

Prayers, politics and peace: The church's role in Zimbabwe's crisis

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Although Zimbabwe is a multi-religious country, Christianity controls a major share of the spiritual market. As a result, the institution of the church will always play a role in social, political and economic issues – whether it actively seeks to or not. And in Zimbabwe, due to historical factors that saw the church co-operating closely with the state, it has also become a strategic actor on issues of national interest – and featured prominently in efforts to resolve the crisis that engulfed the country in the past decade.

But did the church really influence events? And what role is it playing now during the transition process?

In this paper, I discuss the role of the church in responding to the Zimbabwean crisis. The first part highlights attempts by church leaders to engage with political actors, while the second section analyses the strengths and weaknesses of this engagement. In the concluding section, I draw attention to the need for church leaders to embrace new strategies as they seek to contribute to the final resolution of the Zimbabwean crisis – and help the country progress towards genuine democracy.

BEYOND PRAYERS: CHURCH AND POLITICS

Since the church occupies such a central space in Zimbabwean society, it is bound to respond to major issues, even if it is initially cautious about adopting too 'political' a stance. In the face of the country's full-blown political and economic crisis post 2000, the church has intervened in a number of ways as it sought to contribute to a peaceful and sustainable resolution. According to David Kaulemu:

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“...churches have injected more inclusive, universal perspectives into Zimbabwe’s national conflict. This does not mean that churches have not been partisan, but their partisanship has been related to a fundamental stand against injustice, corruption, cruelty, exploitation, and unfairness. Many churches, especially those operating from a prophetic perspective, have been guided by values of universal solidarity, the common good, respect for life, and dignity of the human person – and these values have informed their response to ZANU-PF and their hopes for Zimbabwe’s future.” (2010:51)

Whereas some politicians, particularly President Mugabe, have sought to limit the church to prayers and offering guidance on moral issues, Zimbabwean church leaders have refused to subscribe to such a narrow interpretation of the mission of the church and have endeavoured to make a difference in a heavily polarised political environment.

The animosity between the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU-PF) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has resulted in violence and heightened political tension in the country over the past decade but there has been tension since independence. While ZANU-PF has always cherished the idea of the one-party state, Zimbabwean citizens have actively resisted this option. As a result, ZANU-PF has had to face the reality of competing for the hearts and minds of the voters since 1980. Regarding itself as the sole liberator of the people, ZANU-PF has not enjoyed sharing political space with its rivals. This was the case in the early 1980s with ZAPU, in the 1990s with ZUM and after 2000 with the MDC. In many instances, ZANU-PF has used violence as a political weapon, particularly during the decade-long battle with the MDC.

The 2000 parliamentary elections and the 2002 presidential polls were characterised by violence and tension. In Mugabe’s rhetoric, MDC leaders were mere ‘puppets of the West’, who did not understand that the land rightfully belonged to blacks. Some of his slogans called for the total eradication of the MDC (Chitando 2002:10). The overall climate was one of fear and intimidation. The philosophy of *jambanja* (militancy) that emerged during the fast-track land reform programme implied that the rule of law could no longer be guaranteed. In many cases, the police refused to get involved in addressing cases of violence, arguing that these were ‘political’.

As the crisis worsened, church leaders sought to encourage dialogue between the political parties with a number of different initiatives, such as Andrew Wutawunashe’s nationalist ‘Faith for the Nation’ campaign. A Pan-Africanist who belongs to the Family of God Church and

whose political views tend to converge towards those of Mugabe (Togarasei 2006: 223), Wutawunashe argued that Zimbabweans had to take responsibility for the fortunes of their country. His campaign sought to infuse Christian ideals into the national body politic. For him, it was vital for all Zimbabweans to put aside their political differences and to work together for the national good.

The leaders of the three main Christian groupings – the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) – also embarked on a strategy to promote dialogue. Bishops Patrick Mutume, Sebastian Bakare and Trevor Manhanga held meetings with leaders of the two main political parties and encouraged them to shun divisive attitudes and to promote a shared national agenda. The church leaders pleaded with the politicians to consider the welfare of ordinary men, women and children – and they maintained that there was more to unite the different political actors than to divide them.

Church leaders also argued that the Zimbabwean crisis was indicative of a deeper malaise: the absence of a national vision and agenda. They contended that the sharp polarization in society had emerged because of the failure to develop a shared vision of the country’s future. In this respect, they spearheaded a campaign called, ‘The Zimbabwe We Want’, which culminated in a document entitled, *The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision, A Discussion Document* (ZCBC, EFZ and ZCC 2006). The document undertook a penetrating and honest assessment of the achievements and failures of independent Zimbabwe. It did not spare the church from criticism and invited Zimbabweans to work towards developing a shared national vision.

