



From advocating to attending: The shifting role of the South African Council of Churches during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The South African Council of Churches (SACC) has been on the receiving end of criticism from scholars since 1994. This article contends that the 2020 national lockdown at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic was the pinnacle of the renewal of the SACC. Churches had to contend with the question of “the new normal for churches”, as they grappled with, among other issues, distant communication, social and economic relief, law enforcement brutality against citizens, domestic violence, encouragement of frontline workers, and the place of faith, science, and traditional medicine in combatting the deadly virus. Analysing primarily e-mails to member churches, media coverage, and documents from the SACC between March, 17th and September 2020, this paper undertook a systematic approach to the SACC’s response to the national lockdown. The SACC analysed its context through consultation with external bodies and member churches. It also prayed and reflected on the immediate challenges faced by the country. The paper concludes that the SACC took a more pastoral posture, with a shift from “advocating to attending” reminiscent of the pre-1994 church.

Keywords: COVID-19, SACC, church, state, science, liminal.

Introduction

The role of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) during the dark days of the COVID-19 pandemic is not emphasised enough by public commentators. Scholars agree on the negative impact of COVID-19 in general and the subsequent global lockdowns in particular on economies (Meylahn, 2020: 2), individuals (Chamburuka & Gusha, 2020; Van der Merwe, 2020), and churches (Kgatle & Banda, 2022). Furthermore, Veldsman (2021: 370) stated that the main emphases in South African academic theological publications grappling with COVID-19 were themes on the doctrine of God, hermeneutics and the use of scripture, theodicy, anthropology, ecclesiology, pastoral care, technology, mission, morality, theology-science debates, and concrete societal issues.

However, none has so far discussed the work of the SACC as an ecumenical movement during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was therefore the aim of this paper to place the response of the SACC during the pandemic in historical debates concerning the SACC’s effectiveness post-1994. This was done by searching and examining information extracted from primary sources such as e-mails, statements, press releases, events, minutes, and actions undertaken by the SACC between January 2020 and June 2021. The year 2020, including the first six months of 2021, saw the SACC being drawn deeper into the COVID-19 regulations. This was a trying time for an organisation that has since 1994 embarked on a journey of renewal.



This paper joins discussions around the effectiveness of the SACC in society. It seeks to engage recent views on the ineffectiveness of the SACC. There is no denying the value of the SACC during apartheid; in fact, the work of church leaders and churches is widely recognised and documented (see, for example, Roy, 2017: 147-174; Hofmeyr & Pillay, 1994; De Gruchy & De Gruchy, 2004: 112-1430; Karis & Gerhart, 2013: 77-88). However, post-1994, the church in general and the SACC in particular were accused of being silent when it mattered (Kumalo, 2007; Resane, 2016; Goranzon, 2011; Johan, 2015). Pillay (2017) noted that the SACC had lost its focus and vision. Highlighting recent national events such as Marikana, #FeesMustFall, state capture, the Life Esidimeni saga, and the expropriation of land, Kgatle (2018) dispelled the notion of “silence” and argued that the SACC’s voice had become “weak”. He highlighted the prophetic voice of the SACC in pre-1994 South Africa, which was more confrontational, critical, and authentic.

One cannot deny Kgatle’s (2018) assertion, because there have been fewer instances of the media covering SACC events, especially when the SACC lost key leaders to political parties and eventually also lost its external funding. In addition, Hovland (1992) predicted that the attainment of democracy and freedom would bring with it greater challenges for the church. He argued that churches and religion in general will not necessarily be persecuted or harassed, as happened to the SACC during the apartheid era, but that the churches will be “ignored, marginalised, and eventually privatised” (Hovland, 1992: 65). An example is mentioned by Womack and Pillay (2019: 7) that “[i]n 2005 and 2006 respectively, the SACC sent food to Zimbabwe (see Mail & Guardian 2005) and called for a concerted effort to tackle HIV/AIDS (see Mail & Guardian 2006), showing that a practical ministry within the SACC still existed”. Both marginalisation and privatisation are part and parcel of the consequences of secularisation.

