


Revisiting the theological underpinnings of the Kairos Document and its relevance for the church in Zimbabwe

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The publication of the Kairos Document in 1985 marked a significant shift in the political, theological and social history of South Africa. The document challenged inequalities, oppression, the apartheid system and structural injustices. The underpinnings of the Kairos Document influenced churches outside South Africa to challenge their governments on the socioeconomic and political status of their nations. This article aims to revisit the theological underpinnings of the Kairos Document, to assess how its presuppositions are relevant to the church in Zimbabwe. Using the pastoral letter of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference, 'The March Is Not Ended', as a case study, the article resonates with the bishops' stance that institutionalised corruption, lawlessness, unresolved past atrocities and human rights abuses are multiple layers dividing the country. The article argues that, whereas the Kairos Document challenged the South African church during apartheid, the Catholic bishops' pastoral letter serves as a prophetic voice to the Zimbabwean government that ill-treats its citizens in an independent country. Upon reading the two documents, the article employs a qualitative research methodology to argue that every generation faces its challenges, and there is never a time when the church's prophetic voice should be silent. The article concludes by arguing that the underpinnings of the Kairos Document remain alive as long as politicians use and abuse the Bible for their selfish gains. It also encourages churches to continue using the underpinnings of the Kairos Document as a weapon of justice in whatever oppressive circumstance may arise.

Contribution: This article contributes to scholarship by drawing on the theological underpinnings of the Kairos Document to continue challenging churches to confront governments when they abuse their citizens for selfish gains.

Keywords: Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference; Kairos Document; pastoral letter; state theology; South Africa.

Introduction

Since the enactment of the apartheid policy in South Africa in 1948, the socioeconomic, political and theological terrain has been a tormenting experience for the majority of its citizens. South African society was divided by pigmentation; white represented the minority and superiority, while black stood for the majority and inferiority. The situation of the majority South Africans was so desperate that the country was viewed as a 'country of death' (The Kairos Document 1985:5). This expression was evidenced by how the people were 'imprisoned, killed, and maimed in the townships because of their resistance to the draconian apartheid system' (The Kairos Document 1985:5). Using desk research methodology, this article aims to analyse the theological underpinnings of the Kairos Document and its impact on the church in Zimbabwe. The article uses the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) pastoral letter, 'The March Is Not Ended', published on 14 August 2020, as a case study. There are two justifications for arguing that the Kairos Document influenced the Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter to a certain extent. Firstly, Zimbabwe and South Africa share many things in common, including their political history, borders, culture and, to some extent, their religious and economic life. The challenges that affected South Africa during the apartheid era still challenge Zimbabwe today. Secondly, De Gruchy (2004:198) argues that 'the Kairos Document' made an impact far beyond the borders of South Africa. Indeed, it soon became one of the theological documents of the ecumenical church in the late 20th century.

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The article will begin by justifying why this research was undertaken. This will be followed by revisiting the theological foundations of the Kairos Document to demonstrate how its spirit, 'The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived' (Kairos Document 1985:1), challenges the role of theology beyond South Africa. This summary will be followed by an analysis of the Zimbabwean socioeconomic, political and religious context that influenced the publication of 'The March Is Not Ended'. This article will select the 'state and prophetic theologies' (The Kairos Document 1985:8) as key tenets of the Kairos Document that address the Zimbabwean situation. The article will conclude by arguing that the underpinnings of the Kairos Document remain alive as long as politicians use and abuse the Bible for their selfish gains such as to idolise Robert Mugabe as Angel Gabriel and equating President Mnangagwa to the biblical Joshua. It also encourages churches to continue using the underpinnings of the Kairos Document as a weapon of justice in whatever oppressive circumstance may arise.

Justification of the study

According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, the 'apartheid system was believed to have been endorsed and justified by some churches' (Tutu et al. 1998:59). The Dutch Reformed Church played a significant role in giving theological backing to this heinous sociopolitical ideology, 'in a broader sense, the churches the South Africa Council of Churches like the Methodist, the Reformed, Anglican church played a conflicting role during apartheid in South Africa' (Struby 2018:4). The pro- and anti-apartheid formed the ecclesiastical order of those who supported the apartheid system and its ideological formation, and those who looked to the church as a source of strength during times of persecution from their governments. As mentioned, the Dutch Reformed Church, which was the church of the apartheid system, promulgated what the Kairos Document calls state theology. 'This theology supported apartheid as ordained by God' (Maimela 1997:118). On the other hand, some churches viewed 'apartheid as evil' (Ayubi 2023:125). Although the South African Council of Churches was known for their opposition to apartheid, it does not mean that those affiliated with these churches were of one mind on the issue of church-state relationships, let alone whether to support or struggle against a system like apartheid. Moreover, the general council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches & Perret (WARC 1982) defined apartheid as a 'heresy' (De Gruchy & Villa Vicencio 1984:4; Richardson 1986:1). The general council further described apartheid 'as a sin, and its moral and theological justification as a mockery to the Gospel' (Richardson 1986:1). The WARC also cautioned that active validation of apartheid by some reformed churches in South Africa constituted a *status confessionis*, a formal confession in which the church had drawn clear lines between what it considered to be truth and error (De Gruchy & Villa Vicencio 1984:4). The unequal distribution of resources, abuse of the church as a supporter of an evil system, among other vices, led to the publication of the

