



# *'ICawa ivaliwe':* The Church During the Pandemic

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## Abstract

The closure of Sunday services during the national lockdown created an uproar among the Christian faithful in South Africa. For many, it was an infringement of their right to public worship and a direct attack on their Christian faith. This article argues that the uproar could have been caused by the underlying Christendom theology, which has led many African Christians to focus on Sunday as the 'great day', rendering Christianity a 'Sunday cult'. This is because between the second and the seventh centuries, the church became more dualistic, attractational, and hierarchical. Alas, Christendom, as a paradigm of comprehension, still exercises an overweening influence on our prevailing theological, missiological, and ecclesiological understanding in church circles. It is suggested that for the church to be relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, it must 'adopt the African worldview', 'redefine itself as a "who" rather than a "what"', and 'reconsider the incarnation principle'.

**Keywords:** Coronavirus, COVID-19 pandemic, Sunday, dualism, spirituality, incarnation

## Introduction

On Thursday, 5 March 2020, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases confirmed the first COVID-19 case in South Africa. 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. The lockdown meant that people would only be allowed to leave their homes to buy food or seek medical help, or under other life-threatening situations. The government regulations limited public gatherings, travel from high-risk countries, and the sale of alcohol and tobacco. In addition, borders were closed to reduce the rate of infection from those travelling to South Africa from other countries. A quarantine was also enforced on inbound travellers and returning citizens. All gatherings were banned, except for funerals, which were limited to 50 people. Religious, cultural, and sporting venues were to be kept closed.

This did not go down well with many Christians in South Africa. The coronavirus took away the most important day of the faithful believers – the 'Sunday appointment with God'. The announcement to close places of worship created a 'Sunday crisis'. There was an uproar in the country, with pastors demanding churches to be declared essential services alongside the pharmaceutical, medical, health, and laboratory services; grocery stores and spaza shops; and police and security services. Believers in general demanded that Sunday services be allowed, even if only for 50 people. Others, like the Freedom of Religion South Africa (FOR SA) tried to argue for the opening of Sunday services from a legal approach, by claiming that



their right to freedom of religion was infringed upon<sup>1</sup>. The uproar was so significant that the president tasked the National Coronavirus Command Council to discuss the proposals made to the cabinet by religious leaders of different formations.

Eventually, on 26 May 2020, President Ramaphosa addressed the nation:

... South Africans are a people of deep faith. Our faith is what has seen us through many dark times and sustained us. We understand the great impact that the closure of places of worship have had on members of the faith community, and that this has worsened the distress of communities who are unable to worship in congregation. Our leaders in the faith community provide spiritual guidance, care and counselling to millions of South Africans, and we are immensely grateful that from the beginning of our task of addressing this health crisis they have stood with us and provided advice, guidance, support and encouragement from the very beginning ... As we now prepare to move to coronavirus alert level 3 on the 1st of June, we recognise and appreciate their deep desire to return to their duties, to serve their communities and to serve society. After consideration following consultation with our religious leaders, we have therefore determined that as part of the regulations for alert level 3, the current restrictions on congregational worship will be eased in a carefully measured way. Places of worship may re-open subject to strict restrictions, which are absolutely necessary if we are to prevent infections from rising in accordance with norms and standards that will be set out in the regulations. Churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and other recognised places of worship may resume services, but these will be limited in size to 50 people or less depending on the space available ... <sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the president declared 31 May a national day of prayer, and stated that 'religious leaders will be recognised as essential religious frontline workers for purposes of spiritual counselling to members of their faith organisations' (Ramaphosa, 2020). This decision by the president was not received well by society in general, including some Christians, and as a result many churches backtracked and issued statements that they would not be reopening their Sunday services (Samanga, 2020). This embarrassed the leaders who approached the government on behalf of the church leaders, and it could have also embarrassed the president who was of the impression that Churches had consensus on reopening.

Nevertheless, the unease that arose from the closure of Sunday services was interesting. What could be the driving force behind this uproar? Many speculations were made; one was that pastors were feeling the economic pinch of the lockdown, as congregants were not sending forth their tithes and offerings. In other words, 'no preaching, no money' (Mathe, 2020). The other was that of suspicious Christians who felt that this was the beginning of church regulation by the government; they linked the closure of churches to the Xaluva Commission, which sought to investigate the commercialisation of religion. For them, this was an attack on their freedom of religion, and at worst an attack on the 'Body of Christ'. This paper argues that at the root of the uproar is the value placed on the 'Sunday service', which is a by-product of 'Christendom Christianity'. With the lockdown came the 'Sunday crisis'; the church as people knew it was taken away. Before explaining this further, it is important to discuss 'Sunday' as a 'great day' of church.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://forsa.org.za/lockdown-regulations-what-about-the-religious-community/> [Downloaded 2020/08/27]

