

The Ecumenical Conception of Public Life Praxis: The Case of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the ecumenical conception of public life praxis in postcolonial Zimbabwe as well as the church's actions to salvage the deteriorating national crisis including the leveling of the political field in the early 2000s. The views of the church are derived from the experiences of the union of ecumenical church organizations formed in 2007 called the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD). The ZHOCD, composes of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, and the Union for the Development of Apostolic (and Zionist) Churches in Zimbabwe, Africa. The study uses literature, augmented by informal discussions that focused on how the church sought the protection of people's lives. The study found that the ZHOCD intervened at various critical periods when public life began to degenerate due to state-induced corruption, election violence, and crime. In fact, the church built up specialist organizations to provide required humanitarian services as well as provision of advocacy and protection of human lives by confronting political oppression in Zimbabwe. This forced the ruling party to engage in a palace coup to retain political power in 2017. The article recommends that churches use their power to intervene when accountability institutions have failed because their impartiality to the exercise of political power allows them to perceive public life praxis with a neutral eye. It is further recommended that the ZHOCD needs to engage far and wide groups of Christian organizations of all persuasions if a comprehensive Christian and religious response to a good life can be achieved. The study concluded that it is only the church and other religious organizations that can understand and provide solace to people living in difficult conditions.

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INTRODUCTION

The ZHOCDs brokered a political impasse between the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the Movement Democratic for Change-Tsvangirai and Movement Democratic for Change-Mutambara. The fights between political parties had for long affected the public life prospects of ordinary Zimbabweans, especially during general elections. Churches began to work together to intervene in the deteriorating public life circumstances with the writing of the document

*The Zimbabwe We Want Document (ZWWD)*¹ crafted to influence government actions on the economy, governance, human security, and other basic goods and services like access to water, accommodation, and health. The ZWWD impacted upon the formation of the 2009 Government of National Unity (GNU) and the drafting and adoption of Amendment No. 20 of 2013 into law.² Literature indicates that the church's influence disrupted the power of elites by centering those at the peripheries on law and governance.³ This study is important in upholding the mandate of the church to the state. For this reason, the late Bishop Patrick Mutume stated that "her [the church's] function is to be the moral conscience of the nation, the sign and safeguard of the supreme value of a human person".⁴ The interactions of religious leaders with civic leaders however need to be understood within the context of accountability. While the ZHOCD has remained commendable in relationship to co-habiting with the state, many religious organizations cannot resist the power of the state.⁵ In other words, churches act together to achieve their perceptions of how a good life should be lived. The perception of public life praxis demands a high level of ethical standing and moral understanding that only established churches can possess. This is the prophetic mandate of the church to the world that helps in resolving public life difficulties. This article will first situate the trajectory of ecumenism in the ZHOCD, frame a theory of public life, define the role of the church in public life, and state the role of the church in setting national agendas and finding a theology of the ZHOCD on public life praxis. The adherence of the church to ethics and morality provides the foundation upon which ecumenism has a future through the churches in Zimbabwe.

Situating the Ecumenical Trajectory in Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations

The ZHOCD subsumes a postcolonial and postmodernist form of church in Zimbabwe because there are three groups of ecumenical bodies, those that support the ruling party, those that support the opposition, and the non-partisan group in the country. The ZHOCD claims to be non-partisan although its position is not a novel one because the colonial church used a similar stance to support the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe.⁶ The authors of this article however reserve their views because its claim may be more genuine now compared to the past. In the pre-colonial⁷ and colonial eras,⁸ some missionaries opposed oppressive regimes. The ZHOCD like the South Africa Council of Churches took it upon itself to act as a responsible conscience of society.⁹ Historically, the church has worked alongside the

¹ ZWWD, *The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe by the Churches of Zimbabwe* (Harare: ZCBC, EFZ & ZCC, 2006).

² Constitution of Zimbabwe (COZ) (No. 20) Act, *Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment*, 2013.

³ John K. Downey, *Love's Strategy: The Political Theology of Johann Baptist Metz* (A&C Black, 1999), 8.

⁴ D. M. Mutume, "The Priorities of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference since Independence," *Church and State in Zimbabwe Edited by CF Hallencreutz & AM Moyo*, 1988, 463.

⁵ Bekithemba Dube, "Postcolonial Religious Hope as Stratagem to Achieve Political Enslavement in Zimbabwe: A Decoloniality Approach towards an Uncaptured Theology of Hope," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41, no. 1 (February 11, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v41i1.2007>; Lawrence Mhandara, Charity Manyeruke, and Sharon Hofisi, "The Church and Political Transition in Zimbabwe: The Inclusive Government Context," *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 3, no. 1 (April 2, 2013): 102, <https://doi.org/10.5296/jpag.v3i1.3379>; Molefe Tsele, "The Role of the Christian Faith in Development.," *Faith in Development: Partnership between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa*, 2001, 203–18.

⁶ Babatunde A Adedibu, "The Changing Faces of African Independent Churches as Development Actors across Borders," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018).

⁷ John Chitakure, *African Traditional Religion Encounters Christianity: The Resilience of a Demonized Religion* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017).

⁸ Gift M Makwasha, "The Quest for God's Irregulars: The Legacy of Arthur Shearly Cripps and the Role of the Anglican Church in Nation Building in Zimbabwe Today," *Missionalia* 39, no. 3 (2011): 228–47; Gift Masengwe and Bekithemba Dube, "The Legacy of Sir Reginald Stephen Garfield Todd in Zimbabwean Public Life History," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021); Susan Woodhouse, *Garfield Todd: The End of the Liberal Dream in Rhodesia: The Authorised Biography by Susan Woodhouse* (African Books Collective, 2018).

