

# Coping with the trauma of civil war and political violence through spiritual methods

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## Abstract

Although much has been documented about the material losses and damages suffered by survivors of political violence and war in the 1980s and 1990s in the Midlands region of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, not much has been written about the link between trauma and spirituality in the context of war and political violence in South Africa. In order to address this gap, the author analysed the transcripts of interviews with five Christian women who witnessed and survived the political violence from 1987 to 1991 – violence which culminated in the Seven-Days War between the African National Congress Party (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal from 25 to 31 March 1990. The interviews were conducted by the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work in Africa. The transcripts were selected using the purposive sampling method and with the aim of exploring Christian women's experiences of political violence and civil war in the 1980s and 1990s and what spiritual resources (if any) were utilised to help them to cope and develop resilience. The findings show that the women turned to spiritual methods of survival and posttraumatic growth. Their stories help to give voice to those who have suffered trauma in the wider context and help us to understand that spirituality can be of help in dealing with trauma. The study has implications for the dialogue on the significance of spirituality as a resource to assist traumatised individuals and communities to face and work through trauma.

**Key words:** Trauma; violence; war; spirituality; recovery.

## Clarification of key terminology

"Spirituality: is a personal experience with many definitions. Spirituality might be defined as "an inner belief system providing an individual with meaning and purpose in life, a sense of the sacredness of life, and a vision for the betterment of the world." Other definitions emphasize "a connection to that which transcends the self." The connection might be to God, a higher power, a universal energy, the sacred, or to nature." (<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/provider-type/community/fs-spirituality.asp>) - National Centre for PTSD -USA

Trauma: is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives. (<http://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/>) - American Psychological Association

## **Background: the context and purpose of the study**

The study is located in Vulindlela area of Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. This area experienced political violence in the 1980s and 1990s culminating in a civil war between the ANC and the IFP. According to a press release by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on 13 November 1996, the “war” – subsequently dubbed the ‘Seven-Days War’, lasted from 25 to 31 March 1990 (Levine, 1999). The announcement by the then President FW de Klerk of South Africa on Friday, 2 February 1990 that Nelson Mandela was to be released and the ANC unbanned along with the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and other liberation movements was met with some resistance (SAHO, 1990). The apartheid-sponsored violence in KwaZulu-Natal between the ANC and IFP political organisations escalated and soon spread to the Gauteng province of South Africa and to other areas (Nzimande, 2010). Nzimande alleges that “the primary aim of these attacks was to prevent the ANC from rebuilding its structures inside the country.” The Seven-Days War was fought in the Edendale and Vulindlela areas of Pietermaritzburg initially saw the IFP aiming at removing the influence of the United Democratic Front (UDF) [which comprised ANC, PAC, SACP, and other liberation organisations] from areas controlled by the IFP in the north of Edendale (known as ‘Ngaphezulu’). The IFP sought to turn these areas into a springboard to destroy the UDF movement structures in Edendale (Nzimande, 2010). Although many isolated incidents took place during the time of political unrest in the 1980s and 1990s, the Seven-Days War remains an event of enormous significance. It left more than 200 people dead, hundreds of homes gutted and looted and countless orphans. Approximately 20 000 people fled their homes and became refugees in their own communities as a result of the violence (Levine, 1999:12). They experienced losses, and many suffered multiple traumatic experiences. For those who were internally displaced, separation from other family members and neighbours was common. Many other families abandoned their homes for fear of rebuilding in the same area (Levine, 1999:12). Besides the damage to infrastructure and the physical injuries survivors were living with, Kerchhoff (2002) alleges that other families suffered anxiety through uncertainty about the whereabouts of other members of their families. This caused a lot of pain and fear, anger, bitterness and frustration. Levine (1999:12) adds that, even since the establishment of a democratic government in 1994, some people have never returned to their original homes for fear of victimisation.

This article studies five cases of Christian women who survived the brutal 1987 to 1991 political violence and civil war in the Vulindlela area. Three of the five women came from Mthoqotho, an ANC-dominated community, and the remaining two came from Bhubhonono, an IFP-dominated area. Both communities fall under Vulindlela and were predominantly from the Zulu ethnic group, though the two communities belonged to different political parties. The author accessed five interview transcripts from the Alan Paton Centre and Struggle Archives at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg. These interviews were conducted and documented by the staff of the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work in Africa, an institute of oral history which is attached to the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzburg. The transcripts give a picture of the political violence and war as seen through the eyes of Christian women in the Vulindlela area. The war caused such distress that families, especially women, children and the elderly, fled their homes and sought refuge in nearby forests and toilets while men and boys engaged in a hand-to-hand combat as they defended their property and families. Each one of these five women lost one or more family members and others also lost property, as the warring parties did not spare anything or anybody.