Kairos Document. The document served as a framework for critiquing the notion of 'religious political populism in contemporary South Africa' (Forster 2020:321).

Going by the definition of apartheid presented by Richardson (1996:4), that the 'system was a policy of the governing National Party, which has been in power in South Africa since 1948, to separate people', the same can be said about some of the policies of the ZANU PF party, which had been in power in Zimbabwe since 1980. It appears that political narratives and policies have divided the citizens between the elite few and the majority poor, which speaks to a similarity to the apartheid system in South Africa. Moreover, the abuse of the church by the Nationalist government speaks well to how the church is also divided by the political powers in Zimbabwe to satisfy their selfish ambitions. The researchers are aware that the word apartheid might be complicated to apply to an independent Zimbabwean situation in the 21st century, as the term was used during the colonial era in South Africa. However, the periods of colonial South Africa and independent Zimbabwe will be read side by side because the ZANU PF system has turned the country into an ungovernable state. This 'Zanunisation' of the country (Moyo 2012; Pindula 2020) justifies the need to analyse how the influence of the Kairos Document impacts the church in Zimbabwe, thereby rescuing theology from ZANU PF, which started as a liberating party during the liberation struggle that turned into an oppressor of its people to remain in power.

This article argues that the sociopolitical, economic and religious life of South Africa, which led to the publication of the Kairos Document, bears a certain resemblance to that of Zimbabwe. The ZCBC's pastoral letter, 'The March Is Not Ended', was published 34 years after the Kairos Document was released. Most scholars who have researched the religiopolitical and socioeconomic situation in Zimbabwe agree that the crisis began in 2000 (Manyonganise 2022:1). It is undeniable that the ZCBC's pastoral letter was influenced by the Kairos Document, given the pivotal role played by the Zimbabwean church during the liberation struggle. The church understood its role in standing between the poor and the rich, and in holding politicians accountable when they abused their citizens.

The Kairos Document also remains central to this study because churches in Zimbabwe are becoming increasingly vocal in their challenges to the government. It can be noted that since the year 2000, the church began to be increasingly prophetic, issuing pastoral letters through the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe and the ZCBC (Manyonganise 2022; Mujinga 2025; Ruzivo 2020). The pastoral letters challenged the Zimbabwean government, which supported the political elite while oppressing those who differed from their ideology. Munetsi Ruzivo dedicated a chapter in his 2020 publication to analysing some of these pastoral letters. It is evident from the pastoral letter that they

have consistently been addressed to the 'deaf political elite', whose primary purpose is to serve themselves (Chitando 2013; Chitando & Manyonganise 2011). This paper will use the ZCBC pastoral letter as a case study to demonstrate how the organisation drew on the underpinnings of the Kairos Document to be prophetic in a similar situation of oppression.

Engaging the theological underpinnings of the Kairos Document

The need to revisit the Kairos Document's underpinnings and its relevance to the church in Zimbabwe necessitates a reevaluation of the concept of *kairos*. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.), the word 'kairos' originates from the Greek language, meaning a crucial action, decisive moment or opportune time. Kairos can also be described as the *right moment* (White 1987). The two definitions provided justify the naming of the 1985 document that was published in South Africa. The Kairos Document was written at a time when human dignity had been destroyed, life no longer considered to be sacred, as brutality and vigilance faced one another. Whereas the government in South Africa used violence to enforce the apartheid system, the vulnerable South Africans used vigilance to challenge the aggression of apartheid machinations. According to Goba (1987:313), 'the Kairos Document presented an urgent theological reaction to the deepening political crisis in South Africa, which had far-reaching consequences for the Christian community'. The aggressive approach to stand for justice and to quell the massacre of the majority also propelled the writing of the Kairos Document. The writers of the Kairos Document authored the first line, demonstrating the urgency to stop any callousness and cruelty, with the words, 'the time has come, the moment of truth has arrived'. 'It is the Kairos or moment of truth, not only for apartheid but also for the Church' (The Kairos Document 1985:7).

