liberation theology, which integrates Christian theology with socio-political issues, especially those pertaining to poverty and human rights. Both spiritualities are dedicated to social justice, human dignity, and societal development. They urge adherents to actively participate in the world, confronting systemic inequalities and striving for a more egalitarian and compassionate society.

## **6.9 Preliminary conclusion**

COVID-19 severely impacted both traditional and contemporary worship practices in churches globally, especially in Zimbabwe. Disorientation permeated all aspects of religious practices, resulting in a lasting transformation long after it was deemed safe to attend. In addition to developing a post-COVID-19 theology of liberative reconstruction, it is imperative to act in revitalizing and rehabilitating the church. This is regarded as the last phase of the praxis cycle. Anchoring Kairos theology in spirituality is essential. This chapter proposes a religious reformation method designed to restore a spirituality resilient to life's adversities. This chapter presents Nehemiah's pragmatic spirituality, seen in the reconstruction of Jerusalem's damaged walls, to the church. Kairos theology instils a sense of immediacy, asserting that the present moment necessitates action. The following chapter provides the final thoughts of the thesis, a

critical evaluation of issues discussed drawing on major conclusions. It finally suggests recommendations and possible future studies connected to this work.

## CHAPTER 7

### FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

#### 7.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the culmination of the study titled *Kairos-Theology in Light of the Pandemic: An Analysis of the Zimbabwean Churches' Response to COVID-19*. The chapter synthesises the findings, evaluates the extent to which the research questions and objectives were addressed, and offers recommendations for ecclesial praxis and theological development. The study employed a pragmatic research paradigm and the Praxis Cycle methodology, which allowed for a dynamic interplay between theory and lived experience and eventually produced insightful thoughts and nuances. The chapter is a culmination of all the deliberations, assessments, debates, contradictions and persuasions, hence, it completes these deliberations by proposing a new theological framework, that is Kairos Theology of Resilience, as a contextual response to future crises within the context of state-church relations.

#### 7.2 Research Findings

##### 7.2.1 Experiences of the church in managing COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant vulnerabilities within Zimbabwean churches and these experiences are part of the expression of how the first research objective was met. The chief experience of the church was the sudden and abrupt cessation of physical gatherings due to lockdowns. This was an exceptional development which was not experienced in living memory and its disruption of worship, pastoral care, and community life was extensive. The church like the rest of society was caught off guard and totally unprepared. However, Giddens (1984) brings out the aspect of human behaviour when put in a 'corner'. His theory of structuration and agency state that people deploy agentic behaviour and seek for alternatives, hence, during COVID-19, the church had to gradually migrate towards the use digital technologies to reach to each other. However, this development required strong digital technologies and knowledge hence it was fundamentally flawed as many churches did not have the required digital infrastructures. The rural churches were most affected by this. Therefore, this thesis holds and share Matsveru and Matsveru (2025) that the limitations in digital capacities created a theological and pastoral vacuum for congregants who were spiritually isolated during the lockdowns (Matsveru and Matsveru, 2025). Even the urban-based and resource-rich churches had their own share of challenges with some managing to do livestreams, WhatsApp group conversations for maintain spiritual engagement.

### **7.2.2 Theological Shifts and the Emergence of Kairos Consciousness**

The pandemic catalysed a theological reawakening within Zimbabwean ecclesiology. The crisis became a Kairos moment—a time of divine interruption that demanded prophetic discernment and action (Mawerenga 2024). Churches began to reframe their theology around the lived experiences of suffering, marginalisation, and systemic injustice. This shift echoed the liberationist ethos of earlier Kairos movements in South Africa, where theology was grounded in solidarity with the oppressed (Paradza, 2019). This time it was being experienced in Zimbabwe. Theology moved from abstraction to praxis. Sermons, pastoral letters, and liturgies began to reflect themes of lament, resilience, and communal care. The church was reimagined not as a building but as a dispersed body of believers engaged in mutual support and advocacy. This theological evolution marked a departure from triumphalist and prosperity-oriented narratives toward a more incarnational and justice-oriented faith, hence, the theoretical breakthrough of this thesis, establishing the Kairos theology of resilience.

### **7.2.3 Church-State Engagements and tensions**

This section of the concluding chapter help elaborates and show how the research objective of examining the state-church relationship was met. The relationship between the church and the state during the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe not only complex but characterised by tensions, contradictions and manipulations. Mawerenga (2024) notes a similar trend in Malawi and state that the relationship was complex and at times overtly antagonistic. The state-church tensions originated from the different approaches deployed by the two different institutions towards the management of COVID-19. The study shares Matsveru and Matsveru (2025) argument that government decisions are based on scientific management principles which are tried and tested not only in one country but many across the globe. In this context, the decisions were based on science and its advancement in preserving life as guided and led by the World Health Organisation on COVID-19 management. The drivers of the policy directions have medical specialist background; hence, the state operated from that vantage position. This state world view about infectious disease was as cross-roads with the church's faith-based worlds view. The bureaucrats in government believed that the church was unnecessarily spiritualised on this epidemiological crisis, hence, it was dimmed non-essential services provide. Thus, all the efforts to spread a 'spiritual' perspective and disregard the COVID-19 protocol and avoid being vaccinated was regarded by the state as breach of the law. Based on this, the church operated from a marginal position and many church leaders expressed frustration over being excluded from critical policy discussions, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic.

Based on the above analysis, the state moves on to introduce restrictions on gatherings and this was done without consulting the church. Religious leaders became marginalized as the church institution was neglect (Mahiya and Murisi, 2021). Churches were not only sidelined in the formulation of public health policies but were also subjected to abrupt closures and surveillance, which strained their operational capacities and pastoral outreach.

Moreover, the pandemic revealed a troubling dimension of church-state relations: the emergence of churches that functioned as regime enablers or state propagandists. These churches, often aligned with political elites, used their platforms to legitimise government actions and suppress dissenting theological voices. Rather than offering prophetic critique, such institutions echoed state narratives, thereby undermining the credibility and unity of the broader ecclesial community (Kwaramba, 2023). This co-optation of religious institutions for political ends diluted the church's moral authority and created divisions within the Christian fraternity. Despite these tensions, some churches, particularly mainline denominations, maintained a critical yet constructive stance. They issued pastoral letters advocating for the poor, called for transparency in vaccine distribution, and urged the government to uphold human rights during lockdown enforcement. These actions demonstrated the church's potential to serve as both a moral compass and a partner in national healing. This became an expression of Kairos Theology of Resilience characterised by agentic behaviour of not only adopting but adapting and transforming.

#### **7.2.4 Insights into Ecclesial, Social, and Health Engagement**

This section is an expression of how the last research objective was met in this study; an analysis of insights gained by the church for enhanced ecclesiological social and health management. The main point is that the pandemic offered profound lessons for the church's role in society. The church did not only recognise the importance of having strategic relationship with the state but also as individual institutions embrace technological advancement for use in crisis and when everything is ok. The embracing of the digital ministry during COVID-19 was not merely a temporary measure but as a permanent feature of ecclesial life. Online worship, virtual counselling, and digital discipleship became essential tools for sustaining faith communities (Baloyi and Pali, 2022). Moreover, the crisis underscored the church's responsibility in addressing mental health, grief, and social inequality. Many churches-initiated food aid programs, home-based care, and psychosocial support, thereby expanding their missional footprint. These initiatives demonstrated that ecclesial relevance in

the post-pandemic era requires holistic ministry that integrates spiritual, emotional, and material care.

### **7.3 Recommendations**

#### **7.3.1 Institutionalised Digital Ministry:**

With the rise of digital technology and recent disruptions to physical gatherings, churches face new challenges in delivering worship and care. Therefore, churches are encouraged to invest in robust digital infrastructure and comprehensive training to ensure continuity of worship and pastoral care during times of crisis.