The purpose of this study was thus to explore the Christian women's experiences of political violence and civil war and to explore what or whether any resources were available for them to help them cope and find resilience in their very traumatic situations. In particular, the study investigated how or whether spiritual resources were used as a factor of coping and resilience building in the traumatic situations of the early post-Apartheid era.

## **Objectives**

In order to achieve the desired purpose, the reading and analysis of the five interview transcripts were guided mainly by the following three research questions: What spiritual or psychosocial support systems were available to help the victims of war to cope with trauma? What spiritual methods of survival did Christian women engage to develop resilience and posttraumatic growth during the time of political violence and civil war? What theologies or spiritualities emerged in the midst of political violence and war?

## **Methodology**

To answer the questions above, the selection of key informants in this study was very crucial (Tongco, 2007:147) as the data is meant to contribute to a better understanding of a theoretical framework (Bernard, 2002). The study used the purposive sampling method to select five interview transcripts from the pool of transcripts which Sinomlando Centre had deposited at the Alan Paton Centre and Struggle Archives. Babbie (2004:183) defines purposive sampling as "a type of non-probability sampling in which the researcher selects the units to be observed on the basis of his or her own judgement about which ones will be the most useful or representative." Bailey (1992:96) adds that, in purposive or judgmental sampling, the investigator uses his or her own judgment about which respondent to choose and picks only those who best meet the purpose of the study. To obtain relevant transcripts, the author looked for Christian women who had been exposed to traumatic experiences or who had sustained losses of family members or of property to political violence and war. He came up with five transcripts which fit the purpose of the study.

## **Understanding the link between trauma and spirituality**

Before presenting the results of the study, in addition to the clarification of terms presented earlier, the meanings of two concepts, 'trauma' and 'spirituality' are explored so that both the author and the reader are on the same page when considered from a Theological perspective. The word 'trauma' originates from a Greek word meaning 'to tear' or 'to rupture'. In the case of psychological trauma, this understanding is reflected in a notion of psychological wounding and the penetration of unwanted thoughts, emotions and experiences into the psyche or being of the person (Kaminer & Eagle, 2010:2). These experiences overwhelm a trauma survivor's coping mechanisms and such victims often struggle to make sense of why the trauma happened and why they were singled out to be a victim (Kaminer et al., 2010:60). They may wrestle with how to reconcile the trauma experience with their fundamental expectations and beliefs about themselves, other people, the world and God or the object of their devotion.

It is not the focus of this article to give exhaustive definitions of spirituality or types of spiritualities. McGinn (1993:1-2) talks of coming across over 35 definitions of spirituality and theologians over the centuries have grappled with the desire to understand and define it. For the purposes of this article, we adapt Meichenbaum's definition. Meichenbaum (n.d.) defines

spirituality as 'an attempt to seek meaning, purpose and a direction of life in relation to a higher power, universal spirit or God'. This means that spirituality reflects a search for the sacred and for meaning, regardless of religious affiliation. Nelson-Pechota (2004) maintains that exposure to traumatic experiences often leads to a search for meaning and purpose within a personal and collective sense – seeking the answers to a myriad of questions about the painful realities of war, the value of personal existence, and the value of the human race. Nelson-Pechota argues that the faith that God is constantly available to respond to one's hopes, fears, anxieties and tragedies can be shattered when people are exposed to war. Kaminer (et al., 2010:60) supports Nelson-Pechota's view and adds that trauma presents an enormous challenge to our belief and meaning systems and that survivors of trauma often struggle to develop an understanding of why the trauma happened – and why it happened to them and not to others.