<sup>2</sup> <https://nuus.news/sa-nuus-news/president-cyril-ramaphosa-speech-churches-to-open-national-lockdown-26-may-2020/> [Downloaded 2020/08/27]



## Sunday crisis

Christians assemble on Sundays, the day proclaimed by the Jews as 'the first day of the week,' and by first century Christians as 'the Lord's day,' because it was the day of Jesus' resurrection (Ferguson, 2010:324). *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Livingstone, 1997:1558) adds that the day was later connected with the first day of creation and with the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the 'observance of Sunday as a day of rest consecrated especially to the service of God began to be regulated by both ecclesiastical and civil legislation from the 4<sup>th</sup> century'. Sadly, by the nineteenth century and even in the twentieth century, 'Sunday was still a day mainly devoted to the duties of the piety' (Livingstone, 1997:1558).

In isiXhosa, Sunday is called *iCawa*. Xhosa people are often heard saying *siya eCaweni* (we are going to church) *ngeCawa* (on a Sunday). It is as if there is an indissoluble bond between church and Sunday. However, one will find that isiXhosa does not have such a word as *iCawa*. Where then does the word *iCawa* come from? Bud-M'belle (1903:13) stated that 'it is of Hottentot origin'. This article will explain otherwise; however, the same writer states that when the missionaries arrived in South Africa, they taught communities the seven days of the week. Interestingly,

[t]he first day which the missionaries taught them to observe was Sunday, the Christian Sabbath Day ... [A] flag used to be hoisted at the mission house, at the sight of which people used to flock to the mission house; or a messenger was sent round to the chiefs and headmen, and request them to inform the people that today is Sunday – *iCawa*, resting day. The natives then suspended all work and went to listen to the word of God at the mission house. The missionary *inter alia* explained the "great day" and told the assembly that tomorrow would be Monday, when they could resume their work, hence the term *uMvulo*, the opening (Bud-M'belle, 1903:12).

For the *Batswana*<sup>3</sup> people, the sign of the 'great day' was the ringing of the bell; hence for them Sunday is known as *Letsatsi la tshipi* (Day of the Bell). There is an agreement among Xhosa-speaking people that the term *iCawa* is unknown. A belief is that, upon the arrival of the missionaries, they found an interesting practice among Xhosa households or homesteads called *Ingcawe*<sup>4</sup>. This refers to a family gathering that was held on a specific day set by the family patriarchs where every member of the family was invited to discuss issues that affect the family, to teach the younger generation of the family traditions and culture, and to correct adults if they were found to have done wrong. Missionaries enjoyed visiting these *Ingcawe* sessions because it gave them an opportunity to evangelise families. Since white missionaries had difficulty pronouncing *Ingcawe*, the missionaries called these gatherings *iCawa*. With time, the missionaries invited people to the mission house, where they held their own *iCawa*. For people to hear the word of God, they must go to *eCaweni* (church) *ngeCawa* (on Sunday)<sup>5</sup>.

It is possible that the converted Africans had sought a god whose authority would go beyond the homestead and chiefdom. Christian missionaries provided such a god, but 'the problem

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<sup>3</sup> Batswana are the native people of south-western Botswana, North West and some parts of Northern Cape provinces of South Africa where the majority of the Tswana live.

<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, '*ingcawe*' refers an animal skin worn during the '*ingcawe*' gathering. The skin was traditionally used to wrap the body for burial, and eventually used occasionally during the initiation ceremony. Today the term '*ingcawe*' refers to the Xhosa traditional attire worn by Xhosa men [<https://briefly.co.za/24353-20-xhosa-traditional-attire-men.html>] [Accessed 2020/08/27]. One of the most sacred blankets among the amaXhosa.

<sup>5</sup> This information has come to us through oral tradition. 'At this stage isiXhosa was not a written language but there was a rich store of music and oral poetry. Xhosa tradition is rich in creative verbal expression. *Intsomi* (folktales), proverbs, and *isibongo* (praise poems) are told in dramatic and creative ways. [<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/xhosa>] [Accessed 2020/08/27].



was that the missionaries equated Christianity with European cultures. Africans had to adopt both the religion and the culture' (Zaaiman, 2015:303). This created problems and divisions in families and in society in general. Sunday became a visible 'great day' of separation of families between those who believed (*amagqoboka*) and those who did not believe (*amaqaba*).