South Africa has a secular constitutional dispensation, and religion is no longer as distinctive a feature of South African national public life as it was before 1994. A telling example is that the South African parliament no longer opens with Christian prayers, but with prayers from a range of religious traditions. In some events, African traditionalists take the lead through the burning of incense as they communicate with the ancestors. De Gruchy and De Gruchy (2004) pointed out the challenge that came with the growth of the Pentecostal and newer Charismatic churches with their fundamentalist “mega-church” trend. These churches entered the public life “after years of silence and which, with a remarkable ability, gained media attention for their own conservative ideas” (De Gruchy & De Gruchy, 2004: 208). Furthermore, Klaasen and Solomons (2019: 7) stated that since the SACC, which is made up of mainline churches, focuses mostly on development, and the non-mainline churches’ emphasis is on evangelisation, this perspective of mission post-1994 became dominant. It can be investigated or debated that the SACC did not receive media and consequently societal attention like it did during apartheid, which amplified its voice and drew attention to its work.

Womack and Pillay (2019) correctly perceived a change of posture from the media and some sections of society, during what they called the “regeneration phase” of the SACC between 2012 and 2016. They stated that “the SACC’s media presence started to experience a boom” (Womack & Pillay, 2019: 9). Of significance is that these were the years of the Marikana massacre (16 August 2012), #FeesMustFall (started October 2015), state capture (of which claims came to the fore in 2016), the Life Esidimeni saga, and expropriation of land events and debates. This paper does not debate the SACC’s work during these years, since several studies have already addressed this (see Klaasen & Solomons, 2019 and Womack & Pillay, 2019).

It can be argued that whenever South African society finds a void in political leadership, the church becomes the voice for the voiceless and a safe place for victims of oppression and injustice. Few scenarios come to mind. The church’s rise to the political scene can be seen in



the establishment of black resistance in this country, such as the formation of the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan African Congress (PAC), the Black Conscious Movement (BCM), the United Democratic Front (UDF), etc. The clergy were part of and at the forefront of these formations. The other turning point in the history of South Africa was 1960, after the Sharpeville massacre, where 69 people were killed and 180 injured. The Sharpeville massacre was followed by the banning of the PAC and ANC, which opened a leadership vacuum in the country. This period saw the formation of uMkhonto weSizwe, and the Azanian People's Army, including the Black Consciousness Movement (Jentile, 2018:75). The church rose to the occasion during this period with the formation of the SACC in 1968 (Roy, 2017:153). Post 1994, with the upsurge of corruption and theft with impunity, the media and society paid attention to the voice of the church. The SACC criticised the morality of the government, especially in the years of Jacob Zuma's tenure at the pinnacle of government (Jentile, 2018:172). There is no denying the fact that COVID-19 became a turning point for society, and the SACC became one of the voices in combatting the pandemic.

COVID-19 in South Africa: Timeline and impact

By late December 2019 and early January 2020, the world started to hear more of COVID-19¹ from media platforms such as newspapers, radio, and television. Karim (2023: 9) stated that China reported two cases of the virus on 20 January 2020. The United States of America reported a case the following day, and other countries followed suit. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the disease a public health emergency of international concern. Furthermore, Karim (2023) noted that by 11 February 2020, the generic type of the disease was adequately recognised to allow the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses to name it the "Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2", or SARS-CoV-2. The name reflected its close genetic link to SARS, but also highlighted its difference from SARS. On the same day, the WHO announced the name of the new disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, namely novel coronavirus disease 2019, abbreviated to COVID-19 (Karim, 2023: 10).

It was on 5 March that South Africa announced and confirmed its first case. On 23 March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a three-week nationwide lockdown with severe restrictions on travel and movement, supported by the South African National Defence Force, from midnight on Thursday, 26 March, to midnight on Thursday, 16 April (Jentile, 2020: 1). The lockdown caused many challenges for South Africans, and the church was not immune to these. One of the lessons was that the church does not exist in a vacuum; it exists in a particular context and forms part of its wider context; therefore, whatever affects the community affects the church. Pastors were severely impacted by the scourge of COVID-19 as many were caught off guard. The effects of COVID-19, and the aftereffects thereof, were seemingly underestimated. The dark days of COVID-19 dictated that there be discussions among local churches and denominations, of which some were SACC members. The South African government took the leading position in terms of what should happen in the country and churches had to toe the line. Observation is that this was a challenging time for many church leaders and congregations and, as a result, it appears that the SACC came to the forefront and became the common ground for its member churches, which included Evangelicals, African Independent Churches, Mainline Churches, Pentecostals, and Charismatics.

