



KWAZULU-NATAL CHRISTIAN COUNCIL

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Theological rationale for the Church's role in addressing the current crisis of violence in South Africa

Discussion Paper:

This paper has been initiated by the KZN Christian Council and produced by the theological advisory group which has been advising and supporting the KZN Church Leaders Group through the successive crisis moments of the last 18 months. This group worked in collaboration with three other theologians from other provinces for this, the first paper in our series around the July 2021 unrest. It is humbly intended for the use and engagement of the broader Church in South Africa. As this paper is the first in a series of discussion papers, we encourage you to join the discussion and engage with it through comments and contributions. Please engage in the discussion by emailing Professor Kumalo (kumalor@ukzn.ac.za)

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Our context

The church in South Africa has always played a prophetic role, especially in times of crisis. An example is the 1985 [Kairos Document](#), which together with others like it, have played a critical role in diagnosing the prevailing social ills, analysing their causes and offering a prophetic approach towards remedial actions. Over the past two weeks we have been faced with a social, economic, political and moral crisis of enormous scale. Taken together with the deeply entrenched systemic inequality, unemployment and poverty, the Church is today called to follow in the steps of our predecessors. We have a role to play in being a prophetic presence in our nation. The events we have seen over the last two weeks, have exposed the need for deeper discernment about this current moment and about the road ahead. The role the church plays in responding to this moment in our collective history, is dependent on how we understand the causes of this crisis.

The current crisis is deeply demoralising and traumatic. It is also not happening in a vacuum. First, there is a global context of a viral pandemic (COVID 19) that has left no country untouched. The world is in grief and shock. In addition to this, political and socio-economic factors have created tension and conflict in several countries around the world. Most of these conflicts have involved a racial and ethnic framing that is rooted in history. This global reality has a place in our nation where the current violence, in the context of the last 18 months, has again revealed the many cracks in our society – all of which are rooted in our history as a country.



We have all experienced forms of violence that have left us dehumanised and disconnected from one another. For a unique moment, the post-1994 “New South Africa” promised a new order of democracy inspired and nurtured by “UBUNTU” (humanness) which gave us new faith in ourselves as a nation called to make our diversity our strength. We could foresee us becoming a prosperous (thriving) community driven and supported by the newfound blessing of democracy. The process to wellness and growth in communities on the margins of power has, instead, been slow. Each year since 1994, the growth of economic inequality has outperformed every promise of justice and South Africa is now the most unequal country in the world.¹ Just 20% of the population owning 70% of the resources.²

Within this context, the factional battle of the ruling party is the match to the fire, but it is not the fuel. Our society is in many ways an expanse of dry grass: amongst the cries of delayed hope is a failure to provide restitution for wrongs and injuries of the past, corruption amongst business, political and governmental leadership and exclusion from education, economic activity, housing, food security, etc. The paralysis and complacency evident in civil society, has been maintained by proving just “enough hope and order” to support the status quo and has thus contributed to the results of our current crisis.

Being Church in the context of violence and alienation

As the church, we follow Jesus. As Paul describes in Philippians 2, we are invited to look at him and take our guidance from his incarnate body and life. If we truly look at all of who he was, we see an important picture emerging. Born as a hated race, into a poor family, in foreign occupied Palestine, displaced and becoming a refugee in Egypt. At the end of his life, his body was nailed on a cross. This Roman instrument of torture enacted violence on those who were enemies of the Empire – or put differently, those who lived on the margins of social, political and economic power. We recall how his body absorbed blow after blow of violence and hatred. And then with this picture in mind, we think of the Christmas and Easter stories, and we remember that God is Emmanuel. God has come to be with us, to suffer our pain, to experience our struggles and to know the powerlessness of frail human bodies. Bodies that bleed, feel pain and bodies that die. We gaze also on the resurrection and the hope and promise within it.

We all come to this story of Jesus’ life from different places. Depending on who you are, you will identify with certain aspects of the story more than others. As we sit in this current moment of violence and alienation in our province, and we think about our context described in the previous section, our question is, where is God in the midst of it all?