#### **7.3.2 Reform Theological Education:**

As ministry contexts evolve, traditional seminary curricula may not fully address current demands faced by clergy and lay leaders. Thus, seminaries and theological institutions should integrate contextual theology, digital literacy, and crisis leadership into their academic programmes.

#### **7.3.3 Strengthen Ethical Church-State Engagement:**

The dynamic relationship between religious institutions and the state requires careful navigation to ensure integrity and advocacy for social justice. Transparent, ethical, and institutionalised platforms for church-state dialogue must be established. While engaging constructively with the state, churches should preserve their prophetic autonomy. To prevent political co-optation, religious bodies are advised to develop internal guidelines that uphold advocacy grounded in justice, compassion, and the common good. Additionally, ecumenical organisations such as the Zimbabwe Council of Churches should assume a mediating role, promoting balanced engagement that avoids both antagonism and uncritical support of the state.

#### **7.3.4 Develop Community-Based Health Ministries:**

Public health challenges, including pandemics and mental health crises, highlight the necessity for faith communities to engage in holistic care. Churches should collaborate with health organisations to provide community education, vaccination initiatives, and mental health services.

### **7.3.5 Document and Reflect Theologically on Crises:**

Periods of crisis call for collective learning and spiritual discernment within faith communities. It is essential for churches to foster a culture of theological reflection on lived experiences, producing resources that can inform and guide future ecclesial responses.

## **7.4 Original Contribution to Knowledge**

The originality and groundbreaking stature of the study is centred around its notable contributions to the disciplines of Practical Theology and Ecclesiology:

### **7.4.1 A praxis-oriented grounding**

It presents the first comprehensive, praxis-oriented analysis of Zimbabwean churches' theological and institutional responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. By systematically examining how these churches engaged with and addressed the myriad challenges posed by the pandemic, the study provides valuable insights into their adaptive strategies and the impact on local faith communities.

### **7.4.2 Kairos Theology of Resilience**

The study introduces the **Kairos Theology of Resilience** which serves as a contextual framework integrating prophetic witness, digital innovation, and holistic care in times of crisis and the capacity to adopt, adapt and transform. This theoretical contribution enriches the discourse on theological adoptions and adaptation by offering practical tools for faith-based resilience amid unprecedented circumstance. A key dimension of the theory is anchored on the concept of resilience which brings out a novel dimension in generic Kairos theoretical framing. Resilience as a conceptual framing was popularised and derived word from Latin to mean 'jumping back' and have a quick recovery in response to some stress or distressing conditions. It has three categories, that is, absorptive, adaptive and transformational resilience. Absorptive capacity or resilience according to Bene et al (2016) is when an individual, a community or and a system can resist effectively and absorb the shocks with no or limited changes to the functions of the status quo. However, when the shocks overwhelm, there is need for adaptive capacities of an individual or institution. The third capacity is the transformational capacity, characterised by permanent transformation aimed at altering the system and its structures as a survival mode. In the case of this study, church transformation into digital ministry was an expression of transformational resilience which is part of Kairos Theology of Resilience. Amidst sidelines from the state, the church absorbed and adapted and kept itself relevant in the

period of COVID-19. Thus, the Kairos Theology of Resilience is not only a theoretical framework for this study only but other situations in future.

#### **7.4.3 Church as Agent of Resistance and Compromise**

A critical examination is undertaken of the dual function of the church in Zimbabwe, highlighting its complex roles as both an agent of resistance and, at times, a potential instrument of state propaganda. This nuanced analysis advances the broader conversation on church-state relations and ethics, particularly within postcolonial African contexts, by interrogating the ethical dilemmas and opportunities inherent in ecclesiastical engagement with political power. Thus, the study advances the position that the church is not only a centre of worship, but critical thinking posed at challenging the status quo.

#### **7.4.4 Preparedness for Future Pandemics and Crisis**

Furthermore, the study proposes a forward-looking model for ecclesial resilience and theological adaptation. This model is designed to guide future ecclesiastical responses to pandemics and other national emergencies throughout the Global South, fostering preparedness and ethically grounded adaptability for faith communities facing various forms of crisis.

#### **7.4.5 Construction of a Zimbabwean Theology of Liberation and Reconstruction Post COVID-19**

Considering the post-COVID-19 era, using the liberative reconstruction theory in line with the observations of Vellem, the church can be instrumental in cultivating transformation and healing in Zimbabwe. This follows observations that subjugation of individuals by other individuals is a reality on Earth. The Zimbabwean community remains in upheaval, with many individuals suffering from poverty and oppression. In his liberative reconstruction theology, Vellem asserts that effective reconstruction stems from dealing with matters from the roots. This involves taking into cognizance acknowledging the scars caused by historical oppression among Zimbabwe. If the church can embrace the Black spirituality and indigenous values within the system, the process of liberation and reconstruction can be more simplified towards a society that has a sense of ownership and belonging. According to Vellem, there is need to reimagine the contemporary society prioritizing equity and justice.

Liberation theology is crucial, particularly as COVID-19 has inflicted severe repercussions on commerce and livelihoods, resulting in widespread job losses and diminished revenue sources. The Zimbabwean government failed to implement social safety nets to mitigate the hardships faced by the impoverished, vulnerable populations, and individuals engaged in informal sector

enterprises. Restoration of human dignity can therefore be done by placing the core challenges of the marginalized at the center of liberation particularly by the church. For this to be a successful venture, African pioneered churches ought to lead in such campaigns.

Reconstruction theology is also pivotal. The regeneration of society is essential for facilitating fresh beginnings. The biblical narrative of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37:1-14 is a vision that exemplifies the restoration of a nation both spiritually and physically. The significant aspect of this narrative for Zimbabwean society is the transformation of the dry bones into a formidable army (Ezekiel 37:14). This introduces the concept that reconstruction theology is comprehensive. The church ought to accept Vellemu's (2007:167) perspective that rebuilding should serve as a supplement to liberation theology. Vellemu (2007:205) asserts that the word "liberative reconstruction" is more suitable, as it emphasises the recognition of change and the obligation to interpret the signs of the times.

### **7.5 Toward a New Theology: Kairos Theology of Resilience**

This study introduces Kairos Theology of Resilience as a new theological paradigm developed in response to the pandemic. The framework is based on these principles:

#### **7.5.1 Prophetic Discernment:**

Prophetic discernment involves interpreting contemporary events through a theological lens and responding with clarity and purpose. This principle emphasises the need for faith communities to read the signs of the times, critically engage social realities, and speak truthfully about challenges and opportunities as they arise. When a crisis arises, the church engages all its three Kairos Theology of Resilience dimensions, that is adoptive, adaptive and transformational capabilities and capacities.

#### **7.5.2 Digital Ecclesiology:**

Digital ecclesiology recognises technology as a legitimate and practical space where worship and community can be fostered. It affirms the use of digital platforms not merely as tools for communication, but as integral environments where spiritual formation, connection, and liturgical life take place.

#### **7.5.3 Holistic Mission:**

Holistic mission unites spiritual, emotional, and material support within ministry efforts. It stresses that effective ministry responds to the comprehensive needs of individuals and

communities, integrating acts of compassion, advocacy, and spiritual care to address well-being in every dimension. When people go through difficult and desperate situations, the church should be able to step up its pastoral and counselling work. The Apostle Paul exhorted the Ephesians Elders in (Acts 20:28) to keep watch over the flock and to be shepherds of God's Church, which He bought with His own blood. However, the social crisis and shifting dynamics of family life in recent years have shown the inadequacy of pastoral care models in most congregations of different Churches. Although noting that the traditional model of pastoral care could still be appropriate for certain Churches, the aim of this recommendation is to suggest two alternate pastoral care models that are more appropriate for the Zimbabwean context.