COVID-19 was a liminal season for the South African Council of Churches (SACC)

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, the SACC, through its communication to member churches, acknowledged that it would "make the road by walking"². The bishop was engaging with a book by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, titled "We make the road by walking". He further wrote that "[t]his new walk with our congregations and our nation will surely make a new road, an avenue of a South Africa inspired by the light of Christ through our united



Christian witness in faith”³. What this communicates is the reality of being in a liminal state. Beaumont (2019) defined the liminal state, or season as she called it, the zone between two worlds: the known world and the unknown world. Beaumont (2019: 6) wrote: “Liminality can describe the evolving state of an individual, place, organization, or institution – anything stuck in the neutral space between an ending and a new beginning... liminality can describe the disorientation of an entire era or civilization.”

Beaumont (2019: 11) further stated that a liminal season is the state where structures that define what is normal have crumbled. This was true with COVID-19 where the SACC found itself faced with uncertainty, with one foot rooted in advocacy, and the other foot planted in something not yet defined. This had the potential of bringing disorientation, which carried with it anguish and fear of the collapse of order and status as we have come to know it. Beaumont (2019) suggested that during the liminal season it is best to practise what she termed a “leadership with presence”. Such leadership calls for creativity and imagination. The leader in such a situation is led by the Divine. More contemplation and openness to risk taking, learning from past mistakes, and experimenting with the Divine are therefore called for during the liminal season. In addition, the guidance of the Spirit of God is a prerequisite.

It is further suggested that when leading with presence, three spiritual shifts are important, namely the shift from the knowing to unknowing, from advocating to attending, and from striving to surrendering (Beaumont, 2019: 37-45). Because of limited space, this paper discusses only Beaumont’s (2019) shift from advocacy to attending as the best theory to interpret the SACC’s approach during the Covid-19 pandemic. Beaumont (2019: 41) argued that

[w]hen people in the organization are anxious, leaders adopt an advocating stance. We decide what is right, and then we promote a course of action, a cause, a principle, and a goal. Advocacy is a set of actions targeted to support a particular outcome or policy. It is dogged and single minded. We admire leaders who grab hold of a thing and won’t let go, believing that this demonstrates tenacity and perspicacity.

In contrast, a liminal season is different from the other change seasons, because of the level of disruption it brings. In a liminal season, “we don’t have a clear picture of where we are, nor do we have clarity about where we are going. We only know that a step in some direction is required to keep on learning” (Beaumont, 2019: 41). Attending is therefore different from advocacy, since the leaders must depend on God because their picture of the future is unclear and the vision for the journey is uncertain. Attending is the capacity for deep seeing and listening during a pandemic. Niemandt (2022: 8) postulated that the pandemic would be a point of reference and a considerable signifier of this decade. However, “this post-COVID, post-Corona world is the ‘time that is given’ to the church. But it will not be a post-pandemic world. We may become COVID-proof, but we will never be pandemic-proof” (Sweet, 2021: 1). There are thus lessons that the church could learn during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following section traces the SACC’s origins and how it has fared with political engagements since COVID-19 dictated that there must be engagement and collaboration with all societal stakeholders.

Historical overview of the SACC

The SACC was established in 1968. Its origins can be traced from the first half of the 20th-century ecumenical movement in South Africa (Vorster, 2017: 128). In 1904, the General Missionary Conference (GMC) was formed as missionaries sought closer cooperation in fulfilling their evangelistic endeavours (Roy, 2017: 150). Even so, the GMC lacked authoritative status and did not make the desired impact, because its members were not



official delegates of their societies (Vorster, 2017: 128; Roy, 2017: 151). As a result, a more authoritative council, comprising “official delegates of a variety of denominations and mission societies” (Vorster, 2017: 128), was formed in Bloemfontein on 24 June 1936, namely the Christian Council of South Africa (CCSA). The CCSA served the valuable objective of giving member organisations a space to discuss and deal with matters that affected South Africans.

De Gruchy and De Gruchy (2004: 112) observed a few challenges that led to the ineffectiveness of the CCSA:

The Council was a relatively ineffectual body, unprepared for the tasks that were about to come its way. It was not taken seriously by its member churches or those in authority. It was virtually unknown to the public. In short, it was ill-suited and ill-equipped to serve the churches in a time of crisis.