The arrival of Sunday, for people who made no distinction between 'holy' days and 'work' days, created some confusion. Africans do not worship God in 'isolation from the various aspects of our lives' (Biko, 2017:102). Also, for Africans, there is no specific place of worship and a special day of worship. 'Worship was not a specialised function that found expression once a week in a secluded building, but rather it featured in our wars, our beer-drinking, our dances and our customs in general' (Biko, 2017:102-103).

Christianity became a Sunday cult (Mugambi, 2002:521). It is important to note that at its early stages, Christianity started as a sect, which is a religious organisation that stands apart from the larger society. It became a sect inside Judaism, because 'Jesus certainly did not intend to found a new religion' (Stanton, 1989:274); he challenged established conventions and priorities. However, when the missionaries arrived in South Africa, Christianity became a cult. It is worth to elaborate here what Christianity becoming a cult in Africa means. Sociologists define a cult as a religious organisation that is substantially outside the cultural traditions of a society. Whereas a sect emerges from within a conventional religious organisation, a cult represents something entirely different (Macionis, 1995:494-495). To the amaXhosa, Christianity as introduced by the missionaries became a cult, since it became at odds with the larger society. They not only convinced the amaXhosa to accept their doctrine, but they also demanded that they embrace a radically new lifestyle. It got worse, when as a cult Christians isolated and insulated themselves from the challenges of society. Mugambi (2002:521) correctly asserts that during the modern missionary enterprise,

the mission station became the centre of the new cult, with the resident missionary as its cult leader. The Christian faith among the converts then became a Sunday affair. For six days they would live according to their traditional customs, and on Sunday they would wear the new garb they had been given. Dressed in these they would go to the mission station where they would sing new hymns and become involved in a strange ritual.

Remarkably, recent research has found that in South Africa 'a great gap exists between what takes place on Sunday or within the ambit of the local congregation, and what members do with the rest of their time' (Forster & Oostenbrink, 2015:3). This is a result of poorly developed theology, where the emphasis of most churches is focused on equipping members to play a role in the local church's ministry, more than playing a role in public spaces. Sunday is therefore reserved for spiritual upliftment, when people have an appointment with God after a difficult or fulfilling week of work. Some scholars have observed three dimensions of the church, which are proclamation (*kerygma*), fellowship (*koinonia*), and acts of service (*diakonia*) (Resane, 2019), and that these dimensions are focused mostly on the Sunday service, where Christians proclaim the good news to each other, fellowship with one another, and serve or aid their own members. The church performs the secluded and idealistic spirituality of detachment from societal problems and a corrupt culture.

The coronavirus pandemic, which led to the closure of Sunday services, has indeed exposed this attitude among Christian devotees. What are the reasons behind this attitude in Christian circles?

### ***The understanding or misunderstanding of spirituality***

There is the misunderstanding of the term 'spirituality'. During the early days of the lockdown, many people were heard associating attendance of Sunday services with being 'spiritual' or



exercising 'their spirituality'. This confusion is rooted in the historical shift from the holistic spirituality of the Bible, to the dualistic spirituality of the Christendom between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries. The word 'spirituality' was primarily used by Christians (Holt, 1993), specifically in the Roman Catholic theology. The contemporary understanding of the word can be traced to the origins of Christianity, its scriptures, and to later developments (Perrin, 2007:26). An important observation is that 'spirituality' is rooted in the Pauline letters (Principe, 1983:130-131); however, the idea of the spirit found in the Pauline letters follows the Old Testament usage of the 'spirit' as the presence and power of God. McGinn (2005:26) explained in agreement: 'The role of the spirit (*ruach*) of God in the Old Testament was the foundation for the New Testament emphasis on the importance of the "spirit" (*pneuma*) and the qualifier "spiritual" (*pneumatikos*) in the foundational Christian documents.'

In the Old Testament, God's *ruach* (spirit, wind, hand, heat, breath) refers to the creative and dynamic work of the Spirit of God in all creation. God's *ruach* constantly gives, sustains, and renews life. *Ruach* is the spirit, the power, the life, and the heart of God that is active in the world (Perrin, 2007:26-27). With regard to the New Testament, Principe (1983:130) remarked that 'in Latin translations of Pauline letters one finds *spiritus* and *spiritualis* as translations of *pneuma* and *pneumatikos* respectively'. Regarding Pauline theology, Donahue (2006:74) explained the contrasts between *pneuma* (spirit) and *sarx* (flesh); and in so doing points out that Paul does not reflect a dualistic anthropology but speaks of the whole person as either open to the action of God or turning away from it. In using spirit as the opposite of flesh, Paul did not speak of any opposition between the spiritual and the physical. Rather, he referred to two vastly different ways of living: one being in tune with the Holy Spirit, the other not. In Paul's thinking, material is not the opposite of spiritual. Paul's New Testament meaning of spirituality referred to the whole life of the Christian lived under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Perrin, 2007:27). There is therefore no dualism in Paul's theology.