(i) Wimberly's model (2003): While Wimberly was writing from an African American perspective, which differs from the researcher's Zimbabwean perspective, the problems facing the church in relation to the church's position in analysing political, social, and economic ills in society are close. Wimberly also proposes a different model for the church and its caregivers when it comes to accompanying struggling individuals on their trip. He also proposed that we include biblical stories in our quest.

(ii) Gerkin provides a short overview of pastoral care before combining common group stories, Christian culture, family stories, and personal stories to create a conceptual pastoral care model. Gerkin also suggested three functions for the church to play to change the culture in an interactive way: priest, apostle, and wise advice (Gerkin 1997:79). The people of Zimbabwe will regain their sacred identity by extending the three functions of pastoral care to those who are struggling due to socio-economic problems, as indicated by (Wimberly.2003). The new models and concepts are predicted, as a response to the socio-economic challenges of the country to achieve the necessary results for the Zimbabwean ecclesiology

#### **7.5.4 Contextual Praxis:**

Contextual praxis grounds theology in the lived experiences of marginalised communities. This approach insists that authentic theological reflection must be informed by, and responsive to, the unique contexts and struggles faced by those who are often overlooked or silenced.

#### **7.5.5 Collaborative Engagement:**

Collaborative engagement emphasises the importance of partnering with government agencies and civil society groups to achieve shared objectives. By building alliances across sectors, the church can contribute meaningfully to societal transformation and work toward the common

good. Resilient Kairos Theology encourages the church to adopt approaches that are both adaptive and connected to tradition while addressing present-day circumstances.

#### **7.5.6. Public Space Competitor**

In instance where the government would persist in peripherising the role of the church, the church should proactively seek opportunities of asserting itself rather than await permission. The church ought to embody a prophetic nature, as Kairos theology is defined by its pursuit of a prophetic theology. Verstraelen (1992:22) asserts that this inquiry manifests as 're-reading the signals of the times' and engaging in theological reflection within the framework of these indications. The church ought to thoroughly consider Jesus' statement regarding the violent acquisition of the kingdom in Matthew 11:12. "Since the era of John the Baptist, the kingdom of heaven has endured violence, and the violent seize it forcefully." The church needs to assume an active role when it comes to addressing inequalities in Zimbabwe. Vellem posits that a prophetic voice is instrumental in eliminating systematic injustices and reconstructing the society towards socio-political and economic success.

When Pharaoh did not react favourably to argumentation and persuasion, God had no choice but to employ the language that Pharaoh understood: the language of force and violence (Banana 1990:45). This serves as a definitive sign that God endorses the employment of liberative violence. Banana (1990) asserts that it serves as a cautionary tale for those who employ oppressive violence in their futile attempts to sustain their dominance over the vulnerable; ultimately, the violence of the oppressor will be countered by the liberating violence of the oppressed in their quest to fulfil their rightful aspirations. According to Banana (1990), the church should not anticipate being granted a position in public space; rather, it should assertively claim it, even by force if necessary. According to the liberative-reconstruction theory, the church has an opportunity to turnaround human injustices for the better through advocacy. This can be best achieved through lobbying for social and political practices that exude justice for all regardless of the different backgrounds of individuals.

#### **7.5.7 Prioritise Moral Reconstruction**

The demise of moral integrity has devastated Zimbabwean society, resulting in its continuous upheaval. The ecclesiology of Zimbabwe should aim to positively influence discipline, honesty, integrity, justice, diligence, and all virtues embodying moral traits. The recommendation arises from the context that the political and socio-economic crisis in Zimbabwe is a consequence of a society undergoing moral decay. Zimbabwe is positioned 157th out of 180 nations in the 2022 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index

(CPI), categorizing it among the most corrupt countries globally (Mutongwiza, 2023). Former Minister of Health and Child Welfare, Mr. Obadiah Moyo, embezzled COVID-19 monies, and the police executed a catch-and-release because to allegations of his proximity to influential political figures.

#### **7.5.8 A new paradigm shift for ecclesial leaders**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to surface underlying vulnerabilities that should challenge all ecclesial leaders, for instance, the healthcare system is operating under dire circumstances. It is time for ecclesial leaders to adopt a new method of advocacy. Rather, to achieve liberative reconstruction, they ought to assume an aggressive approach in addressing the socio-political and economic systematic inequalities.

The “economy of death” is not a new phenomenon when it comes to ecclesial leaders as explained by Vellem. This is a case whereby the bottom line is prioritised over human lives. The COVID-19 pandemic further worsened the living conditions of the poor and the marginalized. It is therefore the duty of such leaders to advocate for equity when it comes to resource allocation. The spiritual leaders should also investigate partnering with business institutions for the betterment of the lives of the marginalized. In this regard, the partnership may result in sustainable growth and development not only economically, but also socially.

The digital divide was further heightened by the need of ecclesial leaders to stay in touch with believers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ecclesial leaders should therefore strive to spread the use of digital technology to isolated communities as a way of bringing together believers through technology. To achieve this, they may mobilise resources for these communities. Not only does this enable ecclesial leaders to reach these audiences but also presents an opportunity for the voices of the marginalised groups to be heard.

### **7.6 The Government**

I recommend the following to the government of Zimbabwe:

#### **7.6.1 Unit of Purpose**

Whenever there is a state of emergency, the government should consider having a conference with all stakeholders to achieve a unit of purpose. This will also reduce the amount of criticism against the government from stakeholders. The case under consideration is a good example, that when COVID-19 hit the nation government went on to enact policies and guidelines for the treatment and management without any consultation with stakeholders like the church

which was much affected by the pandemic. At the end the church perceived government policies on hygiene protocols as a weaponisation of COVID-19 against the church. In light of this, the church should strive to maintain its neutrality such that in the face of adversaries, it is able to fully assume its liberative role. By so doing, a viable partnership can be formed with the government whereby a safe space is created for the public to come together and engage in dialogue that drives forward national affairs. Operational social change can be achieved in this manner as the nation, within its respective communities, works earnestly towards common objectives.

### **7.6.2. Eradication of Poverty**

To enhance its commitment to poverty eradication by ensuring that the social welfare department is fully revitalized, adequately funded, and operational, while also guaranteeing that institutions like as health and education are effectively supported in pandemic mitigation efforts. Investing in human security is essential for fostering harmonious relationships between individuals and the State. Resistance to comply with State-imposed limits emerged when citizens saw a lack of substantial initiatives to enhance their socio-economic status. The economy of Zimbabwe requires substantial re-evaluation, as numerous individuals have become impoverished. The disparity between the affluent and the impoverished is increasingly expanding, to the extent that the middle class has arguably been eradicated. Unemployment is pervasive and poverty is widespread.

### **7.6.3. Government and livelihoods**

It is essential to evaluate the socio-economic and political settings of the solutions implemented to tackle certain difficulties. Zimbabwe attempted to implement a complete lockdown; however, it lacked adequate social safety nets and services to address the populace's demands. This complicated living, as numerous individuals relied on the underground sector for their sustenance. Consequently, individuals deliberately disregarded the rules due to the scarcity of viable means of subsistence. I recommend that the government should strive to re-enforce fair labour practices and review the distribution of resources to be fair. When marginalised communities are empowered economically, there is freedom for individuals and the society can be reshaped to be a vibrant economic hub.

### **7.6.4. Restoring African Indigenous Knowledge Systems**

The use of heritage-based medical plants should be promoted in Zimbabwe, and that heritage should be preserved. The health benefits of zumbani/umsuzwane (*Lippia javanica*), for

example, were not known to many people in Zimbabwe until COVID-19 struck. The government should therefore support the operations of African initiated religious groups to transform the perspectives of the public towards a common positive goal. Liberation of individuals to fully express and exercise their religious beliefs can positively turnaround in comparison with using adopted approaches like the Western culture.