⁹ Mutume, "The Priorities of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference since Independence."

downtrodden and oppressed even though at times it seemed to collude with the state on national reconstruction and development.¹⁰ Unfortunately, in the recent past, religious personalities and individuals have thoughtlessly become mouthpieces of the state¹¹ against the values for which the church stands.¹² The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) for instance collaborated with the government on national reconstruction, but not as a state functionary because once in a while President Mugabe threatened it saying ‘anyone [without] the ZANU-PF government was against it’.¹³ It needs to be understood that dictators are worried about the agency of the church and therefore seek to minimise its activities in influencing politics.¹⁴ This is because national leaders are aware of the fervency of the church during the liberation struggles and the unity they brought to ‘overthrow the oppressive regimes’.¹⁵ The authors note with concern the behaviour of ruling parties across Africa, especially former liberators who continue to behave like insurgents, leading to difficult situations for ordinary people.

This study advances the thinking that the effectiveness of churches in being the conscience of society has been affected by problems of funding as missionary churches (like ZHOCD members) depend on foreign support, pitting them of being labelled as regime change agents. Indigenous churches tend to collude with the incumbency because of their need for local funding thus becoming regime enablers. This has led to church disunity in terms of appropriate political actions during a political crisis.¹⁶ Funders, whether foreign or local, facilitated divisions in the church because of their dynamic, controversial, and differing social justice trajectories.¹⁷ Some postcolonial ecumenical bodies that sponsored and aligned with ZANU-PF included the Zimbabwe Christian Ministers’ Association, Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe, and Destiny of Africa Network while new foreign-sponsored and MDC-aligned bodies included Christian Alliance and the Zimbabwe Ecumenical Leaders Forum.¹⁸ This has created an unwitting identity crisis with far-reaching political implications in the populous Christian country.¹⁹ The struggle for justice, equality, and fraternity by the ZHOCD demanding political accountability, responsibility, and transparency remains key because of its neutrality and impartiality. This must not be examined in view of the inconsistencies encountered in the launch of the ZWWD, nor the use of the Social Teachings of the Christian Church.²⁰ However, this initiative led to the useful contribution of the church in the formation of the GNU and 2008 post-

¹⁰ Collium Banda and Suspicion Mudzanire, “Supplementing the Lack of Ubuntu? The Ministry of Zimbabwe’s Mashoko Christian Hospital to People Living with HIV and AIDS in Challenging Their Stigmatisation in the Church,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75, no. 4 (2019).

¹¹ Dube, “Postcolonial Religious Hope as Stratagem to Achieve Political Enslavement in Zimbabwe: A Decoloniality Approach towards an Uncaptured Theology of Hope.”

¹² John Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe” (School of Humanities, University of New England (UNE), 2021).

¹³ Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe.”

¹⁴ Tsele, “The Role of the Christian Faith in Development,” 24.

¹⁵ Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe.”

¹⁶ Obvious Vengeyi, “The Bible in the Service of Pan-Africanism: The Case of Dr Tafataona Mahoso’s Pan-African Biblical Exegesis,” *The Bible and Politics in Africa*, 2012, 81.

¹⁷ Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe.”

¹⁸ Obvious Vengeyi, “Israelite Prophetic Marks among Zimbabwean Men of God: An Evaluation of the Conduct of Selected Zimbabwean Church Leaders in Recent Politics,” *Exchange* 39, no. 2 (2010): 159–78; Paul Gundani, “Prophecy, Politics and Power: Changing Relations between the Catholic Church and the Zimbabwean State (1980-2007),” 2008.

¹⁹ Dube, “Postcolonial Religious Hope as Stratagem to Achieve Political Enslavement in Zimbabwe: A Decoloniality Approach towards an Uncaptured Theology of Hope.”

²⁰ Churches in Manicaland (CiM), *The Truth Will Make You Free: A Compendium of Christian Social Teaching* (Mutare: Churches in Manicaland (CiM), 2006).

election healing and reconciliation.²¹ The ZWWD became a code word for the 2018 ZANU-PF election manifesto: ‘*The Zimbabwe We Want*’, which was also adopted by the African Union Agenda 2063 as ‘*The Africa We Want*’.²² This justifies the assertion by Mtata that the church has always been setting the agenda for the nation and the region.²³ This role is found in the church’s identity and mission.²⁴ The church thus cannot be ‘welded’ into one position when the government that is supposed to be collaborative has turned out to be tyrannical using *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*.²⁵ An oppressive regime, unfortunately, undermines accountability institutions on public life outcomes for the poor and downtrodden.²⁶ The Church however has remained resilient in its mobilisation project for public life transformation, for instance, the ZCC taught ‘Let the People Speak’ and ‘Learning for Transformation’ courses for over 10 years before it confronted the ZANU-PF government with its 1996 NCA launch. ZCC teachings became the basis for further ecumenical collaborations in the ZWWD and the ZHOCD programmes of action.²⁷ This is because of the history of the body with the liberation struggle.