Bitter contention among the CCSA member churches ensued, especially English and Afrikaans denominations, partly due to a tumultuous political environment in South Africa at the time. In 1960, the year of the Sharpeville massacre, a Dutch Reformed minister, Beyers Naudé, established a new ecumenical movement called the Christian Institute of Southern Africa (CI). This organisation organised Bible study groups and provided materials for Christians to understand their context. The CI encouraged the African Independent Churches to form their own association⁴ and pioneered the Study Project of Christianity in Apartheid Society. The CI gave “impetus to the struggle against apartheid. The result was that a ‘vigorous prophetic witness’ entered the religious landscape in South Africa” (Vorster, 2017: 129). In the advent of the CI, the ineffective CCSA changed its name to the South African Council of Churches (SACC), with the aim of facilitating inter-church cooperation. It is widely reported that pre-1994, the SACC proved to be very effective. It grew exponentially, with bigger financial muscle and involvement in oppressed black communities (De Gruchy & De Gruchy, 2004: 113).

However, with the advent of democracy, the SACC has been criticised for being irrelevant (Goranzon, 2011; Johan, 2015). It also needs to be noted that many factors affected the SACC’s work post-1994. The loss of financial assistance from international communities had a negative impact on many ecumenical programmes (Tutu, 1995: 96). As noted above, the SACC’s activities received less attention from the media, because the spotlight moved towards the returning exiles and Christian fundamentalists. It is also known that some SACC leaders, such as Frank Chikane, Alan Boesak, and others, worked very closely with the ruling ANC, which left the SACC with a leadership vacuum and a very conflicted mission.

The SACC has had a very fascinating and sometimes tumultuous relationship with South African presidents Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, and Jacob Zuma (Jentile, 2018: 167). In August 1995, the church adopted the critical solidarity model⁵ at the SACC conference, themed “Being a church in South Africa today”. The conference cautioned against the abandonment of the prophetic voice and allowing politicians to lead societies. Churches were challenged to be in solidarity with the state and communities and to engage in social justice and nation building. That meant opposing all that was unjust, and at the same time supporting programmes that enhanced economic renewal. In all this, the church was to retain its integrity and remain prophetic in its service. Critical solidarity can thus be summarised as the church accepting the authority and legitimacy of the government and pledging its support and solidarity where necessary. However, this solidarity was to manifest in the maintenance of a significant separation from the government (Kumalo, 2013: 633); that is, the church and state were to keep their relative autonomies from each other. The SACC faced the challenge of being co-opted as uncritical collaborators in engagements with government representatives and its independence being threatened. The SACC wanted critical solidarity, which may have been interpreted by the government as “cooperating solidarity”. Due to these tensions, “critical



solidarity” was amended to “critical engagement” in 2001 because the church realised that it could not be a subordinate collaborator with the state (Kretzschmar, 2012: 139). For the purposes of national development, the government anticipated the church joining the ANC-led state in its initiatives. Former president Nelson Mandela recognised and publicly accredited the church for its role during the liberation effort and in changing society. Resane (2016: 4) wrote that “It is clear that Mandela gave churches the pavilion of honour in transforming South Africa.” Although Mandela and Mbeki may be commended for reaching out to the churches, it was not without controversies.

Under Thabo Mbeki, the government encountered a great deal of criticism for corruption, silent diplomacy on Zimbabwe, and the HIV/AIDS denials. The church-state gap was felt especially when corruption escalated. These relations worsened with the arrival of Jacob Zuma. The “bad blood” between the ANC-led government and the SACC during Zuma’s years, according to Kumalo (2013), was due to the supposition that SACC clergy campaigned for the Congress of the People (COPE), the breakaway party of the ANC. Yet, it must be noted that there was no good relationship between Zuma and the SACC after Zuma’s rape case and subsequent acquittal. What cannot be undermined is that under the Zuma presidency, the SACC found its voice again, due to the many errors of and corruption accusations against the former president, which included the arms deal cases, Nkandlagate, and state capture; to mention a few.

The SACC has recently found its space and voice (see Womack & Pillay, 2019) under the Ramaphosa presidency, as demonstrated in the following section. The interest of this paper, however, was the SACC’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The SACC during the COVID-19 pandemic

At the beginning of the year 2020, on 5 March, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana⁶ sent out an urgent communication to all member churches. This e-mail was the first response of the church to the pandemic:

Thursday, March 5, 2020 7:09 PM

Dear Leaders of Members Churches,

I write to express a concern for what might happen when, not if, the coronavirus hits our communities. We have been monitoring the spread of the virus across the world – 79 countries, infecting 92,835, and more than 3000 deaths.