The production of the ‘The Zimbabwe We Want’ document gave Zimbabwean Christians the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between their faith and their civic duties. Whereas many politicians constantly advised Christians to stay away from politics, consultations on the national vision document reminded Christians that they had an obligation to participate in political processes. The consultation process also helped Christians to realise that, while they might subscribe to different political ideologies, they all shared a common destiny.

“THUS SAYETH THE LORD”: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

One of the strategies used by the ZANU-PF government at the height of the crisis was to insist that there was no

crisis. Having considerable control over communications, the government churned out propaganda that denied that all was not well in the country. Some concessions were occasionally made but these 'reality checks' involved blaming others and were accompanied by calls for citizens to brace themselves for tough times. Jingles – such as Rambai Makashinga (Remain Resolute) – were played incessantly on radio and television, encouraging citizens to persevere as a prosperous future awaited them.

Meanwhile, church leaders interrogated the political, economic and social problems that were rocking the country. In particular, the ZCBC issued pastoral letters that highlighted the various aspects of the crisis for all to read. These pastoral letters were hard-hitting and exposed the falsehoods that were being peddled by the official media. The ZCC and the EFZ also issued pastoral letters that called on the government to respect civil liberties. They also challenged the government to tackle the severe economic crisis with greater creativity than the endless printing of the local currency.

The pastoral letters confirmed that the mission of the church was not merely to preach the gospel, but to stand shoulder to shoulder with ordinary people in their hour of need. And when one remembers that these pastoral letters were published in an environment saturated with fear and intimidation, one begins to appreciate the remarkable courage that church leaders demonstrated, especially as Mugabe always contested these prophetic pronouncements by church leaders and criticised them for playing a dangerous game.

PROPHETIC ACTION: THE EMERGENCE OF ACTIVIST CHURCH LEADERS

One of the harshest criticisms of the church in Zimbabwe is that the crisis did not produce a 'towering church leader' in the mould of South Africa's Desmond Tutu or Frank Chikane. This criticism fails to recognise the fact that the circumstances were completely different. While the world was united against the policy of apartheid, the situation in Zimbabwe has always tended to divide opinion sharply.¹ ZANU-PF has managed to position itself as a victim of the machinations of the West and has gained sympathy in significant parts of the global South, making it much harder to build a united front around the struggle for human rights in the country.

But despite the challenges, a number of organisations and personalities have emerged and courageously challenged the abuse of human rights in Zimbabwe and promoted the vision of a democratic and prosperous

country. They include Bishop Levee Kadenge and Sifiso Mpfu of the Christian Alliance, Bishop Anselm Magaya of the Zimbabwe National Pastors' Conference and Archbishop Pius Ncube of the ZCBC. These individuals and their organisations endured a lot of harassment and persecution in their quest to open the democratic space in Zimbabwe.

They emerged to fight for human rights when they realised that established church bodies were not doing enough to resolve the crisis. They sought to challenge the authorities in more direct ways by organising 'prayer meetings', where participants from civil society would strategise on more effective ways of engaging the government. It was during one such 'prayer meeting' that the police descended on participants in Highfield, savagely attacking the MDC leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, and his colleagues. When pictures of the bruised and beaten politicians were beamed across the world, they sparked an international outcry that added weight to the process that would culminate in the Global Political Agreement (GPA).

However, it must be stressed that these individuals and organisations were not unique in Zimbabwean history. They must be located within the trajectory of church leaders' participation in national politics since before independence. Church figures such as Ndabaningi Sithole, Abel Muzorewa and Canaan Banana were actively involved in the struggle for Zimbabwe. Just as they had emerged to fight for freedom, the new generation appeared from the churches to battle against growing authoritarianism and take up the challenge of promoting tolerance, good governance and respect for human rights among leaders in post-colonial Zimbabwe.

INTERNATIONALISATION OF THE CRISIS

Church leaders also played another critical role in helping to internationalise the crisis. Mugabe's powerful rhetoric around sovereignty has often given the impression that only Zimbabweans are stakeholders in Zimbabwe's fortunes – and that no one else has the right to interfere in Zimbabwe's internal affairs. Eloquently, he has asked, "We do not interfere in their internal affairs. Why should they interfere in ours?" In this context, 'they' refers to his erstwhile 'enemies' – Britain, the United States and 'their cousins'. The rhetoric is potent and attractive. The crowning moment was when he thundered at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa in 2002: "So, I say to Tony Blair: Keep your England and I keep my Zimbabwe!"