Kaminer adds that 'Faced with this existential crisis, trauma survivors try to construct explanations for the traumatic event and generate meanings that will allow them to make sense of their world in future.' She points out that these explanations and meanings that are generated enable the survivor to re-establish a sense of trust, control and purpose. However, in other cases, the explanations and meanings that are developed serve to maintain or even exacerbate the survivor's feelings of distrust, lack of control and despair (Kaminer et al., 2010:60). According to Buckenham (1999:7–8) these feelings of 'distrust, lack of control and despair' develop because 'Trauma wreaks its toll in the life of a person emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, in our relationships with ourselves, others and with God.' Janoff-Bulman (1992:5) concurs with Buckenham and adds, that 'When confronted by events of seismic proportions, human beings are psychologically distressed because traumatic events shatter some of the survivors' fundamental assumptions about the world.' For example, the faith that God is constantly available to respond to one's hopes, fears, anxieties, and tragedies can be shattered (Wilson & Moran, 1998:168-188). Individuals who are unable to resolve challenges to their moral and spiritual beliefs might find themselves in a state of spiritual alienation which can take many forms (Nelson-Pechota, 2004). For example, a person may feel abandoned by God, and in his or her response may reject God, feeling that God was powerless to help and therefore unavailable. When the traumatic memory is not processed, Kaplan and Wang (2004:5) allege that it becomes a debilitating memory, that it places excessive demands on people's existing coping strategies and that it creates severe disruption to many aspects of the psychological functioning and well-being of a survivor.

The literature that is available today suggests that despite what many may think concerning conflict situations and their impact on people, when one is analytical in orientation it is clear that the occurrence of a great range of psychological symptoms and syndromes in the populations found in conflict situations is vigorously documented by available research. The research also offers evidence about the incredible resilience of over half of the populations in the face of the worst trauma in war situations in places such as Rwanda, Somalia, Uganda and Palestine (Sarraj, and Qouta, 2005).

In this study, the author sought to find out how or whether trauma perpetrated by political violence and civil war impacted the lives of Christian women emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, in their relationships with themselves, others and with God (Buckenham, 1999:7–78). He explored the spirituality – or what we now understand as the meaning dimension of the psychological impact of trauma on the five Christian women. He reflects on the women's religious and spiritual aspects, in particular the various forms of theologies or spiritualities that emerged in the midst of political violence and war and how or whether these types of spiritualities helped Christian women to cope and develop resilience in the midst of trauma.

Although not prescriptive of what constitutes spirituality, the author looked for certain forms or expressions of spirituality or religious activities or methods of spiritual survival as clues that Christian women were talking about spiritual resources. For example, participation in a religious group or spiritual community; prayer; religious activities or expressions of religious beliefs or faith; adherence to spiritual or religious teachings, morals and values such as forgiveness; mention of spiritual beliefs or supernatural beings or powers, such as God, ancestors; conversations with a personal God or practising religious rituals such as offering incense and so on.

## **Results**

### **Experiences of trauma during political violence and civil war**

This study explored the experiences of five Christian women in respect of political violence and war in the period 1987 and 1991 in Vulindlela area of Pietermaritzburg. As a result of completing the research procedure, five cases are presented in this section, which explore trauma and lived religious experiences of these women. (Their full biographical details appear in the list of references under the section written: Interviews).

#### **Case one: Sebenzile Gwala**

Gwalawas born on 10 October 1952. She comes from the Mthoqotho community in the Vulindlela area and is a member of Umanyano (women's guild) in the KwaNxamalala Zionist Church. She belongs to the ANC. She had four children, three girls and one boy; her husband died a natural death in 1984. She counts family members lost to violence:

Oh, my Lord! Violence did affect and abuse me in that firstly, I lost my half-brother one from underneath here kwa-Hlengwa and I was disturbed. Shortly after that another brother of mine died, that was further disturbance in my life. Then it was my own son in January 1990 and that was a killer in me. In 1991, I lost another [brother] and we watched while they killed him.

Describing how her sixteen-year old son died, she says:

My son went to visit a friend as he was not working... On his way back my son did not know that the fighting had begun as nobody could predict when it would... They [IFP supporters] took him off the bus, attacked, and killed him; but one who was with him managed to run and inform us that they have killed my son, and the undertaker picked him and came to confirm whether it was he.