The ZHOCD puts the proclamation of the Kingdom in its programmes at the centre, because it believes in obeying Jesus Christ,²⁸ and in achieving social morality and justice in public life.²⁹ This is achieved if public life institutions discharge their duties without duplicity, avarice or disregard.³⁰ A well-functioning church seeks the fulfilment of this justice in public life.³¹ The failure of Zimbabwe, as a Christian populous nation to achieve public justice means public servants do not live exemplary lives, hence are disobedient to God.³² The church can engage the state to fix such anomalies in public life because such institutions must be run in honour of Jesus Christ. In this paper, an emphasis is placed on issues of justice because it defines the text and theory of the Christian faith to be the message of God to the widowed, poor, and orphaned (Amos 2).

Understanding Christian and Visible Unity in the Context of Public Life

Christian Unity

Public life requires to understand how the principles that define the church are used outside its circles. The church as a legal, theological, religious, political, social and economic institution has all the legitimacy to interfere in public life prospects (Matt. 5:13-16).³³ The church is however not a political

²¹ Ezra Chitando and Lovemore Togarasei, “‘June 2008, Verse 27’: The Church and the 2008 Zimbabwean Political Crisis,” *African Identities* 8, no. 2 (2010): 151–62; Francisca H Chimhanda and Aletha Dube, “Post-Election Violence in Zimbabwe (2008-2010): The Agency of the Roman Catholic Church in National Healing and Democracy,” *Missionalia* 39, no. 3 (2011): 268–86.

²² African Union (AU). “Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. African Union (au.int),” 2019. Accessed June 2, 2023. <https://au.int/en/agenda2063/overview>

²³ K. Mtata, *Three Possible Models of Transition in Zimbabwe* (Harare: Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) Publications, 2020).

²⁴ Gift Masengwe and Francisca H. Chimhanda, “Towards an Authentic Transformation of the Church of Christ in Zimbabwe,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (March 18, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.4776>.

²⁵ Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe.”

²⁶ Tsele, “The Role of the Christian Faith in Development,” 24.

²⁷ Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe.”

²⁸ Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe.”

²⁹ Thomas John Finley, “An Evangelical Response to the Preaching of Amos,” 1983, 411; A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Memorial Modern Classics, 2001); Robert B Chisholm, “A Theology of the Minor Prophets,” *Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, 2002, 401.

³⁰ Chisholm, “A Theology of the Minor Prophets.”

³¹ Chong Ho Yu, “Book of Amos: Transnational God, Social Justice, and True Religion,” Creative-Wisdom, 2013, http://www.creative-wisdom.com/teaching/sunday_school/amos_message.pdf; Billy K. Smith and F.S. Page, *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 113.

³² Vincent Juma Tago, “Education for Peace: A Case Study of the African Leadership Academy in Gauteng” (2016).

³³ Erik Sengers, “The Concept of ‘Church’ in Sociology and Global Society: Genealogy of a Word and Transformation of a Position,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 12, no. 1 (2012): 55.

organization, hence has no alignment with any political party because as Christians, the Church does not ‘read the Bible as a textbook on the pathology of religion giving rise to hypocrisy, idolatry, group egotism and collective blindness’³⁴; or ‘as a therapeutic text overcoming the maladies of society by being a source of political renewal’.³⁵ The Church bases its actions upon the ideals found in the Bible without which its critical ministry is compromised including its confession of faith. The confession of faith is sometimes affected by divisions in religion, calling the church to pull together from among all of its groups in what is herein called ecumenism. Ecumenism refers to the pulling together of all efforts by Christians of all persuasions. Ecumenism is a decolonial theory that evokes a spirit of courage to humanize others.³⁶ It focuses on the outward manifestation or fruits of religion, which distances itself from the pious commitments of a Christian denomination such as social justice, equality, and liberty.³⁷ By saying ecumenism is a decolonial theory, reference is given to this “mental category of modernity”³⁸ that strives to ensure that colonial “strategies of manipulation, co-optation, division, and control”³⁹ are removed. Decoloniality is a therapy for human survival that evokes the need for intersections between politics and religion where unity in the Christian religion becomes the goal for public life. Social justice and liberty center around the human being in the face of vampire institutions that perpetuate epistemologies of the subject-hood of the African personae.⁴⁰ The authors agree with other scholars that decoloniality resists oppressive narratives that link and delink the use of politics and religion in epistemic terms. This has been evidenced in the ZHOCD facilitating the 2009 – 2013 formation of the GNU as well as the production of the national constitution.

Visible Unity

The visible symbol of unity in the Zimbabwean church came through the Church and Civil Society Forum (CCSF) which assisted the state to form the Government of National Unity (2009 – 2013). This institution was formed by the church to act as a specialist organization that eventually assisted the nation in the production and adoption of Constitutional Amendment No. 20 of 2013 [herein, the Constitution of Zimbabwe]. The CCSF was formed from a broad spectrum of efforts in which the church was a major player.⁴¹ It represented a ‘network of faith-based groups and individuals with a calling in peace and justice work’.⁴² The CCSF framework created Conflict Early Warning System using ‘the community mobilising cluster, the capacity-building cluster, the violence prevention cluster, and the publicity and campaign cluster’.⁴³ These four clusters were used to build one on top of each

³⁴ Charles Villa-Vicencio, “Between Christ and Caesar: Classic and Contemporary Texts on Church and State,” 1986, xv.

³⁵ Sifiso Mpfu, “The Theological Dilemma Vis-à-Vis the Moral Options for Relevant and Practical Ministry Today: Lessons for the Zimbabwe Council of Churches,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiae (SHE)* 41, no. 1 (2015), 68. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2412-4265/2015/v41n1a6>.

³⁶ Mpfu, “The Theological Dilemma Vis-à-Vis the Moral Options for Relevant and Practical Ministry Today,” 4.