There are only 6 affected countries in Africa: Algeria – 5, Egypt – 2, Morocco – 1, Senegal – 1, Nigeria – 1, Tunisia – 1. South Africa recently confirmed first case of coronavirus. But South Africa is the magnetic destination for the continent; and its attraction is not dissimilar to the attraction in the USA, of New York, California and Washington State, all three locations became beachheads of the virus entry and spread in the USA.

I would suggest that we consider an emergency National Church Leaders Forum in late March, to think up strategies with government health experts. The preventative practices have to be inculcated, but churches and schools may need better preparation.

When a new disease is circulating, it’s natural for people to ask what they can do to protect themselves and their families. The SACC must lead on this.

Our proposed date for an emergency National Church Leaders Forum is Tuesday, March 31, 2020, Khotso House, from 10:00 – 13:00

We are inviting you leaders of member churches to hear your views. We will be exploring experts that can work with us, including the regional representative of the World Health Organisation.

Thanks for your kind attention.

In Christ

SACC General Secretary, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana

It is worth noting several things from this e-mail. Firstly, the concern the SACC shows towards the community: “... what might happen when, not if, the coronavirus hits our communities.”



Secondly, the analysis of the context, and South Africa's standing in the global community: "... *South Africa is the magnetic destination for the continent; and its attraction is not dissimilar to the attraction in the USA ...*" Thirdly, the consultation with member churches: "... *consider an emergency National Church Leaders Forum in late March, to think up strategies ...*" Fourthly, the engagement with government resources: "... *to think up strategies with government health experts. The preventative practices have to be inculcated ...*"

The above points were to set the tone for the SACC's response to the pandemic. The SACC wanted to get involved, and it was aware that it could not fold its arms and watch the government and societies fighting COVID-19 from the sidelines. On Tuesday, 10 March 2020 at 11:23 am, the bishop wrote to the churches again:

Dear Leaders of Members Churches

The South African Council of Churches is convening an urgent meeting of church leaders with the Minister of Health to consult on how the churches can play a role with their communities to assist in liaison with the health system. Moreover, the churches need to take the time to consider how differently to conduct their liturgical practices in the light of the advent of COVID-19.

We had proposed March 31, 2020, in Johannesburg, for this meeting. However, we would like to bring this meeting forward to 13 March 2020, Khotso House, 10th Floor, if this is possible from your end. Kindly advise your availability for this urgent meeting. We thank you for your kind attention.

Regards,

SACC General Secretary, Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana

Anticipating the meeting of 31 March, the church leaders met on 13 March 2020 to map the way forward; not only for the community of faith, but for the entire country. The member churches agreed to meet again the following week (19 March 2020), just before their meeting with the government. At this point, the SACC heads of churches had agreed to meet virtually every week. However, time was against the leaders, for things were happening at an alarming rate as the number of deaths were getting out of hand. The government also needed to consult with the church leaders as soon as possible. Khotso House communicated with the leaders and invited them to another meeting, in what was to look like the busiest March in the history of the SACC:

The President requested the SACC to help facilitate a meeting for Government to engage with churches and the broad religious sector. At the request of the President, we offered to convert our planned meeting of March 19 to one that would be hosted and addressed by the President and his Ministers. We communicated the same request of Government to the friends of the religious community, the Motsepe Foundation. And after discussions between the Foundation and Presidency, Dr Motsepe directed that their meeting be also made over to the Government. The meeting will now be at Sefako Makgatho Presidential Guest House in Pretoria; entrance is at Gate 10, on Nassau Street, off Dumbarton that comes out of Stanza Bopape (old Church) Street. It will begin at 9:30...

This memo shows that there was behind-the-scenes communication between the government and the SACC, and that the government needed the SACC's audience and vice versa. The trust gap was waning, and the SACC was to be one of the important links between the government and the communities. The government saw the SACC as a dependable organisation. After this meeting, the SACC member churches met in Pretoria, and further reiterated their stance on following both science and scripture in protecting people's lives. The results were a call for a total shutdown of the economy. On the other hand, the government had already been advised by scientists on this pandemic. What is important was



the SACC's own behind-the-scenes work. The SACC faced many challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these involved its relationship with the state and criticism from other religious formations and from the communities that needed more visible leadership.