As if that were not enough, her brother, a truck driver, was shot at close range in 1991 while Gwala and others watched. Later in the year 2000, Gwala's daughter died of headache. How did Gwala cope with such traumatic experiences? Van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth (1996:3) point out that throughout evolution humans have been exposed to terrible events, yet most people who are exposed to dreadful experiences survive without developing psychiatric disorders. They add that, throughout history, some people have adapted to terrible life events with flexibility and creativity, while others have become fixated on the trauma and gone on to lead traumatised and traumatising existences. Gwala utilised spiritual methods to cope with complicated grief. She says:

*Hey!* My life was changed especially because my husband had also died, my life was affected. However, I stayed as close as possible to God... I trust in God, and I can attest to His wonderful works.

However, Gwala struggled to forgive the woman who cheered when her brother, the truck driver, was killed. She even refused to answer a greeting when she met that woman at first. But Gwala realised that her bitterness was hindering her prayers:

In fact, the consciousness of the Lord's Prayer, especially where it says, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us"... I would keep quiet when it comes to, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us..." as I did not want to lie to God.

But her response towards the other woman changed with time as she was able to greet her. She says:

I urged myself to have empathy. I praise God, because I stopped having remembrances when I see her. I give thanks to God because now I do the Lord's Prayer in full. I do not have to keep quiet at some places.

She concludes her interview by saying:

All I can say is that I give thanks to God because I am unemployed and my kids and I survive just like other people do. I always put my trust to God. I know about my ancestors but God is more relevant to me.

Gwala used spiritual means of survival to rebuild her social world, something that "requires both a renewed commitment to justice and specific acts of contrition, atonement and restitution" (Drozdek & Wilson, 2007: vii).

### **Case two: Tryphina Gubese**

Gubese was born at Makhuzeni in Bulwer, into a family of six children – three girls and three boys. Before she got married, she had four children. Both her parents died of natural causes. Her uncle and sister's son were killed in her house. Then she married Alfred Gubese. Tryphina Gubese engaged spiritual methods of survival during times of violence. She used to pray to God as well as to the ancestors. She points out how difficult it was to pray to ancestors as there was no time for rituals. In the beginning, her family maintained neutrality by refusing to belong to any political party. Only when they were attacked did they join the ANC. Then they became legitimate targets for the IFP. They abandoned their house and sought refuge in KwaHlengwa. The house that they left behind was burnt down. Residents were so terrorised that they could not live in their houses. She says:

...We were staying in the forests. Even if you sneaked through and come out of the forest trying to reach home as you come out you see them coming and you see these local boys there they are running and you conclude that no ways I am not safe at all, and you go back to the forest.

Asked how she survived the violence, Gubese responds:

It means God helped us, we would say it was God because even if you ran away you never forgot to pray wherever you were. We were praying for our children who were running around guarding this side.

We prayed there in the forests sometimes we couldn't sleep at our homes, we used to sleep in the open. There we would gather together and pray, pray for our children because really you would not know where your child is. They were running all over, guarding here and there. Wherever we were, we prayed, praying for these our children so that God will help us or keep them together...Oh yes God helped eventually as we are still alive now.

Although Gubese struggled to conduct formal prayer liturgy as she could not access church buildings – and although she struggled to communicate with the ancestors because she could not perform rituals to them in the forest – she engaged spiritual resources of prayer to cope with trauma of war and political violence.

### **Case three: Princess Dladla**

Dladla is an IFP member and goes to the Roman Catholic Church. She was born on 14 November 1958 at i-IMpendle. She also got married there and later moved to the Bhubhonono Vulindlela area in 1980. Political violence claimed the life of her husband who was stabbed to death at a bus stop in Pietermaritzburg on 21 October 1988. She says:

One Friday evening I noticed that he was late, and I was confused because it was his payday and he had promised to bring candles... I got annoyed because I thought maybe he decided to delay whilst he knew that we do not have candles at home, I thought a lot of senseless things.

Dladla continues:

Well, I was starting to eat when I heard a knock... When I opened the door a lot of women came in and filled the house in no time, I could notice my husband's sister-in-law... I asked, what had happened? She said, "things are bad" because my husband had died... he was stabbed at the bus stop.

This was a very difficult time for Dladla as her last born was still breastfeeding and there was no income for the family since the breadwinner had died. She abandoned observing the mourning period in 1989 and looked for a job. She says: 'It was difficult because I could not get a job.' Eventually she got a job working two days a week.