Theologians have written of “the long good Friday” – where is God for those who live every single day in the pain and suffering that good Friday represents: those who are marginalised and poor, those who have small businesses who try to enter into economic activity in our communities but struggle, or those who work in others’ homes or in retail but struggle to make ends meet each week. The answer is that God is right there, being crucified with them.

As one theologian writes,

The crucified God is in fact a stateless and classless God. But that does not mean he is an apolitical God. He is the God of the poor, the oppressed and humiliated. The rule of Christ

¹ [The International Monetary Fund, 2020.](#)

² For more important information about the state of inequality in South Africa see this [Global Citizen](#) article and this, more in depth [Oxfam South Africa Report](#)



who was crucified for political reasons can only be extended through liberation from forms of rule which make men and women servile and apathetic...³

Towards a Prophetic Church in a violent society?

What kind of people are we? Steve Biko reminds us “it is important that we do not find ourselves being the stern-faced ministers who stand on pulpits every Sunday to heap loads of blame on people in townships for their thieving, house-breaking, stabbing, murdering, adultery etc.” Rather, we should lament that we have not challenged the sinful violent systems which produce such behaviour, and our own role therefore in maintaining the status quo. This is not to say that we do not teach people not to steal and kill, however, the church needs to also speak out prophetically on the violent systems which keep people trapped in these contexts.

Recognising the violence that has marked our history and our current reality, The Kairos document provides some helpful terminology to identify three different ways the church tends to respond to such violence: “State Theology, Church Theology and Prophetic Theology”.

“State Theology” means that we sit in wilful blindness and indifference to the reality we face in our society and choose not to see the ways that this reality inflicts violence on most people. This type of theology sees it as “normal” for a small percentage of people to have so much more than the mass of our society. It chooses not to see the apartheid spatial which still carves up our current geography and which today, marks the sites of racial tensions. It ignores the systemic violence that continues to damage people psychologically, emotionally, socially and distorts human dynamics. It ignores that we live with the greatest economic inequalities in the world. It remains indifferent to the reality that a failing economy, extreme poverty, hunger and unemployment, are all caused by injustice, corruption and greed. It is blind to the fact that vicious cycles of racial and cultural alienation continue and confirm the continuation of the systems that apartheid created. State Theology requires us to ignore the violence of this reality and deny that it has worsened the current crisis we see today in the violence erupting across the country.

“Church Theology”, on the other hand, sees inequality, poverty, unemployment, deprivation and exclusion as evils which can and must be eliminated. Church theology will call us all to pray for peace, and to unite in love. It will reference 2 Chronicles 7:14. It will light candles, pray against government corruption and pray for our economy to grow. It will prize unity and agreement, love and peace. But it will not go further than that. It will not push for action against violent systems.

“Prophetic Theology” is quite different. It calls for a deeper courage like that displayed in Amos 4: 1-3 where the prophet declares that God hates oppression, or Micah 2:2 and Isaiah 5:8 where these prophets lament unequal dynamics between neighbours. It can be seen in the New Testament too. For example, where Jesus is asked which commandments are the most important and he responds, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” he announces in (Matthew 22:37-40), Jesus then goes on to show multiple examples of turning the idea of “one’s neighbour” on its head (e.g. the Untouchables - Matthew 8:2-3, Luke 10:25-37). Luke 4 accounts for the connection between the prophetic call of Isaiah and Jesus. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the formation of horizontal (rather than top-down) power relations is seen in Acts 4:32-35 where there is a reimagining of power relations in the midst of an imperial system; or Ephesians 2 which calls us to one new humanity. In

³ Moltman, pp 473



fact throughout Scripture, we see the triune God continually calling us to shalom and peace between people, creation and God AND between one another. Prophetic theology takes this call seriously.