### **7.6.5. Government and Health Sector**

Harare must implement significant reforms to enhance its health care system. Only buildings and demoralized staff remain. Healthcare institutions have endured prolonged neglect. Obtaining a basic scan or essential medications at a government hospital or clinic has become more difficult. This constitutes systemic violence, as individuals have endured suffering or mortality from treatable illnesses. While COVID-19 fostered new collaborations between commercial and public entities that ultimately benefited public hospitals and clinics, it also revealed the vulnerabilities inside Zimbabwe's healthcare system. Significant action must be undertaken, as articulated by numerous individuals previously.

### **7.6.6 Continuing Professional Development**

Ongoing professional development guarantees that professionals' skills and knowledge remain current, hence enhancing patient safety and the efficacy of practice delivery. Currently, the traceability of professional development (PD) originates with educational institutions and concludes upon graduation; any deficiencies in specific experiences might substantially lead to de-skilling. Healthcare professionals must maintain a record of their progress that substantiates their competence in practice. Conversely, companies ought to proactively promote professional development among their employees by offering study days and essential tools to support this initiative. Establishing a foundational structure of compulsory training modules that cover many aspects of professional practice in patient care helps promote healthcare professionals' advancement of knowledge and abilities in their field.

### **7.6.7 Working in collaboration**

Collaborative practice offers a cohesive methodology that incorporates multidisciplinary professionals and organizations to deliver patient care. Implementing a multidisciplinary educational approach can enhance patient health and well-being, resulting in superior treatment outcomes. This promotes professionals to exchange knowledge about their jobs, enhancing collaboration and ultimately promoting patient-centred care in service delivery.

Nonetheless, there were conflicting interpretations of the multidisciplinary cooperation notion; on one side, it was believed that collaboration diminishes physicians' authority over time, while on the other hand, it was viewed positively if professionals adhered to their own scopes of practice.

#### **7.6.8 Role of medical databases**

The lack of specialised medical databases with research and evidence-based papers in the country hinders the advancement of breakthrough medical discoveries. In the absence of this establishment, the significance of these databases in advancing care standards, facilitating research, and augmenting education would perpetually represent a series of squandered chances. There is a significant concern regarding the extensive access and utilization of information by illicit dispensaries in the diagnosis and treatment of ailments, which constitutes a serious issue now confronting the country. Database access could be customized to restrict access to information containing treatment details.

#### **7.6 Chapter Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a crucible that tested the faith, theology, and resilience of Zimbabwean churches. This concluding chapter has demonstrated how the thesis research questions are answered and research objectives satisfied. It starts by interrogating the experiences of the church in COVID-19 management from a two-dimensional point; the church as individual institutions in the COVID-19 circumstances and second, the church as it relates with the state. As individual churches within the context of COVID-19, the churches adjusted, absorbed, adapted and transformed, characterised by becoming online and digital ministry. Those that failed to absorb, adopt adapt and transform became totally dysfunctional and irrelevant. But evidence from Zimbabwe shows that the church remained relevant to its purpose and cause. The second dimension which is a representation of the experiences of the church is how it related with the state. This chapter brings to the fore that the state-church relationship was characterised by contradictions and compromise. The origins of this complex relationship were based on the church being marginalized and sidelined by the state as a non-essential institution in fighting COVID-19, the church stood up to the challenge and raised its ecclesiological voice. It is within those contradictions and compromises that the Kairos Theology of Resilience is curved. COVID-19 experiences not only shaped new church operational lines such as the online digital ministries but positioned the church on how to handle government pressure and manipulations which became an enabler to the building the

Kairos Theology of Resilience for liberation, which is part of the thesis originality. In the final analysis, all these insights gained by the church enhanced ecclesiological management capacities and capabilities of the church during COVID-19 and for the future.

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## ADDENDUM

### **The March is not Ended – Pastoral Letter of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference on the Current Situation in Zimbabwe**

#### **Democracy | Human Rights**

Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC)

August 14, 2020

#### **Introduction**

John Robert Lewis, an American politician and civil-rights leader, who served in the United States House of Representatives, died recently. At his funeral he was praised for recognizing that the march for freedom has not ended even in the present time in which we live. This too is our challenge in Zimbabwe today between those who believe in a past and completed liberation and those who realize that the march is not ended. Peace building and nation-building are never completed tasks. Every generation must establish national cohesion and peace.

#### **Current Events**

The struggle in Zimbabwe, between those who think they have arrived and those on the march has resulted in a multi-layered crisis of the convergence of economic collapse, deepening poverty, food insecurity, corruption, and human rights abuses among other crises in urgent need of resolution. The call for demonstrations is the expression of growing frustration and aggravation caused by the conditions that most Zimbabweans find themselves in. Suppression of people's anger can only serve to deepen the crisis and take the nation into deeper crisis. This comes on the backdrop of unresolved past hurts like Gukurahundi, which continue to spawn even more angry new generations. The voices of various governments, the European Union, the African Union, and the UN on the desperate situation in Zimbabwe have not only confirmed the seriousness of human rights breaches by government agents but the need to rally behind *#ZimbabweanLivesMatter*. Following the government crackdown on dissent after the 31 July demonstrations we have also witnessed attempts by President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa to intervene by sending a special envoy. Their failure to make broad consultations with the Church and civic society at this most tempestuous time was most regrettable, was this not an

opportunity missed? In the meantime, some of our people continue to live in hideouts, with some incarcerated while others are on the run. Fear runs down the spine of many of our people today. The crackdown on dissent is unprecedented. Is this the Zimbabwe we want? To have a different opinion does not mean to be an enemy. It is precisely from the contrast of opinions that the light comes. Our government automatically labels anyone thinking differently as an enemy of the country: that is an abuse.

## **Corruption**

“... the ruler demands gifts, the judge accepts bribes, the powerful dictate what they desire.”

*Micah 7:3*

The corruption in the country has reached alarming levels. Government and civic society agree that corruption is choking the economy and compromising our justice system. While there is this acknowledgement there hasn't been equally a serious demonstration by government to rid the country of this scourge. The 'catch and release' approach makes the ordinary man in the street question the sincerity of government to deal effectively with corruption. Is there no connection between what some journalists are unearthing about the government officials' endemic corruption and their arrest? In Micah 7:1-6 the prophet is miserable over the state of his nation. Nobody can be trusted, and people wait in ambush to do violence to each other. This sad and sorry state, Micah says, is because leaders could not be trusted, they used their power for personal gain. Micah was from the countryside, a prophet who proclaimed God's reproofs to the rich and ungodly leaders of Judah. Micah, like many of the prophets, champions the poor and the oppressed. With brutal honesty, he communicated a message of justice and mercy. He cared for God's people with profound compassion. Micah graphically condemns Israel's corrupt leaders and exposes their hypocrisy. God, the prophet says, is not fooled when leaders mouth the right words but have corrupt hearts. Political corruption, greed, arrogance was common among the leaders of his time. They didn't care about the corporate or common good.

Micah says that when leaders lose their way, it is because they no longer see themselves as servant leaders. They endanger everyone in the organization or nation. Servant leaders place the interests and needs of their followers ahead of their self-interests and needs. Generally, they value the well-being and development of their followers, building their communities, acting authentically, and sharing power.

The premise of servant leadership is that the most effective and influential leaders are those who strive to serve others rather than take control or be in charge. The servant-leader will continually think about what involves the least damage or pain for the people over whose lives they have power. Servant leaders will value the worth of every person. The organization or nation they build will honour the importance of every individual. The prophet Micah proclaims a message that is especially relevant to the conditions we face in our society and country.