Member churches' response to funerals and liturgy

As the number of deaths were escalating, the SACC faced critical problems. The first was how to handle the issue of burials. Pastors were initially not regarded as "essential workers"; they therefore had to remain behind closed doors like the rest of the populace. What was also concerning was that pastors were not only losing church members, but they were also losing their colleagues as pastors were dying. The irony was that in remembering the death of Jesus Christ in holy communion (through online services), one kept reflecting on the possibility of their own death. As pastors were talking more about the death of Christ, the reality of having to prepare for their own lingered.

The year 2020 signified the first time in the history of the church that Easter or Passover services and conferences were stalled. Reflections around this important weekend in the calendar of the church were needed. Of interest was the significance of Passover during the lockdown. Observations were made that Jesus and His disciples ate the Passover meal in a home rather than at a temple. He interpreted the Passover for his disciples and instituted what Christians were to call the "Lord's Supper". Jesus preserved the domestic atmosphere of the Jewish family feast. The lockdown imposed on us to reflect on the Lord's Supper as an ordinance that started at "home" before it became a church feast. The Lord's Supper, as we have come to know it, became the meal of the church. That means it is observed in communion by the congregation. By coming together around the Lord's table, the church emulates the Upper Room experience of Jesus Christ and the disciples behind closed doors. However, this time the church was not only "scattered", but the scattered were locked out of the fellowship with fellow believers. Nevertheless, the home was the invented place where the Lord's Supper was had.

The other important feature of this ritual is that of the opportunity for believers to serve one another. In Baptist churches, for example, the pastor takes a cue from Jesus Christ by breaking the bread and filling the cups and giving them to the deacons, who distribute them to the congregation. An online Lord's Supper took away this blessed opportunity. In the Jewish meal of Passover, the heads of the families led the observation of the remembrance event. In the Last Supper, Jesus was clearly leading. The question we struggled with was "Who is leading the families in breaking bread?" With all the challenges that South Africa has of child-led households or single-parent families, who had the opportunity to serve others where families had more than two members? Furthermore, the two most essential elements of the Lord's Supper are the "loaf of bread" and the "cup of wine". Jesus associated the bread with his body. The lingering question was "What if they don't have bread?" People had lost their jobs and businesses and the levels of poverty were climbing ever-higher, and the majority depended on handouts. Balcomb (1991: 96) was correct that in the face of poverty, one thinks of bread in terms of work and of everyday commerce. The church needed to be creative in administering the Lord's Supper. One of the ways was to ask people to have their own Lord's Supper services at home and to use any element necessary in remembering the body of Christ. People could share a meal; eating *pap* and drinking water, for example.

Church/faith, science, and African traditional medicine

In the SACC meetings there were theological debates around issues of the church and science, the church and politics, and church set against church. As it can be observed in the communiqué between the SACC and its member churches, the SACC called upon scientists to address church leaders and eventually embraced scientific evidence on COVID-19 and vaccines. The result was that the SACC led a campaign to lock down the country, alleviate



poverty, and, later, promote the vaccination. On 18 June 2020, Bishop Mpumlwana, the General Secretary of the SACC, was co-opted to chair the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Social Behavioural Change (Department of Health, 2020).

There was, however, immense distrust in medical services and science by some Christians around the globe and in South Africa; notably from the Charismatic/Pentecostal movement.

Kgatle and Banda (2022: 2) wrote that

the distrust in medical services and science exists even among well-educated and well-informed Pentecostals. Case in point, South Africa's outgoing Chief Justice, Mogoeng Mogoeng, a fervent Pentecostal, expressed his suspicions about the COVID-19 vaccines in ways that riled the medical community and left some even calling for his removal from office.

In his recent book, *Standing up for science*, Dr Abdool Karim wrote about the disinformation bandwagon during the COVID-19. One of his concerns was the "miracle cures" stories he had heard. He wrote: "I had many miracle cure challenges to repudiate during the pandemic" (Karim, 2023: 290). South African newer Charismatic Pentecostals were not the only ones questioning the science. Popular Pentecostal Pastor Adeboye, General Overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), told his Twitter followers: "I want to assure you that there is no virus that will come near you because it is written that 'He that dwelleth in the secret place of Most High shall abide under the shadow Almighty'." This announcement was made in February 2020 (Brill, 2020). The late T.B. Joshua, pastor of the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN), predicted that the coronavirus pandemic would be gone by 27 March 2020, which did not happen. Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, founder of Love World Incorporated, asserted that individuals were not being murdered by the coronavirus but by the apparatus of the 5G network.