Accordingly, it is impossible to omit the mention of the Holy Spirit when speaking of Christian spirituality. Interestingly, Holt (1993:5) drew closer to the importance of 'spirit' as a root term of spirituality from the biblical perspective. He argued, like Principe (1983) and McGinn (2005), that Christian spirituality means 'walking in the spirit' (Galatians 5:16,18,25):

In both Hebrew and Greek, the same word (*ruach* and *pneuma*, respectively) is used for breath, wind and spirit. The Bible refers both to human spirit and to divine Spirit. How one understands spirit will determine how one understands spirituality. For example, if spirit is separated from physical reality, in a realm of its own, apart from the daily life of human experience, the resulting spirituality will become an escape into another world. But if God created the world good, and later became flesh, as the Gospel of John asserts, then spirit is a dimension of reality compatible with physical existence.

Holt (1993:5) further emphasised that spirituality has a holistic meaning, because human beings are unities of body and mind, and are not divided. Consequently, spirituality 'encompasses the whole of human life and will develop in a variety of styles, depending on cultures, denominations, personalities and gifts' (Holt, 1993:5).

The shift from this biblical understanding of spirituality began with the dawn of the age of scholasticism in the twelfth and seventeenth centuries (Perrin, 2007:28) or modernism. Firstly, in scholasticism, the word 'spirituality' refers not only to the spirit that animated Christian life, but also to anything that pertained to the soul rather than the body. This shift from Pauline theology brought 'confusion of spirituality with disdain for the body and matter that was to mark many later movements' (Principe, 1983:131). Secondly, at about the same time, spirituality came to be thought of as ecclesiastical jurisdiction or of persons exercising such jurisdiction (Principe, 1983:131). Another shift gradually occurred after the seventeenth century.



Spirituality moved 'toward signifying only the inner dispositions, the interior states of the soul' (McGinn, 2005:27). The term became related to strange experiences as individuals attempted commitment to live a Christian life in the quest for perfection based on an isolated life with God. The word 'spirituality' eventually disappeared from the mainline Christian vocabulary, and it was substituted by terms such as 'devotion' and 'piety' (Perrin, 2007:30).

### ***Three major flaws: Attractional, hierarchical, and dualistic***

With Christianity as an official part of the established culture between twelfth- and mid-twentieth-century Europe, the consequences were that members of society were assumed to be Christian by birth rather than by choice, and Christianity moved from being a dynamic, revolutionary, social, and spiritual movement to being a religious institution with its attendant structures, priesthood, and sacraments. By the end of the era of modernity in the mid-twentieth century, the Christian faith was no longer the centre of Western culture. It had been swept away by the very movement (modernity and enlightenment) it had sought to befriend (Frost & Hirsch, 2003:8). The Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution played significant roles in diminishing Christendom's central place in Western society (McLeod 2003:20). Advances in the modern age presented several contests to traditional religious orthodoxy. Singleton (2014:21) summarises that,

... supporters of secularism argued vociferously for the separation of church and state affairs... academic advances in history and literature led to more progressive, nonliteral readings of the Christian Bible... more liberal variations of Christianity grew... the authority and teachings of the traditional churches were increasingly challenged by the discoveries of science and the rise of rationalist thought... another challenge to religious orthodox came from new religious movements, like the Christian Scientists. Many people maintained an interest in the spiritual dimension of life, but felt less bound by the institutional strictures of traditional Christianity.

Eventually, the church became irrelevant and responded by three major flaws – it became *attractional, hierarchical, and dualistic* (Frost & Hirsch, 2003:18). It was attractional in the sense that instead of infiltrating the community, the church built beautiful buildings and expected that people would congregate there to meet God and find fellowship. The church became hierarchical with its overly religious, bureaucratic, top-down model of leadership; as opposed to one that is more structured around public programmes. Also, the Christendom church could not resist being dualistic. It separated the sacred from the profane, and the holy from the unholy. Church historians noted the sad fact: 'Christendom as a paradigm of understanding, as a meta narrative, still exercises an overweening influence on our existing theological, missiological, and ecclesiological understandings in church circles' (Frost & Hirsch, 2003:9). This helps to explain why, during this deadly pandemic, some are hellbent on going back to church, even though it is dangerous to do so. Others still feel that the pastor is the only person closest to God, in terms of hierarchy, and that they must risk all just to be at the church building. Their homes belong to them, and the church building belongs to God.