### **Heroes and Defence Forces Days**

We have just celebrated the Heroes Holiday and the defence Forces Day in which we recall and express gratitude for the immense sacrifices made by our war heroes. Most of our people contributed to the success of the war effort in various ways. We remember Thomas Mapfumo and others who through their music conscientized the people about the struggle and the reasons for it, we know of businessmen and women, teachers, the mujibhas and chimbwidos whose support was the difference between winning the war and losing it. As a nation we must appreciate and be grateful to those who despite not holding a gun made an immense contribution of supporting the cause. As your Shepherds, we are sensing that our national leaders want to take us back to the mentality and practices of the war times where it was ‘us against them.’ We want our politics to build a united nation and not to divide us, turning the military who ought to continue the memory of the late heroes against the people who fed them and clothed them and who gathered intelligence at great risk and saved many of our fighters from peril. Some of our vocal political leaders are busy re-creating the war situation of us and them, abdicating from the responsibility to build a united nation. Have we not all been divided by this divisive political environment to the detriment of the national common good?

As we recognize the sacrifices made by all our people towards our liberation, we continue to worry about what has become of “gutsa ruzhinji” the mantra of the war times and the 80s. This is only possible when we build a robust economy capable of benefiting the poor and the marginalized who perhaps because of the war lost the opportunity to study and educate themselves or their children. While we understand the need to re-engage with the global economic community we ought as well not to lose sight of the impoverished and marginalized Zimbabweans. For example, the newly signed agreement between the Zimbabwean Government and the former commercial farmers does not feature or include the interests of the farm workers and their families who lost livelihoods. While we appreciate the effort of resolving the land question, we think that it should also show concern for the most vulnerable.

It seems to us that Zimbabwe is driving itself fast in the direction of capitalism thinking that this will bring untold benefits for our people. We need to be cautious as Pope Francis reminds us:

*“Some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naive trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralised workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile the excluded are still waiting. To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor...”* (Evangelii Gaudium 2013).

As your Bishops, we feel that this described situation is true of Zimbabwe. It feels as though the poor have no one to defend them. They don't seem to feature on the national agenda. Their cries for an improved health system go unheeded. Their plea for a transport system that meets their transport blues is met with promises and more promises and no action. The only time we see real action is when our leaders are jostling for power, to secure it or to ascend to offices of power. It is not clear to us as your Bishops that the national leadership we have has the knowledge, social skills, emotional stability, and social orientation to handle the issues that we face as a nation. All we hear from them is blame of our woes on foreigners, colonialism, white settlers, and the so-called internal detractors. When are we going to take responsibility for our own affairs? When are we going to submit to the requirements of national accountability? While our neighbors in the region are strengthening their democratic institutions, we seem to be weakening ours, Our Chapter 12 institutions, the judiciary, and Prosecuting Authority seem to be losing their independence and effectiveness. Our health care institutions have collapsed. Our well-trained doctors and nurses remain incapacitated. For a long time, they have felt neglected. As Bishops we have tried to open an honest dialogue on our health care personnel and the health care institutions, and the door was shut in our faces. In the face of growing numbers of COVID-19 infections where does the nation turn to? With the necessary tools in short supply in our hospitals, we notice with wounded hearts that government officials seem to have more PPE than our nurses and doctors.

## **National Transformation**

*“What man is wise enough to understand this? Who has been instructed by the Lord and can explain it?”* Jeremiah 9:12

We feel that the government is focused on things other than national democratic priorities. This amounts to dereliction of duty.

Good leaders are wise enough to see when change and innovation are necessary. They see the gap — of how things are and how they should be — and they seek to close that gap. Deep-seated values guide them. They are willing to make systemic changes to uplift the lives of all.

Jeremiah was a passionate prophet. His straight talk to the leadership of his time brought him great personal suffering. But he was devoted to his people and would not keep quiet when leaders deliberately mislead their followers. Jeremiah, despite widespread opposition, endures and is faithful to his God-given mission. The prophet’s commitment and integrity stand in stark contrast to the leaders of his time. Jeremiah shows that, sometimes, some of the most important changes and innovation comes about when leaders are willing to listen. An effective leader is one who sees the gaps and wisely works on the things that need to change. Good leaders are called to confront the gaps into which many fall and feel abandoned. Poverty is one such gap.

Confrontation is one of the toughest tasks of leadership. It is also one of the most courageous and important things a leader can do. Jeremiah is not interested in leaders who speak politically correct words. He is more concerned about their ability to act and bring about the structural change needed so that all are treated with dignity. Leaders who are committed to building a better organization or nation are those who have a compelling sense of what is right. Deep-seated values guide them. Their principles are at the core of their decision-making process. They are willing to name what is not working, have difficult conversations and then make tough decisions. They do not shy away from the problems. They are faithful to the people they lead — not their own aspirations or political egos. Refusal to listen to the people has led us to where we are today. Loud cries on social media and attempts to demonstrate in a very repressive environment like this is a clear sign that Zimbabweans feel that the government has turned their back on them.

## **The Comprehensive National Settlement Framework Proposal**

The National Convergence Platform (NCP), a platform made up of different Apex Church bodies. Civil society organizations, Business bodies, and Professional bodies, recently

launched its proposed comprehensive national settlement framework to resolve Zimbabwe's complex challenges on 5 August 2020. The Comprehensive National Settlement Framework (CNSF) seeks to establish consensus among the citizens as to what should constitute a comprehensive agenda towards a lasting solution for Zimbabwe's challenges. This is a deliberate effort to build a convergence agenda among citizens towards the Zimbabwe We Want.

The comprehensive national settlement framework makes a clarion call on five core issues that the nation must resolve in order to extricate itself out of the current malaise. The issues are as follows:

A victim-led process which adheres to globally accepted norms and international law.

A broadly agreed reform process towards constitutionalism and the rule of law.

A new social contract because of an inclusive national economic vision

A broad-based and inclusive national humanitarian and emergency response, and

Mending of regional, continental, and global relations.

We already emphasized the necessity of the above-mentioned processes in our ecumenical discussion document, The Zimbabwe We Want of 2006. Fourteen years have already gone by. We make an urgent plea to peace and nation building through inclusive engagement, dialogue, and collective responsibility for transformation. We are also conscious that the Covid-19 pandemic will expose us to new challenges for the foreseeable future. Indeed, as John Lewis realized, the march is never ended, but together we will overcome.

God Bless you all.

**Source:** Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC)

### **Pastoral Letter from the Zimbabwe Synod Ministerial Committee on Covid-19**

To all Regions, Local Churches

& Church Extension Charges

Fellow Congregationalists, brothers, and sisters in Christ greetings to you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We the ministerial committee of the Zimbabwe Synod representing our 7 regions, 3 local Churches and our 3 Church Extension Charges are compelled by the charge that Christ has placed on us to write to you during this difficult time.

We come in a pastoral spirit to you at a time when as a people of faith are under siege from the merciless Covid-19 pandemic that is causing untold suffering to our families, the church, and the entire nation. In the name of our synod, we want to remind you of the love of God that is with us always even through the fire. Nothing shall have the power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. No matter what havoc this pandemic subject us to, it shall by no means separate us from the love of God which itself is stronger than death.

The situation is a challenge to the meaning of faith, yet we hold on firmly to our conviction and knowledge that Jesus has conquered this world by his death. He tells us saying: John 16:32 *“Behold, the hour comes, yes, is now come, that you shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me.”* In John 16:33 *“These things I have spoken to you, that in me you might have peace. In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”* We preach this word to all during this time that *“The Father is with you, and you will overcome because Christ has won* “.