But the church considers itself a global institution. The church in one part of the world is considered an extension of the global church. This is why the notion of the body of Christ having AIDS has had such a powerful theological

impetus. It enables Christians in different parts of the world to identify themselves with the struggles of people living with HIV in Africa (van Klinken 2010).

Bodies such as the EFZ, ZCC and ZCBC are closely linked to global church organisations and they have certainly contributed to keeping the international community focused on the crisis. Visits by church leaders from various parts of the world have ensured that the country remains under the spotlight, while information has circulated between churches – spreading the word about what was going on and ensuring that Christian communities around the globe did not lose touch with the realities on the ground in Zimbabwe. This global view is directly opposed to Mugabe's insistence that particular communities must be allowed to stand alone.

DIVISIONS

Although the church has played an active role in efforts to defuse and resolve the Zimbabwean crisis, the effectiveness of its engagement has been limited by a number of challenges.

Over the years, the government has been quick to respond to criticisms by church leaders by promoting the visibility of others who are more favourable to it. Church leaders who have come out in support of Mugabe and his policies receive positive coverage in the national press and also officiate at national events. These leaders include representatives of the African Initiated and Pentecostal Churches as well as mainline Protestant church leaders. The net effect has been to divide the church into two broad groups – those in favour of Mugabe and those opposed to his continued grip on power.

There are a variety of reasons why some church leaders have chosen to be openly identified with Mugabe and ZANU-PF.² First, some have deep-seated ideological convictions that tally with those of Mugabe. These relate to his appeal to racism, African pride and sovereignty. For church leaders who have struggled against institutional racism in their own denominations, Mugabe comes across as an articulate spokesperson. Leaders who fall in this category tend to be older church leaders who had to negotiate racism, exile and condescending attitudes towards African indigenous religions and cultures. These tend to be predominantly from the mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions. Nolbert Kunonga of the Anglican church is a case in point (Gunda 2008). Pentecostal leaders such as Wutawunashe also fall into this category.

Second, some church leaders are attracted to Mugabe's emphasis on God's recognition of the equality of Africans with other racial groups. His Afro-centric inter-

pretation of history resonates with their interpretation of the place of Africans in the Bible. They are convinced that Mugabe is a God-given leader, who will empower Africans to reclaim their status in the world. According to these church leaders, Europeans have distorted the biblical message, which has created an inferiority complex among Africans. Church leaders such as Manhanga and Obadiah Msindo of the Destiny of Africa Network may be classified within this category.

Third, Mugabe's rhetoric on reclaiming the land for the black masses and his emphasis on the integrity of African culture appeals to leaders of African Initiated Churches (AICs). These are churches that cherish their autonomy and total separation from mainline churches. Leaders such as Archbishop Paul Mwazha of the African Apostles belong to this category of Mugabe supporters. They find his resistance to imperialism in all its forms compelling and also approve strongly of his public attacks on homosexuality as un-Christian and un-African. (Gunda 2010)

Fourth, there are economic and other benefits to be derived from supporting Mugabe. Some church leaders are beneficiaries of the land reform programme.³ Others are indebted to the ruling party for one favour or another, including getting free vehicles from the Reserve Bank. Leaders who are deemed favourable to Mugabe get preferential treatment on state occasions, use their political connections to increase their own grip on power and also enjoy the psychological benefit of feeling 'safe' in an uncertain socio-economic and political environment. The emergence of state-aligned church leaders has enabled the government to dismiss those church leaders who criticise it – just like the MDC politicians who oppose it – as 'puppets of the West'. This has compromised the church's ability to speak with one voice on issues of national interest, weakened its overall influence and limited its role in resolving the Zimbabwean crisis. In addition, the division within the leadership of the church gives the impression that it does not have the right to claim the moral high ground since it appears as sharply divided as the politicians that it seeks to call to account.

CHURCHES AND THE INCLUSIVE GOVERNMENT: PATTERNS OF CONTINUITY

One would have hoped that the era of the Inclusive Government (IG) would inspire new models of church-state relations as happened in the early 1980s when the government co-operated closely with churches in rebuilding the country. Unfortunately, the political temperature has remained high since the formation of the IG. Civic liberties remain constrained, while the police force has not relented in its harassment of democratic forces. As in

the past, churches have been caught up in the shrinking of the democratic space. Prayer meetings continue to be disrupted and church leaders arrested.