Although the income was meagre, the job allowed her to focus on important tasks. The extended family supported her too and she also accessed money from her husband's employer, though not much. Against all odds, she held on to God. She says: 'I never lost faith.' However, 14 years later she still struggled with unresolved anger. 'Sometimes when I pray I ask God to help me remove this anger I have.'

Nevertheless, Dladla turned to spiritual methods of prayer and personal conversations with God for redress. She says, 'I pray and sometimes I fast and ask God to help me succeed in whatever I were [want] to do.'

Unlike Gwala and Gubese, who give credit only to God for their survival during the violence, Dladla acknowledges the role ancestors played in her deliverance from harm. She believes that ancestors are closer to God and it is their duty to intercede for the living. Even after her husband's death, she has continued to perform rituals to ancestors as a spiritual method to reach God.

#### **Case four: Tryphina Magwaza**

Magwaza is a member of the ANC and lives at a place called 'KwaNokhesheni' in the KwaNxamalala Vulindlela area. She was born on 15 April 1930. She had five children but three died. Two children died of natural causes but Bongji, her son, was killed during political violence on the night of 23 January 1988 while on his way to visit his girlfriend. Magwaza describes the traumatic incident:

They killed him, they stabbed him fifteen wounds, my brother counted them, fifteen wounds which they stabbed him, until he died. He was found by some boys, they moved him from where they killed him and left him in the forest at the Ngadini forest here at eBovini, they found him there.

Her house was burnt down together with all her belongings. Like other Christian women mentioned in this article, she engaged spiritual methods of survival. She says:

We trusted in Him, because there was nothing else that we did ... we prayed ... we burnt incense and asked God to sleep with us, Jehova[h].

However, in spite of her trust in God, she fled her home because of a threat to her life. She admits:

We were scared...so we ran out of fear. We did not run away, we hid in the toilets.

She engaged all forms of spiritualities at her disposal to cope and to survive the violence. For example, she prayed to God and also burnt incense, a ritual commonly performed when offering prayers to ancestors. She also participated in a religious group, attending church, and joining a prayer group. Although she did not attend church services regularly, the church was a significant support system for her during the political violence.

#### **Case five: Agnes Mbambo**

Mbambo was born on 15 March 1950 in a place called KwaNxamalala in the Vulindlela area. She lived in Bhobhonono and is a member of the IFP. She attended the Roman Catholic Church. She married Bhekimpi Mbambo from Nxamalala in 1973 and gave birth to six children – three boys and three girls. Her father was killed by a neighbour in Nxamalala long before the political violence had started. Her husband was shot and killed in 1990, by people who called themselves police, in his house at night while his wife and children watched. The assailants disguised themselves as police, knocked at the door and demanded that Mr Mbambo open up. They said they had come to inspect his house for weapons. Although Mr Mbambo told them he had no gun, they demanded that he opened the door. She says:

By the time he pulled the bolt he did not know that the gun was already aimed at the door. As the door swung open and Mbambo moving to one side ... the only thing said by the man holding the gun was: "Do you know this?" Mbambo saw the gun and tried to shield himself with the wall – he was shot! I stood there, and all my children were by now watching this unpleasant incident through the curtains ... my husband gunned down, all the blood in my house, his brains strewn around, I see all this!

During the interview, fourteen years later, she was still traumatised by the brutal murder which had taken place in 1990. Asked whether she felt any animosity towards the murderer or if she had forgiven him, Mbambo responded:

It does not go away! For me it is even more difficult ... it was too traumatic because it all happened right in front of me, I will never forget that pain. This always comes back to haunt me even when I am relaxing with my children trying to be joyful.

Although Mbambo does not mention for how long she stayed away from church, her protest gives an impression that she was disappointed by God for not protecting her husband. Nelson-Pechota (2004) argues that 'individuals who are unable to resolve challenges to their moral and spiritual beliefs might find themselves in a state of spiritual alienation, which can take many forms'. In Mbambo's case, she disengaged from attending church. However, Mbambo demonstrates that the images and conceptions of God are not a static process. There is always a shifting of God-images as we are confronted by trauma, death, illness and other existential crises. For example, although disappointed by God as a protector, Mbambo trusted God as a provider. She says:

I like to say I trusted in God given the way things were happening. I had to hold on to God, I could not depend on anybody else because people can do nothing for me. I trusted even though I had painful, hard and traumatic experiences in my life. I had so many children to raise, I did not know what to do, how to raise them alone, but I said the Lord knows, I will take care of my children as the Lord provides.