To those of us who are battling with this disease, we urge you to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his mighty. God is with you. Weeping may endure for the night, joy cometh in the morning. We look forward to your testimony of healing. At the same time, we are cognizant that some amongst us have gone to be with the Lord during this time. We commend their souls to the Lord. To their loved ones *“Be Still – God is with you. His grace is enough for you.”*



May we then as a church reflect on the call of the Lord to us in the past four years “**Reaching New Frontiers. Hope and Healing**”. By this theme we are reminded that this era plagued with covid-19 is a frontier that we are crossing as we walk with God. It has heightened the blessing of the online ministry as a driver of mission. This is our Hope and belief that a time where we will be in a healed world free of such pandemics is at hand. We say this guided by the word of God and the experience of God’s love seen in the past pandemics as well as present testimonies of the saints.

**Kindly receive the following Recommendations.**

May we exercise extreme caution as we mourn those who have succumbed to Covid-19. We are encouraged that church leaders and the ministers guide those in mourning to by all means possible avoid gathering, vigils and body viewing. (*Nxa kungabuthanangwa uMfundisi uzabakhona ngelanga lomgcwabo esebenza ngokunanzelela okukhulu*). Sometimes it is in Unveiling Ceremonies where we get exposed to infections. Where possible let us refrain from gatherings.

We encourage virtual means of sharing money and where this is unavoidable, extreme care should be taken to avoid transmission of the corona virus.

Let us consider funeral ceremonies where there is no cooking, this tends to get people gathered with lowered masks.

Regions and Local churches assist ministers with Personal protective Equipment (PPEs) during burials.

That where several people are gather for a funeral people seat outside while maintain a healthy social distance and avoid the shaking of hands.

That families re-think the tradition where the chief mourner usually sits on the mattress in a room surrounded by relatives, hardly going out for fresh air.

The virtual ministry must continue in all these situations notwithstanding that we normally do not connect online while in mourning. This must be done to offer continued pastoral care to the bereaved and to connect the mourners with the church in worship.

**May God bless you all.**

**Signed:**

**Rev Dr Xolani Maseko (Synod Secretary)**

**Rev Japhther Sibanda (Moderator)**

**Zimbabwe's religious leaders increase efforts to tackle COVID-19 and support vaccines.**

**Format**

News and Press Release

**Source**

• UNICEF

**Posted**

14 May 2021

**Originally published.**

5 May 2021

**Origin**

Faith leaders are critical partners in addressing many known barriers to the uptake of health and other essential services, including vaccines.

UNICEF and the Ministry of Health and Childcare (MOHCC) in partnership with Apostolic Women Empowerment Trust (AWET) hosted a dialogue with interfaith religious leaders from across the country to leverage support for the COVID-19 vaccine roll out and recovery.

The faith leaders were drawn from prominent religious groups including Christian, Islamic and the African Traditional Religions. They were represented by the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference, Seventh Day Adventist, The Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs in Zimbabwe, and Zimbabwe

Faith leaders are critical partners in addressing many known barriers to the uptake of health and other essential services, including vaccines.

UNICEF's Global Faith for Positive Change Initiative recognizes the central role and influence of National Association of Traditional Healers and Dare reMweya neVadzimu. religious leaders in behavior and social change communication. Through the partnership with AWET, over 850 interfaith and community leaders have been trained to support engaging and mobilizing their communities about integrated COVID-19 prevention and continuity of essential health, nutrition, education, child protection and WASH services. The initiative aims to reach 5 million people across all provinces of Zimbabwe.

To kick start the dialogue, participants reflected on misinformation, distrust and barriers including social, religious, and cultural barriers contributing to vaccine hesitancy. Leading the conversation AWET National Director Tendayi Gudo said, "Understanding and addressing these barriers is key for our partnership with local faith actors, increasing their abilities to counter false claims or address religious questions or other sensitive topics."

The religious leaders also noted with concern that the spread of too much-unfiltered information and misinformation has undermined people's trust in the COVID-19 vaccines.

Zimbabwe Council of Churches Director for Research, Innovations and Program Development, Ronald Nare said that faith leaders have a responsibility to provide a fresh understanding and insights about these vaccines. "We must mobilize faith groups to take direct actions to promote the well-being of children, families and the communities they serve."

This, he said was in line with UNICEF's Faith for Positive Change for Children, Families and Communities Strategy that states: "Religious leadership hold some of the deepest and most trusted relationships with their communities and, as skilled and influential communicators, they

can significantly move the hearts and minds of millions and in turn shape behavioural and cultural practices.”

The faith leaders who attended the three-day workshop endorsed the COVID-19 vaccination campaign and pledged to play an active role in boosting community trust in the science behind COVID-19 vaccines and enlisting their communities to join the efforts to end COVID-19.

The President of the Supreme Council of Zimbabwe, Sheikh Ishmael Duwa said he was the first Islamic leader in Zimbabwe to receive the vaccine in public and is now encouraging congregants and the wider population to get vaccinated.

“I am sharing my vaccination experience to Islamic followers and Zimbabweans at large to prove that these vaccines are safe and taking them is how we can protect our children, families and communities from this pandemic,” said Sheikh Duwa.

As vaccination champions, the leaders agreed to model and promote positive attitudes and behaviours towards vaccinations, articulate trust in accurate information, engage followers to address faith-related barriers and help congregants to understand how vaccines work.

“With this knowledge, I am going to play a leading role in challenging misinformation circulating through our congregation platforms and social media space by promoting trust in accurate information sources such as Ministry of Health and Childcare and UNICEF,” said Phyllis Manungo from Seventh Day Adventist Church.

With funding from the Health Development Fund (HDF) supported by the EU, UK Aid, Sweden, Irish Aid and Gavi, UNICEF will continue facilitating multi-faith dialogues and actions to increase uptake of COVID-19 vaccinations and improved access to health, nutrition, education, WASH and child protection services to children, families, persons with disability, the ageing population and those in need of care.

For more information contact: James Maiden, Chief of Communications, UNICEF Zimbabwe:  
Tel: +263 772 124 268, Email: [jmaiden@unicef.org](mailto:jmaiden@unicef.org)

## **Covid Response MCZ Connexional Office**

### **Background.**

The COVID 19 –the novel Corona virus was first diagnosed in Wuhan China in December 2019 but has since spread throughout the world to become a pandemic. Zimbabwe recorded its

first case and death in March 2020 with cases rising exponentially in July and August from 914 on July 16 to 5176 by August 19 and 130 deaths and 2047 recoveries<sup>1</sup>. The highest weekly incidence risk has been in the urban provinces of Bulawayo and Harare, with a consistent sharp increase in incidences in Harare since the second week of July, increasing incidence in the provinces neighbouring Harare, and recent decline in incidence risk in Matabeleland South with predominantly imported transmission.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/zimbabwe/>

In addition to the previously announced lockdown regulations, on 21 July, the Government introduced extra measures including a curfew from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. except for essential services; official business operating hours from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. apart from providers of essential services; inter-city/town public transport and inessential transport to all rural areas remaining banned, and the planned reopening of schools on 28 July postponed. Returning residents and foreign nationals are required to quarantine for a period of 21 days, of which the initial seven days at Government designated quarantine centres, with mandatory testing on day one and day eight.

With these facts in mind, businesses and workplaces must put measures in place to safeguard their own staff as well as the clients that they serve. The nature varies according to the services offered with health services having a higher level of control than other workplaces because of the nature of their business.

As Connexional Office we are also required to set up safeguarding measures to ensure the health and safety of staff as well as that of the public that we serve.

The following is a proposal guide for the Connexional Office to use in its response Standard Operating Procedures to the Covid 19 threat.

## **Standard Operating Procedure**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is to sensitize staff at MCZ Connexional Office on preventing, mitigating, and managing the novel corona virus disease (COVID-19).