Not all Charismatic/Pentecostals, however, had a problem with the science. Mulutsi (2022: 147) clarified how and why the COVID-19 pandemic had split Pentecostals and stated that "those who believe that it is a coincidence of scientific occurrence believe in medical intervention. Those who believe that the pandemic was planned, trust in God as a measure that supersedes all non-scientific measures". Nevertheless, during the dark days of COVID-19, the debate of faith and science was brought to the public domain. The lesson was that church leaders needed to find each other on these issues, especially since some scientists are church members. Christian leaders should therefore not view science with suspicion.

Supplementary to the faith versus science debates were discussions among Christians on the use of African traditional medicine to supplement the healthcare system's medicine. Beyers (2020) alluded to the element of traditional leaders seeking to assist in curbing the plague of the coronavirus using traditional medicine. He noted that the traditional leaders sought the audience of the South African government to consult and involve the traditional healers operating in rural areas to help fight the spread of the virus. The argument was that people in those areas were struggling to access government healthcare systems, and that "traditional healers may, in some instances, be the first point of contact of people infected by the virus" (Beyers, 2020: 2).

The government was reluctant to allow traditionalists to officially use natural herbs to treat coronavirus symptoms; however, Christians might have used traditional medicine and natural resources to either protect themselves from the virus or to deal with the symptoms thereof. There were various believers who wanted to know whether it was acceptable "scripturally" to use traditional medicine or natural resources as a child of God. There were references to substances such as *umhlonyane/lengana* (African wormwood), *intsangu* (dagga), mulberry



leaves, *serokolo* (*Siphonochilus aethiopicus*), eucalyptus leaves, *moringa* (to prevent clotting), honey, lemon, red onion, ginger, and garlic and practices such as *ukufutha* (hot stone steaming). It would have been difficult to explain that some of the Western medicines on the shelves contain these natural resources.

The use of natural herbs created a “faith crisis” and demanded attention. To appreciate this confusion, one needs to understand the concept of “conversion” in the doctrine of evangelicals. Conversion, also known as being “born again” or “receiving Christ as one’s personal Lord and Saviour” (Ntlha, 2005: 27), has been interpreted by many to mean leaving behind everything that has to do with their previous lives and traditional belief systems. After conversion, people depend almost entirely on “faith” for healing, success, and for their daily experiences. COVID-19 interrupted this belief system, and traditional medicine was an additional option towards healing. The argument can be made that African Christians should not disregard African traditional solutions. Beyers’ (2020: 2) research found that between 80% and 90% of black people in South Africa consult traditional healers, as well as biomedical health practitioners, and that 70% to 80% of people living in South Africa consult traditional healers before consulting other healthcare practitioners. In addition, 70% to 80% of Africans consult traditional healers for physiological, psychiatric, and spiritual needs. Some of these people consider themselves Christians; the church therefore needs to appreciate that African Traditional Religion coexists with Christianity in our context.

Furthermore, Gehman (2005: 5-6) was correct in explaining the evidence for the survival of African Traditional Religion. He observed the rise of African independent/initiated churches as the result of the emptiness created by the loss of traditional religion⁷ and culture and the inadequacy of modernity and the many forms of Christianity to fill that void. African urbanites also still maintain personal contact with their rural homes through culture or tradition. The African worldview and rural values are not completely lost, and traditional ideals are mostly upheld. As a result, there are Christians who embrace both the Christian/Western thought and the African traditional world systems. Traditional concepts are not completely lost, and many believers operate with two thought systems at once, and both systems are close to each other. Each is only superficially modified by the other (Gehman, 2005: 6). For a church going through a pandemic, it is imperative to keep in mind that people may revert to their cultural practices while remaining Christians.

Church and State

The other debate, which this paper pays much attention to, is the relationship between the church and state or religion and politics in a democracy. Even though the battle against COVID-19 was fought by scientists, it was led by a democratically elected government. The SACC engaged with the government especially about the lockdown, which eventually also affected churches. The SACC did this in one meeting at the Presidential Guesthouse next to the Union Buildings. This did not sit well with many Charismatic/Pentecostal churches, who later organised themselves to march to parliament in protest of the closure of churches (Kalipa, 2021; Jacaranda FM, 2021). Bishop Kelly Montsho said they were a cluster “representing around 257 Charismatic independent churches across the country” (Moatshe, 2021). What was noticeable in these marches were mantras and obscenities against the SACC, even accusations that SACC pastors were all paid by the government. Montsho further blamed the government for only consulting with the SACC, which did not represent them.