### **Ministering during the COVID-19 pandemic**

The observation is that the pandemic has exposed poor theology on the side of the church. Pastors are now faced with the daunting task of unlearning this behaviour, especially those who are on this side of the world. Leaders are now faced with the test of being 'essential' during this pandemic. The question is, how might pastors think about good and faithful ministry in ways that claim space in the public sphere to empower disciples of Jesus, and impact the world? My opinion is that through the COVID-19 pandemic, God is moulding us back to what we are supposed to be, or who we should have been.

### ***Reflecting on the African worldview***



Pastoral leadership is called to move closer to the African worldview (African traditional spirituality), which is more biblical than the Eurocentric cultural understanding of spirituality. Karecki et al. (2005:92-93) tabled five general features that constitute African spirituality. First is the awareness of the deity. In Africa, there is a strong belief in God as the creator of heaven and earth (Kato, 1987:30-31). Consequently, prayer for Africans is based on the belief that the visible world is influenced by, and indeed dependent on, the unseen world (Karecki et al., 2005:92). The invisible, ever-present Great One can be called upon to grant power to root out evil. As a result, there is an extreme consciousness of the spiritual dimension of life, including God, angels, evil spirits, and Satan among African Christians; for God is not just a name, but a real and powerful presence (Karecki et al., 2005:92). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the awareness of a real, living God is life strengthening. Pastoral leadership begins here.

Secondly, Africans have a holistic worldview; 'wholeness of life' therefore defines African spirituality (Pato, 2000:93). Desmond Tutu a nobel laureate (1995:xvi) explained that the African worldview rejects popular dichotomies between the sacred and the secular; the material and the spiritual. All life is religious, all life is sacred, all life is of a piece. The African mind comprehends both realities as a whole. An African myth says that life and death are both sides of the same seed, which is existence (Montilus, 1983:52). The world is perceived as a unit and reconstructed as interacting parts; therefore, God is not worshipped in isolation from the various aspects of life (Biko, 2017:102). A further argument is made by Karecki et al. (2005:92) that '[r]eligion, morality, dancing, praying, eating, laughing and communal worship – everything from the mundane to the mystical – are all part of African spirituality'. African Christian spirituality is therefore holistic and incarnational and religious leaders, such as Chikane, Tutu, and others, thus 'move effortlessly from prayer to social justice' (Karecki et al., 2005:92). It is therefore important to teach this 'holistic worldview', especially now that the 'I Can't Breathe' movement, the global 'Black Lives Matter' movement, and President Donald Trump are making the news in America. In South Africa, we have a corruption cancer where leaders steal money that was supposed to assist in fighting COVID-19, while in Zimbabwe, President Mnangagwa is running amok.

The third element is the value Africans place on a human being. *Umntu* is a fundamental aspect of African culture. In fact, anything done in an African society is in relation to the wellbeing of *umntu*, because 'ours has always been a Man-centred society' (Biko, 2017:45). This is seen in how intimate Africans are in their communication. This 'intimate communication' not only happens between two friends but, in fact, between peers anywhere they gather. Caring for others is seen by how people frequently visit and check on one another. Biko (2017:46) wrote:

A visitor to someone's house is always met with the question "what can I do for you?" This attitude to see people not as themselves but as agents for some particular function either to one's disadvantage or advantage is foreign to us. We are not a suspicious race. We believe in the inherent goodness of man. We enjoy man for himself. We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do we always place Man first.

The fourth implication is that African Traditional Religion is not individualistic. Indeed, the modern industrial society encourages the cult of the individual. Sociologist (Stewart & Zaيمان 2015) agree that South Africa is increasingly getting modernised, and the *Ubuntu* philosophy, 'the idea that to be an individual means to integrated into the social group' is being replaced by the egoistic individualism. 'The importance of the social group has increasingly given way to the glorification of the individual as it has in fully developed industrialised societies' (Stewart