Although she abandoned church in 1990, after her husband's death, 14 years later she reveals in an interview that: 'I have begun attending church regularly only recently.'

She does not mention what changed, but it does show that her 'post-traumatic spirituality' (Manda, 2013), might have played a role in her return to church. Manda defines post-traumatic spirituality to mean the theologies and spiritual values that emerge in the trauma survivor in the aftermath of a traumatic experience.

### **What resources helped the women face and cope with trauma?**

The study investigated what methods of survival or psychosocial support Christian women in Vulindlela area of Pietermaritzburg used to cope with the burden of political violence and war trauma. The results show that all the women studied utilised spiritual resources in their traumatic situations.

### **Spiritual methods of survival**

All five transcripts of the interviews with these Christian women show they engaged spiritual methods to survive the political violence and the brutal war that they were embroiled in. For example, although they did not go to churches for formal prayer liturgies for fear of being killed, they prayed as individuals and groups in their homes as well as in toilets and forests where they sought refuge from rampaging assassins. They prayed for their families' safety, especially the boys who were guarding the homes and fighting their adversaries. However, some women who mixed Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) encountered difficulties in offering prayers to ancestors in the forests or toilets where they were hiding. ATR needs *emsamo* (a special room in the house) in which to burn incense and offer prayers to the ancestors. However, whenever there was an opportunity to access *emsamo*, they engaged the ancestors to intervene in their situation. For example, Dladla attributes her survival to the role ancestors played. She believes that ancestors are closer to God than are the living and that it is their duty to intercede for the living. Regardless of the type or forms of spirituality the women engaged in, this study shows that women used spiritual resources or methods to cope and to develop resilience during the political violence and civil war.

These results are consistent with a body of literature that supports the fact that spirituality can be a resource for people to cope effectively in traumatic situations. For example, a national survey conducted in the USA by Schuster, Stein and Jaycon (2001) found that, after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, 90% of Americans reported that they turned to prayer, religion or some form of spiritual activity with loved ones in an effort to cope. Another study by Meichenbaum (n.d.) following hurricane Katrina revealed that 92% of those who survived and who were evacuated to shelters in Houston said that their faith had played an important role in helping them get through. The current study found similar trends. All five women called on God, whether through Jesus or the ancestors, to deliver and sustain them during the violence and war.

### **Seeking meaning in suffering**

When they were confronted by existential crises, the women developed explanations for the traumatic events and generated meanings that would allow them to make sense of their situations. For example, Mbambo says, '...I trusted in God given the way things were happening. I had to hold on to God ... even though I had painful, hard and traumatic experiences in my life'. Nelson-Pechota (2004) argues that exposure to traumatic experiences often leads to a search for meaning and purpose within a personal and collective sense – seeking the answers to a myriad of questions about the painful realities of crises, the value of personal existence, and the value of the human race. As they engaged spiritual methods to find answers to their traumatic experiences, the Christian women in this study generated explanations and meanings that enabled them to re-establish a sense of trust, control and purpose.

### **The church as a support system in traumatic times**

Generally, the church is considered a place of refuge and support for those who are confronted with trauma, illness, death, and other existential crises. Through sermons, prayers and other rituals that church members perform, they comfort and inspire each other to persevere, even in difficult times. In Vulindlela, however, people abandoned attending churches for fear of being killed. Instead they would hide in their homes, in toilets and in forests. It was a very difficult time

for church leaders and members alike to give support to each other. However, the interviews revealed that officials of the Roman Catholic Church visited people in their homes and administered material and spiritual support. The priests brought the Eucharist (Holy Communion) to their members in their homes. The Eucharist is a very significant sacrament or ritual for Christians as it symbolises God's identification with human pain and suffering. The church inspired community resilience and recovery and re-established the rhythms and routines of life as members engaged in the collective healing ritual of the Eucharist. Besides the Eucharist, the church gave material support those who were in need. For example, Dladla acknowledges the role of the church as a support system in the midst of what Louw (2000:21) would call, 'the injustice of suffering'. She says:

Some people received clothing from the church...They came with lots of clothes.