The first paragraphs of the document demonstrate the need to be bold because the church had reached a moment of decisive action, which was a perilous moment if missed. A missed opportunity would have been detrimental to the life and mission of the church in South Africa. Drawing from Luke 19:44, the Kairos Document, theologians equated the inequities in the South African sociopolitical and economic situation to the city of Jerusalem that Jesus wept over. For Jesus, the destruction of the city was imminent because the people in Jerusalem had not seized the opportunity to repent when God granted it (The Kairos Document 1985:7). These opening remarks, according to Goba (1987:313), 'made the Document unique as before 1985, the church was less vocal, which could have been interpreted as it supported of the status quo'. The Christian Church had a conflicting theological stance because the state church advocated for a state theology. In contrast, the prophetic church struggled to voice its prophetic witness in a hostile environment. Goba confessed that 'the church had no solution to the struggles of the populace, yet

liberation was sorely needed' (Goba 1987:313). According to Le Bruyns (2015:460–61), 'the key aspects of the Kairos Document are criticality, change, and contextuality'. The three aspects present Kairos theology as a prophetic God-talk during times of struggle. Thus, Kairos theology is for those who struggle to define their identity in the context of oppression.

The Kairos Document represented a moment when truth, and only truth, had to be spoken, although its contents stirred discomfort to the oppressor and those sitting on the fence. The Document cracked into the unity and divisibility of the church, where the oppressor and the oppressed worshipped the same God, governed by the same book of discipline, met at the table of grace, received the same gospel and yet behaved very differently. After church, the white Christian police brutalised the Christian black populace, a visual contradiction of what should be a religion of community. 'At the same time, the White Christian soldiers performed barbaric acts of brutality against Christians' (The Kairos Document 1985:7) – another contradiction of what should have been a religion of peace and healing. From the dividing lines of the oppressor and the oppressed cited above, 'the Kairos Documents constructed the notions of State Theology, Church Theology, and Prophetic Theology' (The Kairos Document 1985:8), differentiating between the different voices of God (through the church) in the context of overt oppression.

The Kairos Document addressed the issues affecting South Africa, but it also had a broader influence on other countries. For example, in 2009, Palestinians drafted their version of the Kairos Document to address the issues affecting their specific context and challenges. According to Le Bruyns (2015:451), 'the Palestinian Kairos Document was formulated on the foundations of the South African theological standpoint'. Writing from the Palestinian context, Das (2010) describes the Palestinian Kairos Document as a call to the international community to stand with the people of Palestine who faced displacement, oppression and functional apartheid for more than 60 years. This version is also a prayer, a quest for hope and faith in God to liberate the oppressed. Le Bruyns (2015) concludes that:

Latin American Black Theology, Women Theology, Black South African Theology, Minjung Theology, African Theology, Dalit Theology, Feminist Theology, and Contextual Theology are all liberation theologies that define their purpose, task, and methodology grounded in a kairos situation. (p. 454)

According to Le Bruyns' assertions, 'the Kairos Document served as a pointer to liberation theology and the liberation of theology'. In applying Kairos theology, 'the church considers religion as a critical source of social categorisation, which influences the emotional experiences of citizens' (McDonnell & Cabrera 2018:484); as such, addressing issues of injustice is a means of responding to its prophetic call. West (2010) argues that:

There is a place for liberation theologies ... as long as the God of life is engaged against the idols of death, whether these be the idols of neo-liberal capitalism ... or the idols of patriarchy within

our cultures and religions, or the idols of moral and medical discrimination in the context of HIV and AIDS, there is a need for forms of liberation theology that work with and proclaim the God of life. (p. 158)

For De Gruchy, the Kairos Document made theology a timely response to the need for a prophetic moment or confessing event. It is a theology that emerged in the context of a struggle, challenging the constrictive, systematic academic theology to be relevant in its context (De Gruchy 1990:62).

The context of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference pastoral letter

The Zimbabwean political landscape has always been in the spotlight, with the church challenging the system through sermons, pastoral letters, calling for negotiations and other means to address injustices. Although most churches and scholars did not use the term 'Kairos Document' to refer to their writings, the definition of Kairos presented earlier highlights an urgent need to engage with Zimbabwean socioeconomic and political life within a Kairos mood. The South African Kairos Document raised critical issues that challenged the church and political powers; the same is true for the church in Zimbabwe, which also confronts the evils of its time at all times. The researchers are aware of the extensive work done by various scholars in addressing the religious, political and socioeconomic situation in Zimbabwe. Little attention will be paid to already saturated areas. The primary focus of this article is to argue that 'March Is Not Ended' is one version of the Kairos Document, addressing the ills in Zimbabwe, despite the numerous similar pastoral letters written by the ZCBC and other mainline churches as argued earlier.