### **Scope**

The SOP applies to all Connexional staff, visitors, service providers and other stakeholders.

### **Roles and Responsibilities**

Set up a Health and Safety Committee comprising of MeDRA as technical team, MD, HR Officer, Accountant, representative of HODs and representative of staff be set up. The specific roles include:

- Training and sensitization of staff, visitors, service providers and other stakeholders on covid-19
- Advising heads of departments in executing the procedures outlined in this SOP.
- Reporting outcomes of the activities conducted to administration and management.
- Revising this SOP as new information becomes available.

## **2. Monitoring and evaluating aspects of this SOP**

**The HR Officer and GJO are responsible for:**

- Executing the procedures outlined in this SOP.
- Submitting information obtained during screening activities and information on persons who meet the case definition for suspected COVID-19 to the two key officers.

### **Key response measures**

COVID 19 is an air born infection that affects the respiratory system and transmitted through droplet infection. In this regards the best way to prevent infection in the workplace is as follows-:

#### **1. Physical distancing:**

- This should always be maintained in the workplace by keeping a physical distance up of up to 1.5 -2 meters between persons.
- Sitting arrangements in an office must achieve 4 square meters space per person. Where this is not possible due to shortage of office space staff should be given an opportunity to work from home
- Where the need to come to the office is necessary staff can be put into teams so that one team comes to the office for one or two weeks while the other team comes the other week on rotational basis
- Offering transport for staff is necessary for social distancing as public transport has been a hive of infection in the country. There is need to re-thing about staff who are currently using public transport as these pose a huge risk to staff and their families.
- Meetings - Use electronic communication wherever possible.
- Limit face-to-face meetings
- Maintain 2m social distancing if meetings must be done face to face.

- Staff to sanitize and wear a mask if attending a face-to-face meeting.

## **2. Scheduling visits and activities in the office and outside**

- Reduce the number of participants for activities/training at any given time so that they can be spaced far apart from each other (i.e., encourage social distancing).
- Schedule visits through an appointment system

These measures are important to reduce the viral load in the ambient air of the workplace.

## **3. Screening**

- A screening booth set out at the entrance of the office to be always manned.
- Running water to be available all the time
- Thermometer to be provided for screening.
- Use of hand rub sanitiser - 70% alcohol based.

### **Office Screening**

- ❖ There must be a register for everyone coming into the premises including contact details.
- ❖ Staff to minimize the number of personal visitors who visit the work premises.
- ❖ A report should be made to the responsible team members (who ever will be available) when someone has a high temperature of at least 37.5 degrees Celsius or showing respiratory symptoms.

### **Further Screening**

If there is need for further screening, there might be a need to look for free services if available, if not there is need to prepare for the cost associated.

- Staff screening can also be done at the Maisha Centre on Mazowe Road (MARS grounds) free of charge using the Rapid Test of blood.
- When someone is positive then a PCR test will be done to confirm diagnosis of Covid 19. This is available at various laboratories such as Lancet, Pathology, interpatch, Wilkins or any other reputable laboratories.

#### 4. Hygiene around the workplace

- ❖ Cleaning of offices to be done daily using disinfectants.
- ❖ Cleaning of toilets daily using disinfectants
- ❖ Cleaning of door handles daily as offices are being cleaned.
- ❖ Deep cleaning and disinfecting of premises once a month
- ❖ Signage to show where booths and sanitisers are.
- ❖ Provide facilities for hand washing starting at the entrance to the facility
- ❖ Each floor should have some running water, soap, paper towel and a disposal bin
- ❖ Wash hands or sanitise regularly throughout the day especially upon arrival and leaving the office, after coughing or sneezing, before preparing meals and eating and after using the toilet.
- ❖ Use alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) in areas where there is no hand wash including upon entry and leaving vehicles.

#### Cars

All vehicles to have: -

- sanitisers
- Thermometers for vehicles that carry many people
- Cars to be cleaned daily and deep cleaned once a week

Drivers moving cars in the parking lot to wash hands or sanitise before handling cars and keys for various drivers.

#### 5. Meals' preparation – use hygienic procedures

- ❖ Serve hot meals all the time
- ❖ Rota for departments to attend for meals or take meals in the offices to maintain social distancing

#### 6. Respiratory hygiene

- Staff to maintain cough etiquette in public areas including offices.

- Cover mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing by coughing into a flexed elbow or a tissue that is discarded into a covered bin followed by hand washing with soap and water.
- Avoid touching the face, eyes, mouth and picking the nose.

## **7.PPE**

- All staff to be always provided with face masks for use.

Cleaners to be provided with gloves and overalls for use when cleaning and these be removed after cleaning.

- Staff depending on nature of duty to be provided with appropriate PPE.

## **8.Wellness**

- Please note that persons with pre-existing conditions including lung disease or immunosuppression, diabetes, and other chronic illnesses, those over the age of 60 years, are at greater risk of developing more severe conditions if they become infected with COVID-19.
- Staff are encouraged to call their immediate supervisor from home if they have symptoms of an upper respiratory tract infection. A COVID-19 symptom checklist should be administered over the phone and appropriate action taken.
- Staff who are unwell should stay at home and self-isolate.

## **9. Training**

All staff should receive training on this SOP and additional updates as new information comes in or the need arises. IEC materials should be availed to all staff.

## **10. Screening of staff for COVID-19**

Connexional Office to offer COVID 19 testing to staff member as per the Government of Zimbabwe Statutory Instrument 99 of 2020 which has mandated that all organisations facilitate COVID-19 testing for their staff using rapid diagnostic tests or other tests approved by the Minister of Health.

## **11. Health and Safety Committees**

Workers are entitled to:

- elect a health and safety representative - Mrs Lillian Chikara is the Focal Person ☐
- have health and safety issues at the workplace resolved ☐

There is need to ensure that there is no discrimination for staff who test positive.

## **12. Discrimination**

- You cannot discriminate against or disadvantage workers for raising work health and safety concerns in the workplace.
- Encourage workers to raise any concerns they have about health and safety in the workplace, including in relation to the COVID-19 virus.

## **References**

CCRC Covid 19 SOP GT -1 UZ

Coronavirus Disease 2019 World Health Organisation

Coronavirus Disease 2019 CDC

<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/zimbabwe/>

Zimbabwe MoHCC PPE Policy for COVID-19 March 2020



## THE METHODIST CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE

Wesley House, 17 Selous Avenue,  
Box CY 71, Causeway, Harare, Zimbabwe

pbsec@mczconnexional.co.zw

+263 242 250523

0712 360 660

www.methodistchurchinzimbabwe.org

gssec@mczconnexional.co.zw

+263 0242 250523

0712 366 665

www.methodistchurchinzimbabwe.org

20 March 2020

### COMMUNIQUÉ: MCZ RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Lenten greetings from The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, Presiding Bishop: Revd Dr S. Zwana's Desk.

#### Preamble

Following the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe nine point guidelines for the Methodist people throughout the Connexion issued two weeks back by the Office of the Presiding Bishop, and following the emergency Consultative Meeting of the Presiding Bishop with the eight bishops from our Synods and faced with the growing risk of the COVID 19 virus, the following is recommended to all the Methodist people and their communities. That we dig deep into our faith and faith traditions in order to withstand the scourge that has come upon the face of the earth. Our main concern is not just physical health, but also mental and spiritual health of the population. In this regard the obligation to Worship God cannot be substituted for anything else save for the sick, the elderly and the children, they could follow services through live streaming for those who can afford, or other social means, heed (Matthew 6:6) to study and pray privately.