Using Prophetic theology, the Church is able to name this crisis and, drawing on our earlier metaphor, see and name both the match that started the fire and the “dry grass” that this match fell to. But, importantly, it also proclaims that the crisis (or to take the metaphor further, the “wildfire” we see) is not yet the full-scale explosion. If we want peace – or rather Shalom which is not just the absence of conflict but rather the presence of wellbeing, flourishing and contentment for all - then we need to do the work of Luke 4; to bind up the broken hearted, to lose/break the yoke that has caused these injustices and set free all who are in bondage, both those who are held captive to greed and wealth and those who are captive to the bondage of poverty.

In order for the church to help prevent the explosion, we need to call all South Africans to reimagine a country where there will be no need for protest, no need for strikes, no need for riots or looting. We need to imagine a country that will seek the thriving of each citizen (love one another as I have loved you) not just the thriving of the 5%. Prophetic theology will require us to even reimagine church, or worship, or church land and buildings and what it can be used for and how we can use all we have, to ensure an end to injustice.

Ultimately, the church has a choice. We could seek “peace” in this moment, or use this moment to seek an end to the cause of this crisis.

The Church’s ministry to a hurting and bleeding Country

Perhaps, in this time, there are **3 things to do as the church of God**. These three things constitute the Church’s ministry at this moment.

Firstly, to prophetically lament the status quo. Lament is a lesser used spiritual discipline, and yet we see it holding a core place in our canon of Scripture – and a core place in our understanding of prophetic theology. Lament comes after a critical social analysis to understand what is happening around us. This analysis strengthens our voice to cry out. We must pronounce in our lament, as Amos and Micah did, that in the strength and Spirit of God, the delayed hope cannot be delayed any longer and that we have agency and capacity as individuals to act in the pain we are in.

Secondly, our lament is both a call to repentance and an expression of a deep commitment to make things whole again. Repentance is a central step to owning what has happened as “our story” rather than pointing out the faults in all the groups around us. It allows us, to proclaim as Isaiah did that “I am one of unclean lips” (Isiah 6:5). And then from this place of repentance, as the community of God, we must speak about the hope we may find in ashes. The church lives in the story of the cross, but crucifixion is not the end of the story; resurrection is. With the resurrection comes new life that produces peace. Importantly, it’s not the kind of peace we find in a graveyard. It’s more like the peace in a maternity ward. It’s messy, chaotic and bloody, but there’s new life amidst all of this mess. We believe in a God who is present and active and always birthing new life, even in the blood, tears and ashes. As it is said in Ezekiel 37: “Son of man, can these bones live?”, the church is called to prophesy to the dry and disconnected bones. To call flesh and tissue and blood to flow into the skeletons of our broken nation and to cry out for the resurrection breath of Jesus to come and breathe Spirit life back into us.

Finally, we must listen and be present to the immediate needs of all our congregants as they tell their stories of traumas suffered, but also as they pray for help in their desperate attempts to put their lives together again. Communities are destitute, crying in delayed hope and the ashes of the current times. The most revelatory response is love.



Some final practical exercises to reflect on are:

1. Consider the impacts of the current crisis on the lives of the immediate community around you: food and medicine are an immediate critical concern.
2. Consider how your Church can be shaken out of its complacency with the status quo and its failure to be a prophetic voice – how can we lead our congregations to that place of repentance and re-orientation?
3. How will you help your Church to preach the Gospel of Hope and Resurrection in the midst of the ashes of the past two weeks?
4. How is your Church going to play the role of mediator in communities where serious damage has been done especially to delicate inter-racial relations?
5. How can you join your voice to others in the prophetic space to meet with those in power (at a local, provincial and national level) and remind them of their responsibility and oath to good governance.
6. Consider how your church could stand with our communities as they lament the loss of livelihoods, dignity and essential properties and also as they imagine a new South Africa that is meaningful for all.
7. Lastly, how could you actively develop a theology of hope, resurrection, reconstruction and development amongst your church? What role could reflection groups at the local level play in developing this theology, or the creation of spaces for corporate discernment and prophetic imagination?