³⁷ Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe.”

³⁸ Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America,” *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (June 29, 2000): 215–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005>.

³⁹ Catherine Walsh, “Shifting the Geopolitics of Critical Knowledge: Decolonial Thought and Cultural Studies ‘Others’ in the Andes,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 224–39.

⁴⁰ Mpfu, “The Theological Dilemma Vis-à-Vis the Moral Options for Relevant and Practical Ministry Today: Lessons for the Zimbabwe Council of Churches”; S J Gatsheni-Ndlovu, “Why Decoloniality in the 21 St Century,” *The Thinker, for Thoughtful Leaders* 48 (2013).

⁴¹ Cornelias Ncube, “Civil Society and Peacebuilding during Zimbabwe’s Government of National Unity, 2009–2013,” *African Security Review* 23, no. 3 (2014): 284.

⁴² Joram Tarusarira, “An Emergent Consciousness of the Role of Christianity on Zimbabwe’s Political Field: A Case of Non-Doctrinal Religio-Political Actors,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 29, no. 2 (2016): 64.

⁴³ Ncube, “Civil Society and Peacebuilding during Zimbabwe’s Government of National Unity, 2009–2013,” 284.

other through ‘conflict analysis, mediation, and resolution skills’.⁴⁴ The CCSF carried out various functions ‘under the Civil Society Monitoring Mechanism through the production of quarterly progress reports critical to the sincerity of the parties’.⁴⁵ The united church has shown that it can remove destructive labels through moral re-imagination called the ‘canvas of mutual relationships’.⁴⁶ It created social spaces of healing, reconciliation, and restoration as it brought ‘people into the pregnant moments of the moral imagination: the space of recognition that ultimately the quality of our life is dependent on the quality of life of others’.⁴⁷ The initiative has struggled with ‘political party politics and the attendant societal polarisation’.⁴⁸ The installation of various social justice commissions is a result of this contribution. In other words, the church remains the conscience of society as various accountability institutions can be co-opted into national initiatives other than into the church. This makes the church the only institution that can restore public trust, renew the national social contract, advance the economy, and empower citizens to engage in the processes. Zimbabweans lost trust in politicians who are implicated in the looting of national resources and reserves including gold reserves and the use of state institutions to launder money. The church believes that ‘Human beings were given an obligation to leave the earth as good as they had found it at creation’.⁴⁹ This means there is no place for greediness and wanton accumulation of resources for natural resources to address the identity and dignity of all human beings.⁵⁰ The authors believe that positive outlooks can only be achieved when the church is united and that its ideas can be advanced and can be upheld.

The Life-Giving Nature of the Church on Public Life

The church is a life-giving institution of religious nature that has an impact on public life. The essence of the life-giving nature of the church on public life is fully realised when the various religious groups are united. Denominationalism and extra-institutional religious bodies such as New Religious Movements (NRMs) have difficulty working together and it takes a lot of effort for them to work together.⁵¹ A united church in Zimbabwe has always successfully condemned various state perpetrations that include and are not limited to the mass killings of Ian Douglas Smith during the liberation struggle (1975-1979); the post-independence (1983-1987) ethnic cleansing by Robert Mugabe; the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (1990-1995); the one-party state ideology and election rigging (1996); the War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Black Friday (1997); the fast track land reform programme (2001-2003); the Operation Restore Order popularly *Murambatsvina* (May 2005), and the short and long sleeve election violence (2007-2008). Some religious men and women, unfortunately, became entangled in short-term political gains as pawns in a much bigger political chess game.⁵² Christian theology however has advanced social justice and liberty based on the architects of politics.⁵³ This article wishes to support the view that the church has

⁴⁴ Church and Civil Society Forum (CCSF), *The Church and Civil Society Forum – Proceedings from the CCSF Bi-Annual Conference Held in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, 27–28 June* (Harare: Church and Civil Society Forum (CCSF), 2012), 9; Ncube, “Civil Society and Peacebuilding during Zimbabwe’s Government of National Unity, 2009–2013,” 289.

⁴⁵ Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe.”

⁴⁶ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 35.

⁴⁷ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, 35.

⁴⁸ Ncube, “Civil Society and Peacebuilding during Zimbabwe’s Government of National Unity, 2009–2013,” 291.

⁴⁹ ZCC, *Statement on the Civic Unrest and Violence of 14 January 2019* (Harare: ZCC, 2019), 5.

⁵⁰ ZCC, *Statement on the Civic Unrest and Violence of 14 January 2019* (Harare: ZCC, 2019), 5.

⁵¹ Gladys Ganiel, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵² Mhandara, Manyeruke, and Hofisi, “The Church and Political Transition in Zimbabwe: The Inclusive Government Context.”

⁵³ L. Kadenge, “God Himself Is an Architect of Politics,” *The Standard*, October 22, 2017,

<https://www.zimbabwesituation.com/news/god-himself-is-the-architect-of-politics/>; B. Raftopoulos and T. Savage, *Zimbabwe: Injustice and Political Reconciliation* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2004).

not only advanced social justice but has also advanced humanitarian assistance during national crises like the intervention of the ZCC in the mining collapses and cyclones in Zimbabwe.⁵⁴

Furthermore, the Church as a life-giving institution speaks to people's existential issues, takes into cognisance the experiences of people, and prepares people not only for heaven but to live peaceably and productively on earth, while they wait to go to heaven.⁵⁵ A united church produces positive messages that help permeate every facet of human life and does not act out of pressure or compromise.⁵⁶ The Church as a life-giving institution can provide credible advice on national resources and economy, state governance, and social protection among others.⁵⁷ This makes the church an agenda-setter in creating appropriate policies and action decisions for the state.⁵⁸ When the church sets the agenda, principles cannot be compromised and public life goods can be guaranteed. The ecumenical vision is found in a church that proclaims the Kingdom of God on the public square such as dealing with economic recessions, political upheavals, and moral degenerations, and not to sacrifice human life to the idolatry of power.⁵⁹ The authors also want to state that when Christians act together based on moral issues, the Church would be standing against the political stratagem of the status quo, and can bring hope to the nation as expected of institutions founded upon the eternal principles of God.