The debate was on how churches should relate to politics, especially in a democracy. These debates are not new; however, during the dark days of the COVID-19 pandemic they played out in public and gave a very unpleasant picture of the body of Christ. As a result, in most communities, Charismatic/Pentecostal pastors seldom collaborate with pastors associated with the SACC. The Charismatics/Pentecostals have their own formations. The church is missing an opportunity of having a powerful voice by devouring each other in public. Apostle



Paul warned the Galatians about this behaviour: “If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (Galatians, 5: 15).

When cases of corruption were reported during the lockdown, the SACC organised a silent protest in all provinces around the country, with the main event held at the Union Buildings in Pretoria⁸. The SACC was not going to be silenced or suppressed by the government. Critical engagement leaves the church with a challenge of educating the ministers to learn to engage the state. Without sharp-minded leaders, the church will remain silent and marginalised, and at worst withdrawn from public life. Post-1994, life has been difficult for the church, for it had to contest for space with the ruling ANC and the growing opposition of the Democratic Alliance (DA), the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and other vocal civil society actors.

Concluding analysis: The SACC’s pastoral work

Following its meetings with the government and other stakeholders, the SACC National Church Leaders Forum established a task team, chaired by Anglican Archbishop Thabo Makgoba. This team was to be guided by the SEE-JUDGE-ACT model of “informing ourselves, applying our faith lenses and determining courses of action that will yield the best results for the most people, most effectively and efficiently” (SACC, 2016). The SACC sought to prepare member churches of “what will be the new normal for churches”. The matters of concern included the “Church by Distant Communication”, “Schools Opening – To Be or Not to Be”, “Social & Economic Relief”, “Brutality Against Communities”, “Domestic Violence”, “Frontline Workers”, “Cuban Doctors”, and “The Place of Science in Our COVID Combat”. The SACC sought to emphasise a message of hope and a view of the church as the “Light of the World” in the coronavirus situation. Its strategy, as shown in the following figure, included relief, awareness, care, support, and advocacy. Advocacy, as the SACC was previously known for, was one of the pillars in its response, but not the main one.

The group of churches (SACC) took a more pastoral role as it emphasised relief, care, support, and awareness as its core response to the pandemic. This makes Beaumont’s (2019) theory of “attending” very clear and relevant. The SACC became more pastoral in its “attending” approach. Not only did it engage the government and other religious formations, but it also appealed to its member churches to be involved in their communities through what it termed Local Ecumenical Action Networks (LEANs). Without waiting for the government or foreign assistance, the ecumenical movement showed its concern for the South African populace. This is what pastoral leadership is about. In their theory of pastoral care, Thayer and Browning (1985: 64-65) postulated that the pastoral ministry’s primary function is to intervene in a crisis. The aim of intervention is not only restoration and strengthening of coping abilities, but the utilisation of current experience to deepen the person’s consciousness of the moment. Furthermore, pastoral attending enables people to “experience and order their lives in openness to and according to the dimension of the Sacred Transcendent as manifested in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures” (Thayer & Browning, 1985: 64).

The SACC took time to pray and ask for God’s guidance in the time of crisis. These prayer sessions were not just for enquiring from the Divine on the uncertain future but were moments when the unity of the church was made visible. This can be interpreted as a “unity through diversity” in an ecumenical movement. At this time, doctrinal differences did not matter, only the fact of human dependence on the transcendent God. Furthermore, the SACC used prayer sessions as times of discussion and meaning giving to what people were going through, which eventually led to designs of effective intervention. In a pandemic, we learn that prayer as a pastoral care tool is to be informed by in-depth psychology. People were severely affected psychologically by the COVID-19 pandemic. The SACC addressed this very well by inviting specialists to assist in the analysis of their context.



In analysing its context, after consultation with member churches and engagement with government resources, the SACC mastered the theory of leading in a liminal season, for it sought to assist people to manage their anxieties, embrace the freedom of the unknown, and explore new possible pathways, and it resisted the temptation to reorient people before they were ready (Beaumont, 2019: 20). Ministering during the COVID-19 pandemic dictated that the SACC reflect on several matters. This was a liminal moment, where the SACC and all organisations were faced with an unknown future; however, the SACC moved from advocacy to attending or pastoral leadership. This required the SACC to be more 'spiritual', which calls for prayer and the understanding of the experience of God as revealed in the Bible.

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