2015: 23). Stewart (2015:23) gives an example of political leader's faces on featuring prominently on followers' T-shirts, the same is seen among church leaders where pastors' faces are seen in car stickers, T-shirts and church profile-raisers. However, in an African Traditional Religion, the *Ubuntu* philosophy, seen in the emphasis of social group interconnection is always encouraged. 'The rites and ceremonies are always performed by a group – a family, a clan or the population of an area' (Pato, 2000:94). Almost all African languages have a proverb that expresses this: *Umntu, ngumntu ngabantu*, which is loosely translated as 'a person becomes a person through others'. M'Timkulu (1971:22) argued that '[t]he social ties binding the African to his extended family and clan have always been stronger than the forces of separation that arise from members of different denominations'. Important family occasions such as births, marriages, funerals, and clan festivals bring together in one place (of worship) relatives with differing confessional backgrounds (M'Timkhulu, 1971:22). Biko (2017:47) added the property angle to the debate by insisting that Africans' attitudes towards property show how un-individualistic the African is, as a consequence of a community-based and man-centred society. He wrote:

Most things were jointly owned by the group, for instance there was no such thing as individual land ownership. The land belonged to the people and was merely under the control of the local chief on behalf of the people. When cattle went to graze, it was on an open veld and not on anybody's specific farm. Farming and agriculture, though on individual family basis, had many characteristics of joint efforts [and] poverty was a foreign concept. This could be really brought about to the community by an adverse climate during a particular season. It never was considered repugnant to ask one's neighbour for help if one was struggling (Biko, 2017:47-48).

Likewise, the African Christian experience, as observed by Karecki et al. (2005:93), values participation and belonging to the wider group and attention is paid to facilitating harmony and communal wellbeing. *Ubuntu* dictates that we look after others wellbeing and give support where necessary. Readopting the *Ubuntu* philosophy of group solidarity will make it difficult for a leader to be separated from the day-to-day issues that affect the entire community. There is therefore no way that pastoral leaders or any church leader for that matter cannot be involved in what affects the community; be it that of the believers or any human being for that matter.

The fifth element is public worship. As noted above, in an African setting, religion is not something one adds to various aspects of life. For example, African Traditional Religions do not have a separate day of worship, like Christians who gather for public worship on a Sunday. Biko (2017:49) explained how religion features in the daily lives of Africans:

We thanked God through our ancestors before we drank beer; married, worked, etc. We would obviously find it artificial to create special occasions for worship. Neither did we see it logical to have a particular building in which all worship would be conducted. We believed that God was always in communication with us and therefore merited attention everywhere and anywhere.

There is also not a separate community of religious people. Africans are communal; people gather around rites of passage such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death, and everyone who participates in the community automatically participates in its worship, celebration, and community interactions.

African Christian spirituality, especially as reflected in public worship, is filled with music, song and rhythmic movement [and] there is a strong sense of the immediacy of God's presences [...] In many churches, ample opportunity is provided for extempore and individual responses to God (Karecki et al., 2005:93).





### ***Rethink our understanding of 'church'***

In 1994, the church lost its voice for the second time (Boesak 2014:1066); the first time being in the 1960s before the banning of political parties and leaders. However, after the 1960 silence, the church, especially the ecumenical prophetic churches, was 'stunned, then shamed, then converted by Biko's critique on Christianity and more specifically, on the black church' (Boesak 2014:1063). Eventually, due to the banning of the liberation movement, ecumenical leaders assumed a political role by default (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2004:207). Tutu (1995a:94) wrote that during the struggle against apartheid, the churches occupied a prominent position. Furthermore, the ecumenical prophetic churches were united, because they had a common enemy called apartheid. However, post-apartheid, Tutu realised that the once-united church was faced with an 'identity crisis'. The common enemy which used to unite them was now on its knees, and it was not easy to say what they were for or standing for as the church (Tutu 1995b:96). There was no more significant church or ecumenical action regarding some of the most burning issues in South Africa, especially issues relating to poverty, and inequalities as tabled by De Gruchy and De Gruchy (2004). Boesak (2014:166) stated that the church was outmanoeuvred by democracy. With the advent of democracy, prophetic leaders felt that the time had arrived to give space to the released prisoners and the exiles, and some felt that the church leaders were in a hurry to withdraw from political activity (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2004:207).

De Gruchy and De Gruchy (2004:208) indicated other factors which affected the political involvement of the church. First was the loss of international support for the South African Council of Churches. Lack of financial muscle had a negative impact on many ecumenical programmes. Secondly, church activities did not receive attention from the media, because the spotlight moved towards the returning exiles and freed prisoners. These men and women were new spokespeople for the struggle. Also, De Gruchy and De Gruchy (2004:208) correctly pointed out the growth of the charismatic and 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). With the exception of Tutu, the Christian voice in the media was given to these churches for their fundamentalist stereotypes. At same time, '[t]he ecumenical church was not good at countering this image of Christianity, especially at a time when world-wide attention was focusing on religious fundamentalism of all kinds (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2004:208).