The Life-Giving Nature of the Church as Agenda Setting

The church has always produced a broad-based conception of public life in utter contrast to what the state conceives of public life in Zimbabwe.⁶⁰ The engagement of the state by the church opens up spaces for national dialogues between state leaders and citizens. The ability of the church to set an agenda for the state on how politicians should relate with citizens is referred to as agenda-setting and speaks to the de-colonial theory that frees human consciousness from repressive situations.⁶¹ The ability of the church to overcome political confinement in Zimbabwe where President Mugabe wanted the church to remain restricted to the pews, has created vigilance in the life of the church that has removed the trappings, violence, deceit, lies, and hypocrisy of religion used by the status quo as a stratagem of their political oppression.⁶² The church that sets an agenda for the state thus engages public leaders around priority areas like the constitution, economic recovery, and political tolerance.⁶³ Besides agenda setting, this church is life-giving as it uses national ideals, common laws, and national regulations to address social injustices.⁶⁴ President Mnangagwa's setting up of "a 26-member

⁵⁴ Gaga, "The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe."

⁵⁵ Gaga, "The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe."

⁵⁶ Dube, "Postcolonial Religious Hope as Stratagem to Achieve Political Enslavement in Zimbabwe: A Decoloniality Approach towards an Uncaptured Theology of Hope"; Bekithemba Dube and Milton Nkoane, "The Interface of Politics and Religion in Zimbabwean Politics: Rethinking Religious Leaders as Agents of Consecration and Repudiation," *Alternation: Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa* SP23 (December 1, 2018): 224–43, <https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2018/sp23a10>.

⁵⁷ ZCC, *Statement on the Civic Unrest and Violence of 14 January 2019*.

⁵⁸ K. Mtata, *Interview* (Harare: Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) Publications, 2019).

⁵⁹ Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Joshua Mqabuko Nkomo of Zimbabwe: Politics, Power, and Memory* (Springer, 2017); R. Wafawarova, "The Curse of Prosperity Gospel," *The Herald*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.herald.co.zw/the-curse-of-prosperity-gospel/>; Bekithemba Dube, "What about the Vapostori Now? The Ambivalence of Politics of Relevance among Indigenous Churches in Zimbabwe," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 75, no. 1 (March 20, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5202>.

⁶⁰ Mtata, *Interview*; ZWWD, *The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe by the Churches of Zimbabwe*; Churches in Manicaland (CiM), *The Truth Will Make You Free: A Compendium of Christian Social Teaching*; G. Masengwe, "The Church of Christ in Zimbabwe: Identity- and Mission-Continuity [in Diversity]" (UNISA, 2020).

⁶¹ Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott, "On the Idea of Emancipation in Management and Organization Studies," *Academy of Management Review* 17, no. 3 (1992): 432.

⁶² Gatsheni-Ndlovu, "Why Decoloniality in the 21 St Century," 10.

⁶³ ZWWD, *The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe by the Churches of Zimbabwe*, 12, 40,43.

⁶⁴ Gaga, "The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe."

Presidential Advisory Council comprising of entrepreneurs, business executives, intellectuals and Church leaders”⁶⁵ is a realisation of the resources in various professional institutions for agenda-setting and life-giving skills. The church’s life-giving contributions thus can be understood as broad-based approaches to agenda-setting for communities and nations.⁶⁶ Setting an agenda for the nation, herein useful for life-giving, if properly done, can create safe spaces for people to talk freely, in contrast to the hate speech of yesteryear.⁶⁷ The ability to speak without fear, which is part of life-giving exercises is one of the agendas that have been set to allow the state to proceed with national dialogues that lead to social security and national destiny (2 Kgs. 7:1-2). Agenda-setting thus addresses the problems of public life bankruptcy in Zimbabwe. This ensures that the nation enjoys its untended heritage without fear or favour because there are parameters and measures necessary to allow people to talk about issues that affect them without fear (Jer. 8:22). This article advances the thinking that agenda-setting is life-giving and that the church is the only prophetic institution in the nation, from among all other accountability institutions, that can, if it plays its role faithfully, bring everlasting change for the nation. It agrees with the thinking of the church that it sets the agenda for the nation, as it provides opportunities for citizens to open up closed spaces and to find their own lives again.