On 14 August 2020, the ZCBC issued a pastoral letter, titled 'The March Is Not Ended' (ZCBC 2020:1). The pastoral letter addressed the sociopolitical and economic situation in Zimbabwe. The title of the pastoral letter was drawn from an American politician and civil rights activist, John Robert Lewis, who served in the United States House of Assembly, but passed away shortly after his historic statement. The bishops reiterated the praises that were ascribed to Lewis during his funeral. 'Lewis was known for declaring that the march for freedom is not over, even in the context of the United States of America' (ZCBC 2020:1). The bishops typified the notion of community development in the United States for the Zimbabwean context, as practices such as peacebuilding and nation-building are never completed tasks. Every generation has to establish national peace and cohesion (ZCBC 2020:1).

The pastoral letter addressed several issues that continued to divide the country. The bishops labelled the two social classes as those who think they have arrived and those on the march resulting in a multilayered crisis of the convergence of economic collapse, deepening poverty, food

insecurity, corruption and human rights abuses, among other crises (ZCBC 2020:1). For the Catholic bishops, the two social strata are represented by the minority elite from the ruling party. In contrast, the majority means the poor and the people from a different ideology than the ruling party. Mujinga (2025:895) prefers to refer to the two diverse sides as the far-right and the far-left to describe the diversity of their political ideologies. The minority elite were, and are, suppressing the voices of the people, resulting in a deep crisis and the unresolved hurts of the *Gukurahundi*.¹ The pastoral letter was also written in response to the confirmation by the European Union, the African Union and the United Nations of the crisis in Zimbabwe. South Africa had sent envoys to discuss the crackdown, as most people were living in hiding out of fear of being persecuted by the state. 'Their fear is justified, as many who spoke out against oppression were imprisoned' (ZCBC 2020:1). The bishops bemoaned the animosity that was defining the country, as people with different views were treated as enemies of the state. For them, 'this was an abuse of human rights' (ZCBC 2020:1).

The summary of the issues raised by the ZCBC was articulated by Zvaringeni Samuel Chasi, a human rights activist, in his open letter to the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, dated 15 April 2025. In this dossier, Chasi proposed deferring Zimbabwe's bid to rejoin the Commonwealth. In his 12-page letter, Chasi narrated Zimbabwe's sociopolitical and economic crisis over the years. Chasi pointed out the ills and atrocities of Zimbabwe from the time of Robert Mugabe. He argues that:

The issue of democracy, which led to the removal of Robert Mugabe as President on 14–15 November 2017, was facilitated by military assistance. The refusal by the Army Generals to salute anyone who does not have the war credentials as the President, the perpetual election contestations since 2000, the persistent Election Observer Missions reports that have been ignored, resulting in the ZANU-PF hegemonic leadership. In addition, the conflicting stance of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, the draconic legislations such as the Access to Information and Privacy Act (AIPPA) and the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) which favours the ruling party and treats everyone as a criminal, lack of Electoral Reforms worsened the situation. Moreover, the involvement of the military and police on civil matters dubbing them as political crimes, the disruption and interference of the opposition parties by the ruling party, crimes against humanity, corruption and poor social services are the cancer haunting Zimbabwe. (Chasi 2025:1)

The pastoral letter addressed and challenged state theology, proffering a prophetic alternative. The two theologies will be discussed, linking them to the central tenets of the Kairos Document.

1. The Gukurahundi was a series of mass killings and genocide in Zimbabwe which were committed within the Midlands and two Matabeleland Provinces of Zimbabwe through a Fifth Brigade army, trained by the North Koreans, and which was accountable to former President Robert Mugabe. The massacre took place from 1983 until the Unity Accord in 1987. The name derives from a Shona language term which loosely translates to 'the early rain which washes away the chaff before the spring rains' (Ndlovu 2019).