That Methodist people note the following:

1. That Districts engage their Committees on the issues of COVID -19 and disseminate the Presiding Bishop's guidance to all Methodist Societies.
2. That officially there are no recorded cases in Zimbabwe as yet, but that as a country the risk is high and we cannot relax.
3. That the Bishops did analyze other churches' responses, particularly the Catholic Bishops Conference and that of our counterparts the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and are in total agreement.

In light of the fast spread of the pandemic the Church has made key decisions and observations as follows:

#### 1. Training & Awareness Programs

- There is need to train our communities and Churches on how COVID -19 is spreading and how it can be prevented. We therefore appeal to our Ministers and Stewards to use expert resource persons in training and awareness raising programs.

#### 2. Prevention - is better than cure and we need to observe the following:

- a. Avoid holding or shaking hands during prayers, church services or at the end of the service.
- b. Sunday School children to be closely monitored by their teachers, parents and guardians (avoid sharing food).
- c. Place hand sanitizers or soap at strategic positions.
- d. Washing of hands after using the toilet is always very important.
- e. Cover your mouth when sneezing or coughing.
- f. Wash Communion cups in hot water using soap.
- g. Our tradition is that we put Holy Communion into the receiver's hand, and not into the mouth. Let us maintain that.
- h. Those who distribute Holy Communion, ministers and the laity should wash their hands using running water (pouring method) and soap before handling Holy Communion and in between serving.
- i. Ministers and Preachers/ Stewards to talk about the corona virus in the pulpit and congregants to discuss corona virus during class meetings.

#### 3. Sunday Services:

- a. Sunday services with 100 congregants should break up the services to reduce the numbers and maintain safe

METHODIST CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE  
PRESIDING BISHOP

20 MAR 2020

WESLEY HOUSE, 17 SELOUS AVENUE, HARARE

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

"For such a time as this" Esther 4 vs 13 -14

WESLEY HOUSE, 17 SELOUS AVENUE, HARARE: Revd Dr Solomon Zwana, LAY PRESIDENT: Mr Brown Sanyauke, GENERAL SECRETARY: Revd Dr Jimmy Dube

**A pastoral letter to the churches and the people of Zimbabwe Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Amos 5:24)**

To the churches and people of Zimbabwe Grace and peace from the God of life and the Lord Jesus Christ Christian greetings from the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the World Methodist Council. We have heard the laments of our sisters and brothers in your country, and we are deeply concerned about the circumstances by which you are afflicted. We express our solidarity with all the people of Zimbabwe yearning for the realization of their human rights, for justice, and for physical and economic security in their communities. We have heard of the deteriorating conditions for women, children, young people and men whose lives and livelihoods are facing increasingly serious threats each day, with approximately half of the entire population facing hunger, staggering unemployment rates, corruption and insecurity, the country is crying out for effective accompaniment. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the economic challenges and seriously affected the already fragile public health and education systems. The ongoing medical doctor's strike has caused millions of Zimbabweans – including children and pregnant women – to have no access to essential medical care. While we understand the gravity of the challenges posed by the pandemic, we also recognize that the root causes of corruption and the longstanding failure to protect human rights lie in failed governance structures. We condemn the increasing use of force, violence and intimidation against people protesting these failures, targeting particularly those deemed to oppose the current government. We are particularly concerned about the mistreatment of political activists and other advocates for human rights. We strongly condemn the sexual abuse and violence against women activists. We find the incarceration of journalists and political leaders unacceptable. We are encouraged by the ongoing ministry of churches in Zimbabwe to serve the most vulnerable and call on you to keep remembering the 'least of these' even as you remain steadfast in your hope in Christ Jesus. May your voice continue to be raised on behalf of the most vulnerable. We believe that the God of life calls us into action for justice for the oppressed. We pledge our solidarity with you as we lift up your cries for justice, dignity, and protection of their human rights. We shall continue to advocate together with our member churches for this cause. Sisters and brothers, we assure you of the continued prayers of the global Christian family. Hold steadfast to the faith that we share, which binds us together in Christian unity, and compels us to seek justice and work for peace. In solidarity, Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca, WCC Interim General Secretary Rev. Dr Martin Junge, LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr Chris Ferguson, WCRC General

Secretary Bishop Ivan M. Abrahams, WMC, General Secretary \*As published at  
<https://news.pindula.co.zw/2020/08/17/full-text-world-council-ofchurches-statement-in-solidarity-with-people-of-zimbabwe/>

# INDEX 1

## ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTERS



### THE METHODIST CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE

Wesley House, 17 Selous Avenue,  
Box CY 71, Causeway, Harare, Zimbabwe

pbsec@mczconnexional.co.zw  
+263 242 250523  
0712 360 660  
www.methodistchurchinzimbabwe.org

gssec@mczconnexional.co.zw  
+263 0242 250523  
0712 366 665  
www.methodistchurchinzimbabwe.org

3 July 2023

Revd B. Chinhara

**REF: ETHICAL CLEARANCE FOR RESEARCH**

Your request to use the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe documents and literature to research on the topic **"KAIROS-THEOLOGY IN LIGHT OF THE PANDEMIC: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ZIMBABWEAN CHURCHES' RESPONSE TO COVID-19"** in partial fulfillment of your PhD thesis requirements with Pretoria University has been approved.

At the end of your research, you are required to bring a copy of your findings to the gatekeeper, in this case, the Church. The findings should be in the form of a copy of your thesis.

We wish you God's blessings in your academic life.

In God's Vineyard

  
Revd Dr M. Mujinga  
**GENERAL SECRETARY**

Cc: Revd G. T. Mawire - The Presiding Bishop

THE METHODIST CHURCH  
IN ZIMBABWE  
GENERAL SECRETARY  
03 JUL 2023  
P. O. BOX CY 71, CAUSEWAY  
HARARE, ZIMBABWE

**"The Lord Of Revival and Restoration" Psalms 85 vs 6**

PRESIDING BISHOP: Revd G.T. Mawire, LAY PRESIDENT: Mr G. Hanyane, GENERAL SECRETARY: Revd Dr M Mujinga

## INDEX 2



Zimbabwe Council of Churches  
27 St. Patricks Road,  
Hatfield, Harare, Zimbabwe  
+263 04 755 745  
+263-4-572122 / 573073  
[www.zcc-eco.org](http://www.zcc-eco.org)

10 July 2023

Rev Blessmore Chinhara  
University of Pretoria  
South Africa

Dear Rev Chinhara

**Ref: Permission to conduct research with the Zimbabwe Council of Churches**

Reference is made to the above request to conduct research for your PhD Program with the Zimbabwe Council of Churches.

We would like to inform you that permission to conduct research with the Zimbabwe Council of Churches has been granted, you are requested to work within the stated parameters of your study and comply with the Zimbabwe Council of Churches regulations and standards.

We also request that you share with us a copy of your findings upon completion of your studies.

Yours Sincerely



Rev Wilfred Dimingu  
General Secretary

EMPOWERING CHURCHES FOR NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION  
LUKE 4:18-19

## INDEX 3: Ethical Clearance



Faculty of Theology and Religion

Research Office  
Mrs Daleen Kotzé

3 March 2025

NAME: Mr B Chinhara  
STUDENT NUMBER: 20780975  
COURSE: Doctoral  
DATE: 3 March 2025  
APPLICATION NUMBER: T092/24  
TITLE: Kairos-theology in light of the pandemic: an analysis of the Zimbabwean churches' response to covid-19

This letter serves as confirmation that the research proposal of this student was evaluated by:

- 1) **The Research committee:** This applies to all research proposals
- 2) **The Research Ethics committee:** This applies only to research that includes people as sources of information

You are hereby notified that your research proposal (including ethical clearance where it is applicable) is approved.



Prof D J Human  
Chairperson: Research committee: Faculty of Theology and Religion



Prof Tanya van Wyk  
Chairperson: Research Ethics committee: Faculty of Theology and Religion