What Kretschmar (2012:135) called 'escapism of neutrality', Egan (2007:458) referred to as withdrawal by the churches from the political arena and further away from the public sphere. In relation to participation in society, the majority of church leaders confine themselves to a "welfarist paradigm" (Rasool 2009:5) or "gap filling" (Crawford 1995:37). In comparison to "advocacy", which seeks to influence the rules, practices, or beliefs of policymakers, and "partnership", which seeks to cooperate with government in efforts to realise some type of service such as crime reduction, "gap-filling" activities provide services largely independent of government service delivery (Crawford 1995). Handing out food parcels is one example. One finds that churches feel very much proud that they have distributed food hand-outs to poor families, but few ask why these people are starving in the first place. Churches would do well to conduct a deeper analysis of the socio-political issues, and refrain from blaming people for their poverty. Currently, many prosperity gospel preachers put the blame on the congregants for their poverty, claiming that poor people are not praying enough, or that they lack sufficient faith to be blessed by God. In South Africa, poverty has colour and gender. The face of poverty is black, and its gender is female (Chitiga-Mabungu, Mupela, Ngwenya & Zikhali 2016:181). What is worse is that in the face of abject poverty, there seems to be a new minority on the rise – a black elite (Southall 2016). Richardson (2009) observed that while a few have become rich, live in extravagant houses, and drive luxury cars, the unemployment rate is at least as high as it ever was. Materialism, coupled with individualism, and consumerism are rife



(Richardson 2009:55). A recent analysis showed that churches are fostering individualism and materialism (James 2014:209), and these are the hallmarks of Western Christianity. The problem of dualism still haunts the modern-day church. Few ministers of the gospel are able to move freely from the pulpit to the streets where people are struggling. An example is the absence of church leaders during the students' #FeesMustFall campaign, which led some student activists to ask, 'Where are the church leaders?' Again, the observation is that the church has withdrawn into denominational or privatised zones, attending only to their own flocks (Pieterse 2000; MacMaster 2008). De Wet (2016:17) wrote that despite the church's influence in society, church leaders, 'have no ambition to be politically active, little power to convince their congregants to vote as a block, not a great deal to offer the country philosophically, and are actively making themselves less relevant with every passing day'.

Quoted in De Wet's article, West (2016) blamed the kind of theology and spirituality found today: 'It doesn't know what to do with political power [...] It doesn't know how to engage it.' The church has settled for a highly individualised form of theology, 'where there is no engagement with more systematic dimensions of life, and the prophetic is almost entirely absent [...] The churches have retreated into what you can call 'maintenance mode' (West 2016 quoted in De Wet 2016:17). Indeed, post-1994, most churches began to focus on denominational issues and remained neutral. As Kretzschmar (2012:139) observed, however, neutrality leads to disengagement, which, in turn, results in exclusion.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed this irrelevance of the majority of believers and churches in their communities. The observation is that the church as we have come to know it, is losing relevance. The fact that the government did not see church leaders as contributing essential service and that believers, instead of being overwhelmingly supportive to safety measures such as "stay at home" but became indignant, proves to that conclusion. Further, following COVID-19 deaths of many Christians and particularly faith leaders, people are beginning to question the relevance of the church with regard to physical 'healing from sicknesses' through prayer alone. Some Christians, are looking for healing from other sources such as '*umhlonyane*'<sup>6</sup>. However, it must be noted here that there are many people who claim to be 'spiritual' but not necessarily 'religious', these may be part of the ones who easily explore African medicinal herbs more than staunch traditional believers, who may choose to die of COVID-19 than use '*umhlonyane*'. The future though, points to a church that is 'post-congregational', in the words of McNeal (2011). The church is no longer a 'what' but a 'who'. McNeal (2011:25) explained this further:

Seeing church as a what is seeing it as something outside ourselves, something we go to, a place where certain things happen, a vendor of religious goods and services, something we support, something we invite people to attend.

Biko (2017:49) spoke against the view of a place of worship as a place people go to on a special day once a week. Biko advocated for the view of the church as a 'who'. Biko (2017:49) wrote that Africans 'believed that God was always in communication with us and therefore merited attention everywhere and anywhere'. The implication is that wherever people are, there is the 'church'. This understanding of the church dictates that the church be thought of more as a verb rather than a noun. However, the fact of the church taking the form of the society it finds itself in should be emphasised because Christians cannot live isolated from its context.