Challenging Divisions in the Church’s Contributions to Public Life

The divisions and differences that have bedeviled the ecumenical body, especially with regards to the generation of newer and opposing ecumenical organisations that leaned too closely to ruling and opposition parties, pose a challenge to the prospects of the church’s contributions towards public life in Zimbabwe⁶⁸ since the colonial era,⁶⁹ wherein “Churches were seen as partners in the development of the colony and for many years churches were at the service of the settler regime’s agenda”.⁷⁰ Missionaries brought divided churches, but only after these divided churches sought for unity did they start to fight against colonialism.⁷¹ The worst social betrayal of national transformation however experienced in history has been the collusion of the church with the state.⁷² This is one of the challenges the church in Zimbabwe has been facing with the ZHOCD trying to be faithful to its mission as it emphasized its neutrality and impartiality in dealing with politicians as opposed to indigenous bodies like the Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe under Bishop Johannes Ndanga during President Mugabe’s time and the Zimbabwe Indigenous Interdenominational Council of Churches led by Bishops Andrew Wutawunashwe and Nehemiah Mutendi which interferes with faithful mediation during crisis moments. The divisions, in the ‘new strategic dilemma posed by religious and political pluralisms’,⁷³ have been manipulated by politicians, with missionary churches being accused of harbouring foreign interests and indigenous churches’ party-political interests. The activities of the

⁶⁵ Takunda Shumba, “Mnangagwa Appoints Queen B as One of His Advisors...Full List,” ZWNEWS, 2019.

⁶⁶ Vengeyi, “Israelite Prophetic Marks among Zimbabwean Men of God: An Evaluation of the Conduct of Selected Zimbabwean Church Leaders in Recent Politics.”

⁶⁷ Robert Matikiti, “Christian Theological Perspectives on Political Violence in Zimbabwe: The Case of the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe” (2012), 113.

⁶⁸ Abwire Akuloba, Sussy Gumo, and Simon G Omare, “Religion and Politics in the Contemporary Kenya,” 2012.

⁶⁹ Masiwa Ragies Gunda, *At the Crossroads: A Call to Christians to Act in Faith for an Alternative Zimbabwe*, vol. 21 (University of Bamberg Press, 2018), 11-12.

⁷⁰ Munetsi Ruzivo, “Civil Religion in Zimbabwe: Unpacking the Concept,” *Prayers and Players: Religion and Politics in Zimbabwe*, 2013, 3.

⁷¹ Gunda, *At the Crossroads: A Call to Christians to Act in Faith for an Alternative Zimbabwe*, 43; Michael Lapsley, *Neutrality or Co-Option?: Anglican Church and State from 1964 until the Independence of Zimbabwe*, vol. 16 (Mambo Press, 1986), 34; ZWWD, *The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe by the Churches of Zimbabwe*, 10.

⁷² Gerald O West, “Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context,” 1995, 15; Gunda, *At the Crossroads: A Call to Christians to Act in Faith for an Alternative Zimbabwe*, 44.

⁷³ Frances Hagopian, “Latin American Catholicism in an Age of Religious and Political Pluralism: A Framework for Analysis,” *Comparative Politics* 40, no. 2 (2008): 149–68.

ZHOCD as an ecumenical body without the incorporation of indigenous churches, and especially NRMs, and all other quasi-religious organizations, will forever remain challenged for being foreign-driven until such a broad-based initiative is attained.⁷⁴ The ecumenical body thus should be cautious of how leaders react to fortunes and misfortunes during general elections and especially their celebrations and prophecies with regard to perpetrators.⁷⁵ It needs to be argued that the ZHOCD has some of its leaders victimised by the state through blackmailing, for instance, the person of Archbishop Pius Ncube who was blackmailed by the ruling party, but in his actions, he had criticised both ruling and opposition parties.⁷⁶ The authors note with regret that the church was divided by political parties, especially since indigenous churches began to support the ruling ZANU-PF while missionary churches had a message that could be aligned with opposition propaganda. With indigenous churches behind the state, the incumbent got the impetus to vilify all Christian fraternal critics.

It however needs to be stated that a united church promotes the public life ethics of ‘Association, Freedom, Dignity, Participation, Subsidiarity, promotion of the common good, respect for the environment and solidarity’⁷⁷ because it is driven by the desire to empower those who are at the margins (Lk 4:16-18).⁷⁸ The realisation that the church is not neutral to public life threats during periods of social and political transformations; and that it wants to guard against the manipulations of politicians who want to determine its religious outcomes by suggesting how its agenda has to be set, as what President Robert Mugabe usually wanted to do. Even though President Mugabe attempted to manipulate the church in post-independence, the Roman Catholic Church through the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace as well as the Lutheran Development Foundation, broke the silence on closed discourse like the *Gukurahundi*.⁷⁹ With this bravery, even though many men of cloth became victims of state brutality, especially blackmailing and naked violence, the resilience of the church made it difficult for the state to have a free fall. The current unity in the ZHOCD and the cooperation its member organisations keep are useful for protecting the national constitution, especially because it exercises political neutrality (or non-partisanship). This includes its faithfulness to the confession of the different positions of their members as Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, and Indigenous.⁸⁰ The church’s inclusivity, the authors believe has far-reaching implications for the identity and mission of the church, and especially its contributions towards public life. This article, therefore, recommends that a movement to unite churches be strengthened for the good of the public.

Finding a Theology of Public Life on Ecumenism

This article believes that a theology of public life cannot be found in individual denominational commitments because every church organisation has cleavage towards one form of ethical thinking or the other, leading individual denominational actions a threat towards causing political partisanship. The ecumenical church however can contribute towards issues of law, justice, democracy,

⁷⁴ Gundani, “Prophecy, Politics and Power: Changing Relations between the Catholic Church and the Zimbabwean State (1980-2007)”, 299; Vengeyi, “Israelite Prophetic Marks among Zimbabwean Men of God: An Evaluation of the Conduct of Selected Zimbabwean Church Leaders in Recent Politics,” 159.