Christians over centuries have endured persecutions and martyrdom and yet the support from the church has always inspired them towards what Saul (2014:106) calls 'a positive vision of the future with renewed hope.' The church support in Vulindlela is a case in point, helping the traumatised individuals as it did until the siege was lifted.

### **Forgiveness as a resource for rebuilding social connectedness**

Rigby (2001:129) alleges that research has shown that 'Forgiveness helps us to let go of the pain of the past in order that we do not remain trapped in the confines of the past injuries and injustices.' To deal effectively with violence and war trauma, Saul (2014, 105) argues that, when it comes to effecting change in traumatised individuals and collectively, research has shown that community members are five times more effective than outside providers. He argues that 'local knowledge, combined with pre-existing resources and social networks, gives community members advantages in identifying efficient ways to have a meaningful impact.' How then did Christian women rebuild what Saul (2014:105) calls, 'previously held social connectedness and forging new relationships'? Some women forgave their enemies. For example, Dladla says: 'I have forgiveness...Well, if he [perpetrator who killed her husband] seeks forgiveness, what would be the use of not forgiving him?' Another example is Gwala who initially refused to talk to or greet another woman who was cheering when her brother was killed. She says, 'I remember one day she greeted and I just kept quiet because she disturbed me so much.' However, her bitterness hindered her prayers. She could not say the Lord's Prayer in full as she failed to say: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' But Gwala made an effort to forgive and reconcile with her enemy. Since the day she forgave her, she was able, not only to say the Lord's Prayer in full, but also to restore social connectedness in a community which had been torn apart by violence and civil war. Thus, not only did forgiveness remove impediments to their recovery from trauma, but it also became a spiritual means for releasing people from feelings of anger, guilt, shame, and revenge.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the experiences of five Christian women who passed 'through the fire, the torture, the cruelty, the horror and the squalor' (Hobhouse, 1923:5) of political violence and civil war. Transcripts of oral interviews with these women, who lived through a period of political violence and civil war between 1987 and 1991, were read and analysed with the purpose of gaining an understanding of their experiences and means of survival at that time. The study revealed that Christian women engaged spiritual methods of survival in the midst of political

violence and war in order to cope and to develop resilience in their traumatic situations. The women in the study used Christian spirituality and African Traditional Religion (ATR). While Christian spirituality insists on praying to God directly or through Jesus Christ, ATR prays to the same God but through rituals performed to ancestors. It was easier during the civil war for displaced believers of Christian spirituality to pray from a location elsewhere after they had fled the killings. However, the case was different with ATR, because this form of spirituality requires a special place called *emsamo* to burn and offer incense and such a ritual was very difficult to practise after the women and children had fled their homes.

However, when an opportunity arose to access the *emsamo*, prayers were made and several Christian women claim that their survival and deliverance from violence was due to the ancestors' protection. We have seen how these women found meaning in their suffering which they would not have found if they had not turned to God or used spiritual methods of survival in their traumatic situations. Although not exhaustive, forms or expressions of spirituality or religious activities included participation in a religious group or spiritual community such as a church or prayer group in the forests; adherence to spiritual or religious teachings, morals and values such as forgiveness; mention of spiritual beliefs or supernatural beings or powers, such as God and the ancestors; conversations with a personal God; or practising religious rituals such as offering incense. Although two types of spirituality were practised, interview transcripts do reveal that the five Christian women found comfort, hope and meaning in their traumatic situations which they would not have found if they had not turned to spiritual resources for their deliverance and survival during the 1987 to 1991 political violence and the Seven Days War of 1990.

The evidence clearly suggests that trauma can produce both very positive and negative effects on the spiritual experiences and perceptions of individuals such as the women described above. When people are caught up in terrible situations, depression and loneliness can lead to feelings of abandonment and loss of faith in one's God. It is possible that such effects may change as time passes and a person moves further away from the acute phase of trauma recovery.

Viewed positively, some individuals may experience increased appreciation of life, greater closeness to God and an increased sense of purpose in life. For many there is an enhanced spiritual well-being while sadly for many others, trauma can be linked with loss of faith, and a highly reduce participation in religious or spiritual activities. Some may opt to alter their belief, as feelings of abandonment by God, lead to a devastating loss of meaning and purpose for life.

Therefore, spirituality is deemed a significant resource to assist people who are confronted by trauma, illness, death and other existential crises in order to develop resilience in traumatic situations.

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