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<sup>6</sup> *Umhlonyane* in isiXhosa language or *Lengana* in Sotho language is a medicinal plant used to treat coughs, colds, fever, loss of appetite etc. Many Christian evangelists have been heard preaching against the use of natural or traditional medicinal plant in favour of the 'the Name of Jesus' or 'the blood of Jesus' as the healing sources. The more liberal Christians who would encourage the use of medicine for healing, may not readily point the faithful to *Umhlonyane* or *Lengana* but would encourage the use of Western medicine. One is equated to 'evil' because it is of African origin, and the other is equated to 'life giving' because it is European.



### ***Consider the incarnation principle***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the church, through pastoral leadership, should consider being 'present' in its context. Being 'present' means 'standing alongside', 'suffering with', 'identifying with', and even 'learning from' the context and culture the church finds itself in. Therefore, for a church to be effective during the COVID-19 pandemic, it ought to remain true to the principle of incarnation. The theology of incarnation emphasises the coming of Jesus from his heavenly home to be born as a very ordinary human being, belonging to a particular place, context, culture, and time. The principle dictates that the church identifies, as Jesus did, with a particular context and culture to which it is witness. Bowen (1996:44) added, 'even if it is our own culture which we know well'. He lamented the fact that Christians struggle to make contact with the context/culture that surrounds them, because they lose touch with their own context and culture when they join the church, or it may be that they were born into a 'church culture' (Bowen, 1996:46).

Bowen's (1996:68) argument, which was supported by Bosch (1996), means that the church should go down rather than climb up, and identify with people with every kind of need. The church should get involved with people in the ordinary matters of life, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and poverty in South Africa and not just in religious matters. The incarnation principle states that the church must become like the people to whom it was sent, it must listen to the agenda of those people, and relate the message of the gospel to them. The more radical Bosch (1996:513) explained incarnation theology as follows:

One is not interested in a Christ who offers only eternal salvation, but in a Christ who agonizes and sweats and bleeds with the victims of oppression. One who criticises the bourgeois church of the West, which leans toward Docetism and for which Jesus' humanness is only a veil hiding his divinity. This bourgeois church has an idealist understanding of itself, refuses to take sides, and believes that it offers a home for masters as well as slaves, rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed. Because it refuses to practice solidarity with victims, such a church has lost its relevance. Having peeled off the social and political dimensions of the gospel, it has denatured it completely.

As Frost and Hirsch (2003) saw it, the incarnation principle is the direct opposite of the Christendom church; recalling that the missionary church took the form of a Christendom church in terms of operation and theology. The church that is true to its mission is incarnational, not attractional, in its ecclesiology. It simply does not create sanctified spaces into which unbelievers must enter to encounter the gospel, but disassembles itself and seeps into the cracks and crevices of a society in order to be Christ to those it seeks to witness to. A worship area is not necessarily a particular building, but everywhere one finds oneself; that is, in the factories, in schools, in the streets, under bridges, etc.

Furthermore, by definition, an incarnational church is messianic, not dualistic. It adopts the holistic worldview of Jesus, rather than the Western worldview that divides the sacred from the profane. In an incarnational church, all people are important; all are involved in the leadership and in the interpretation of the gospel. Interpretation is not left to religious professionals but open to all. In an incarnational posture, the church is best positioned to facilitate transformation in society.

Jesus explained this penetration of society by urging his followers to be the 'salt of the earth' (Matthew 5:13; Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34-35). Jesus used this imagery because salt works silently and penetrates irresistibly. That is how the church ought to work. It must work in society and penetrate the structures of society. The incarnation principle can be referred to as a 'radical spirituality'. White (2015:61) preferred 'rooted' instead of 'radical'. Nevertheless, the



advent of Christ taking the form of his community was a radical departure from the prevailing religiosity of his day. Jesus spent time with the 'nobodies' of the community, ate with sinners, and sought to reform the temple-centred religion of Judaism. He lived a religious life on his own terms.

## Conclusion

This paper investigated the source of the pandemonium that came with the announcement of the national lockdown by President Cyril Ramaphosa. It identified the fact of the importance of Sunday worship among the faithful protesting believers, and how this can be traced to how missionaries had introduced the Christian faith among the amaXhosa. Missionaries sought to separate converted people from their communities in their quest of building a 'Sunday crowd' of 'faithfuls'. By so doing, they domesticated or privatised God and placed God in a 'particular building' on a 'particular day' called Sunday. All these are contrary to African spirituality and philosophy.

Africans view life holistically, without separating realities (dualism) or celebrating holy days such as Sunday differently from other days. God can be met anywhere, by anyone, on any day. The closure of church buildings does not, spiritually, take anything from the Christian faithfuls' faith. In fact, the lockdown should have brought believers closer to their communities and families, as a time for believers to practise all they have been taught on Sundays.

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