⁷⁵ Matikiti, “Christian Theological Perspectives on Political Violence in Zimbabwe: The Case of the United Church of Christ in Zimbabwe,” 109.

⁷⁶ Vengeyi, “Israelite Prophetic Marks among Zimbabwean Men of God: An Evaluation of the Conduct of Selected Zimbabwean Church Leaders in Recent Politics,” 173.

⁷⁷ Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe.”

⁷⁸ Mpofo, “The Theological Dilemma Vis-à-Vis the Moral Options for Relevant and Practical Ministry Today: Lessons for the Zimbabwe Council of Churches.”

⁷⁹ Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) & Legal Resources Foundation (LRF). *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report on the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980 to 1988.* (1997) Harare, CCJP/LRF.

⁸⁰ Mary N Getui, “Quests for Abundant Life in Africa,” 2002.

humanisation, the environment, and national philosophy.⁸¹ This can be accumulated from the individual actions of denominations in terms of how each individual denomination takes seriously its identity and mission in public life actions.⁸² The ZHOCD inherited from its member organisations, strategies of engaging non-state actors to ‘dismantle relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that foment the reproduction of racial, gender [political–religious oppression] and geo-political hierarchies’.⁸³ This has helped to overcome geopolitical thinking in postmodern pluralism.⁸⁴ This influenced President Mnangagwa to use “The Zimbabwe We Want” in his 2018 election manifesto, which awakened the church’s consciousness in empowering and transforming politics as the Zimbabwe Kairos Theme became adopted by the African Union in its Agenda 2063, ‘The Africa We Need’.⁸⁵ This sets the church above other national institutions, and in fact, its effectiveness is a key that can be used in centering the church’s voice on national discourses. When the church sets out an agenda for the nation, it is always mindful that ‘The nation is bigger than individual church bodies, and has different goals from those of the church’.⁸⁶ In the theology of the church, partisan politics has always been condemned as fanning oppression and false hopes for the masses,⁸⁷ hence the need to find a transforming theology, identity, and mission of the church that can sustainably transform public life systems.⁸⁸ This transformation is possible because the church has precedents, religious flagships programmes, Christian theologies, and political containments it can claim and use in its national engagements in the context of its changing theologies.

In finding a theology of public life, Christian actors emphasise a non-violence approach in transforming the state using the church’s biblical and theological resources of the ‘distressing disguise of the poor and downtrodden’.⁸⁹ The issue of violence or non-violence in the context of injustice has been disputed by earlier scholars who feel that a proper theology responds to the circumstances upon which the situation calls the church to attend to. Cone argued, ‘No one [called of God] can be non-violent in an unjust society. If violence is the only option to gain liberation, then it is the most sensible thing to use’.⁹⁰ This agrees with the rare occasions where revolutions have justifiably been achieved by violent methods.⁹¹ While the emphasis in the theology of the church does not use violence to remove oppression, realities indicate that violence has often than not been used to remove oppression but with recurring repercussions derived from the initial method of removing oppression. This theology however can be developed to guide church leaders in their understanding of their service to the people

⁸¹ David Kaulemu, “Political Participation in Zimbabwe,” 2010, xi; Mpofu, “The Theological Dilemma Vis-à-Vis the Moral Options for Relevant and Practical Ministry Today: Lessons for the Zimbabwe Council of Churches,” 4.

⁸² Gift Masengwe, “‘Crossing Over’ from an Ideal to a Real Church: Journeying from Gullibility to Responsibility,” *Alternation - Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa* SP35 (December 1, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.29086/2519-5476/2020/sp35a8>; Dube, “What about the Vapostori Now? The Ambivalence of Politics of Relevance among Indigenous Churches in Zimbabwe.”

⁸³ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On The Coloniality Of Being,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (March 3, 2007): 243, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548>.

⁸⁴ Sara Rich-Dorman, “Inclusion and Exclusion: NGOs and Politics in Zimbabwe,” *Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Oxford*, 2001, 2-3.

⁸⁵ David W Stinson, “The Proliferation of Theoretical Paradigms Quandary: How One Novice Researcher Used Eclecticism as a Solution,” 2009, 506.

⁸⁶ Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe,” 176.

⁸⁷ Dube, “What about the Vapostori Now? The Ambivalence of Politics of Relevance among Indigenous Churches in Zimbabwe.”

⁸⁸ Christian Onyenaucheya Uchegbue, “The Place of the Church in the Socio-Political and Economic Liberation of Nigeria,” *European Scientific Journal* 9, no. 19 (2013).

⁸⁹ Chimhanda and Dube, “Post-Election Violence in Zimbabwe (2008-2010): The Agency of the Roman Catholic Church in National Healing and Democracy,” 42, 252.

⁹⁰ James H Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Orbis Books, 1997), 219.

⁹¹ Gaga, “The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe”; V. Fabella and S. Torres, *Irruption of Third World*, ed. V. Fabella and S. Torres (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 400.

given to them in their denominations and nations.⁹² Doing things within the church's identity and mission, therefore, unifies social and spiritual components of religion despite 'social fragmentation and heavy polarisation' characterising contemporary Zimbabwe.⁹³ Theologising public life due to the multiplicity of voices prompts one to think of the fragmented nature of Christianity as a disservice to the religion.⁹⁴ In fact, 'the fragmented nature of the Christian voice in Zimbabwe, which was inherited from the inception of the Church in Zimbabwe, and whose effects on Zimbabwe have been severe'⁹⁵ demands that new insights are developed. The development of a theology in the context of the church in a secular state demands a deliberate effort and commitment on the part of the church to live out its faith actions and theologies publicly and faithfully.⁹⁶ This is why Canaan Banana stated that 'I refuse to accept the notion that Jesus assumed the role of an honoured guest in the theatre of human slaughter and misery'.⁹⁷ This calls for the church to have and adhere to its own principles in public life. This should consider the traditions of both missionary and non-missionary churches if the call can be achieved.