There are clear patterns of continuity in terms of how the government of Zimbabwe – or at least the part that ZANU-PF still controls – responds to criticism. It is highly intolerant and has not dropped the rhetoric of ‘enemies and saboteurs’, which was commonly used prior to the IG’s inauguration. Due to their international connections, some churches continue to be suspected of promoting a ‘regime change agenda’. The tension and suspicion between ZANU-PF authorities and these churches also remain.

Evidence that Mugabe’s side of the government is still uncomfortable with progressive churches can be seen in how churches have been marginalised in the quest to promote national healing and reconciliation – a key goal of the GPA. The church is well placed to play a major role in this difficult exercise and one would have expected a robust church-state partnership to support the process. Unfortunately, churches have not been openly invited to spearhead the process, which has been monopolised by the ineffective Organ on National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration. But the church has also been unable to influence the process because of its own weaknesses. In particular, the church has struggled to make an impact due to the divisions outlined above and because it has failed to develop contextually relevant theologies of healing and reconciliation. Sadly this has contributed to the spectacularly underwhelming progress towards national healing.

Political parties in the IG have also not been keen to involve churches in other critical activities – for example, by marginalising the church’s role in the constitution-drafting process. Operating with a very limited understanding of constitution making, the parties appear to have arrogated the right to make decisions on behalf of all other stakeholders. Unfortunately, the church has not been able to challenge such a shortsighted approach because it has not succeeded in positioning itself as a major stakeholder in relation to this issue. Once again, one notices patterns of continuity where politicians are comfortable inviting church leaders to say opening and closing prayers, while the political figures deal with the ‘important business’.

However, despite internal weaknesses, church leaders have joined forces with other actors within civil society to demand that elections should only be held when the country has been sufficiently de-militarised. While political gladiators are keen to have elections in the hope that they alone will wield absolute power, church leaders have argued that previous polls (especially the June

2008 presidential run-off) have been bloody and that utmost care must be taken before plunging the nation into another election. They have also done well to insist on a ‘roadmap’, which includes the adoption of a new constitution and the opening up of democratic space.

CONCLUSION

The church has sought to provide effective leadership in a heavily polarised political environment. In particular, church leaders have challenged the political leadership to give dialogue a chance. They have openly said that violence degrades both the victim and the perpetrator. They have called for realistic economic policies that place the needs of the poor at their centre. But despite their noble intentions and activities, they have not had the desired impact. Divisions within the church and the lack of radical theologies have compromised the church’s efforts.

For example, Francis Machingura (2010) is convinced that the church in Zimbabwe lacks the hermeneutical skills to promote healing and reconciliation. There is need for a more sophisticated reading of biblical passages if the church is to ensure that justice is achieved. This is the surest way of promoting healing and reconciliation.

The church will need to come up with more creative programmes if it is to have a lasting impact on the country’s political culture. Theological education must equip church leaders with political and economic literacy. They should be able to read ‘the signs of the times’ and avoid aligning themselves with partisan political agendas. Beyond the GPA, the church must move quickly to promote civic education, minimise political tension and equip its members with peace-building skills. It must remind its members and the larger society of the need for solidarity and respect among people with different political opinions.

The church must utilise its various ministries – including its women’s, youth and men’s fellowships – to inculcate positive values. The church needs to groom leaders who share its vision in order to transform the political culture. Furthermore, it must invest in communication and mobilisation so that politicians recognise its massive strength and take it more seriously. If it takes these steps, the church will be able to play a greater role in Zimbabwe’s political transition – a role commensurate with its pivotal place in the social fabric of the country. ○

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Endnotes

1. Whenever facilitating a workshop or a conference, I have observed that two topics are very divisive: the condom when debating HIV prevention, and Zimbabwe when discussing governance and human rights.
2. While it is analytically rewarding to isolate some of the main reasons, it is important to remember that these reasons are not mutually exclusive.
3. It must be pointed out that being a beneficiary of a contested exercise (such as the fast-track land reform exercise) does not, in and of itself, imply that one necessarily subscribes to the tenets of the benefactor.

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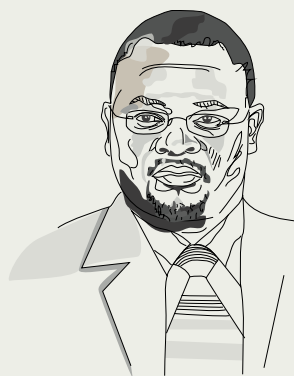
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