The Future of Ecumenism on Public Life Praxis

The unity of the churches provides a formidable institution that navigates some of the crises that hinder the separate bodies of Christian denominations in their defense of the masses.⁹⁸ This defense happens through the protection of the national constitution, which is the continuing work of the church through its institutions.⁹⁹ This can only be successful if the church can deal with social justice, public corruption, election violence, and tyranny without fear of censorship, victimisation, or blackmail. The united church is against the covering up of public corruption, especially state scandals that include tender gates, the gold mafia, and the squandering of public savings.¹⁰⁰ The united church, through its institutions, can express its displeasure to a government that is drunk with the use of power to oppress its people rather than empower them.¹⁰¹ The church has learned the hard way because there are times when '*Great opportunities have been missed because the church spoke with forked tongues*'.¹⁰² Out of these lessons, church unity has taught and urged churches to become united in purpose and vision, which tended to remove blame-shifting when things went wrong because their focus would be on the bigger picture of the mandate rather than busying themselves with unimportant ceremonies of their political parties.¹⁰³ Some churches have busied themselves with national days of prayer without busying themselves with the 'national days of marching for freedom and justice' in order to change the destinies of people.¹⁰⁴ The united church which is concerned about people's destinies would confront, as in the case of the corruption in Zimbabwe, especially the gold mafia and money laundering by Christians who are not only 'looters of state resources through government blueprints and violators of human rights'¹⁰⁵ but violators of international principles, rules, and regulations. This article calls

⁹² Calvin P Van Reken, "The Church's Role in Social Justice," *Calvin Theological Journal* 34, no. 1 (1999): 198.

⁹³ Gaga, "The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe."

⁹⁴ Gunda, *At the Crossroads: A Call to Christians to Act in Faith for an Alternative Zimbabwe*, 45.

⁹⁵ E. Chitando, "Foreword," in *At the Crossroads: A Call to Christians to Act in Faith for an Alternative Zimbabwe* (University of Bramberg Press, 2018), 11.

⁹⁶ Chitando, "Foreword," 20.

⁹⁷ C.S. Banana, "Foreword," in *In Michael Lapsley Neutrality or Co-Option? Anglican Church and State from 1964 until the Independence of Zimbabwe* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1986), 7.

⁹⁸ Gunda, *Crossroads A Call to Christ. to Act Faith an Altern. Zimbabwe*, 44-45.

⁹⁹ Gunda, *Crossroads A Call to Christ. to Act Faith an Altern. Zimbabwe*, 45.

¹⁰⁰ Chitando, "Foreword," 11.

¹⁰¹ Gunda, *Crossroads A Call to Christ. to Act Faith an Altern. Zimbabwe*, 45.

¹⁰² Gunda, *Crossroads A Call to Christ. to Act Faith an Altern. Zimbabwe*, 45.

¹⁰³ Gunda, *Crossroads A Call to Christ. to Act Faith an Altern. Zimbabwe*, 46-47.

¹⁰⁴ Gaga, "The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe."

¹⁰⁵ Gaga, "The Work of the Heads of Christian Denominations on Socio-Political and Economic Change in Zimbabwe."

Christian looters deliberately because in Zimbabwe there is eighty-five percent of the national population professes to be Christian followers, for whom the church should investigate for crimes of state brutality and public corruption if the nation is to succeed in advancing humane public life praxis.¹⁰⁶ For this reason, this question which has been asked by earlier scholars is asked again: “How is it possible for members who share the same faith, participate in the same rituals, to proceed to cause pain to one another?”¹⁰⁷ The problem with the future of ecumenism lies with the church rather than the state, because what is at the ‘crossroads’ is the church and not the state.¹⁰⁸ With de-colonial thinking, the church needs ‘to move towards denaturalisation of modern religious powers, and the inclusion of non-modern systems and principles of knowledge, voices, and categories of thought’.¹⁰⁹ Thus with the unity of the church, which is achieved when various gaps between confessions are reduced, Christian cooperation and engagement can be increased, and so are public life outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The article has discussed the experiences of the united church on public life as the ‘moral conscience of the nation’. The united church in Zimbabwe has been involved in national issues since the colonial era and remains faithful to its mandate. The united church can interfere with the power of elites where all other institutions cannot because it is the modern prophet of the proverbial Israelite Kingdom that is set to resolve national crises. The united church is not expected to collude with political parties, and for it to remain the moral conscience of society, the church must safeguard ‘the supreme value of a human person’. This allows a self-conceiving church to produce its own strategies for resolving public life difficulties.

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¹⁰⁶ Gunda, *Crossroads A Call to Christ. to Act Faith an Altern. Zimbabwe*, 8.

¹⁰⁷ Ezra Chitando, “*God Hears the Cry of the Oppressed*”: *Analysing a Provocative Pastoral Letter by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop’s Conference (2007)*, 2013, 87.

¹⁰⁸ Gunda, *Crossroads A Call to Christ. to Act Faith an Altern. Zimbabwe*.

¹⁰⁹ Dube, “What about the Vapostori Now? The Ambivalence of Politics of Relevance among Indigenous Churches in Zimbabwe,” 6.

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