Zimbabwe's state theology: 'A mirror of Apartheid South African church'

The Kairos Document presents state theology as a theology of political dominance. The Kairos theologians defined state theology as a form of God-talk that justifies the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. State theology blesses injustices and sides with the powerful. 'It portrays the poor as subhuman beings who should be obedient, passive, and live in a state of apathy' (The Kairos Document 1985:9). This type of theology misuses theological concepts for political gain and is prevalent in Zimbabwe. The ruling party has divided the church along those who support them as *pure sons of the soil*. At the same time, those who disagree with them are labelled as enemies, aligning themselves with Western sociopolitical narratives. Since the time of Robert Mugabe, outspoken individuals such as Prophet Lawrence Katsiru, Godfrey Nzira and Obediah Musindo have portrayed Mugabe as a demigod (Mujinga 2018:244). The white garment churches, Mapostori, referred to Robert Mugabe as an 'Angel, sent by God to bring good news to the suffering Zimbabweans' (Machingura & Musona 2020:88). These chants were uttered in the context of a suffering populace. According to Musendekwa (2018):

While it was genuine prophetic promises for a better future in ancient Israel, the messianic characterisation of Mugabe was used as political rhetoric and propaganda to legitimise his role as the sole liberator and candidate for leadership of the nation of Zimbabwe. (p. 1)

The deification of political leaders did not end with Mugabe. After his death, the presidency of Zimbabwe continued under President Emmerson Mnangagwa, marking the beginning of the Second Dispensation. Many pro-ZANU-PF church leaders cherry-picked scriptures to promote state theology. For Gusha (2020:4), the Second Dispensation in Zimbabwe's political discourses legitimised its existence by citing Romans 13:1-7. Zimbabwe is a democracy and not a Christian state. However, there is a bias towards Christianity by state leaders, for it appeals to the masses (Gusha 2020:4). Just like during the time of apartheid, law and order in state theology are used to determine and control what the people may be permitted to regard as just and unjust – moreover, the term communist was used to refer to anyone against state theology. The Kairos theologians reinterpret Romans 13:1-7 as a text interpreted out of context. The text includes the circumstances of Paul in the Roman context (The Kairos Document 1985:10). The Romans were not revolutionaries calling for the change of government but were antinomians or enthusiasts, and they believed that Christians and only Christians were exonerated from obeying any state, government or political authority and claim Jesus alone to be their king. Paul was addressing a heretical theological issue, not a political one. The Kairos theologians condemned the use of Romans 13 to address the problems in South Africa as a disservice to Paul,

because his letter is used out of context (The Kairos Document 1985:10). These are the same sentiments that Gusha is cautioning against in Zimbabwe 'where Romans 13 is cited out of context to promote its State Theology' (Gusha 2020:1).

The Kairos theologians condemned Nationalists for using law and order to define what was unjust as just and vice versa. They challenged the abuse of injustice by describing the then justice system as discriminatory, because such terms did not mean the same to every person, whether white or black, in everyday use. For the state, what is unjust is what everyone sees as just for themselves, because the system controls the law to support those within their circles. Laws are institutionalised, and for the Kairos Document, the enforcement of law to oppress the already vulnerable constitutes institutionalised disorder (The Kairos Document 1985:10). The state maintains law and order. Still, it does not have a divine mandate to support any oppressive law and order. Something does not become moral and just simply because the state declares it to be law. Moreover, the state punishes anyone who goes against it, and the Kairos theologians regard such a system as ungodly. This discriminatory application of law, which treats everyone against the state as a communist, was also reiterated by the ZCBC as being unfair. (ZCBC 2020:12). For the state, all evil is communist, and socialist ideas are seen to be atheistic and godless because they are an enemy of the state. In Zimbabwe, enemies of the state, for whatever reason, are treated with brutality, primarily through unconvicted incarceration (Amnesty International 2024; Thornycroft 2019). In the state theology, the threats of hellfire and eternal damnation are replaced by threats and warnings about the horrors of a tyrannical, totalitarian, atheistic and terroristic communist regime. For the Kairos theologians, 'this abuse of theology was the seedbed of heretical theology that creates the God of the State as a monster God' (The Kairos Document 1985:12).

The Kairos theologians challenged how the military chaplaincy, police, defence forces and politicians, swearing with the Bible, are the opposite of what it means to be godly. Through these secular programmes, presided over by the judiciary at the swearing-in of members of the House of Assembly, Senate or President himself in Zimbabwe, means that theology is sacralised and religion is dramatised. God is defined on the side of the state that disposes of the black people or the opposition. He is the God of teargas, bullets, sjamboks, prison cells and death sentence and who is always with those who are suffering. The Prophetic Theology of the church, on the other hand, describes God as the one who does not exalt the oppressor and pull down the poor, but as the God who pulls down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the humble (Lk 1:51-52). The ZCBC expressed their fear that violence is institutionalised to keep the oppressor in power. These parallels of the apartheid system and the Zimbabwean situation present a complex web of theology, where God is (ab)used to speak on the side of the powerful, which is not the character of the Prophetic

God. State theology was attacked because, for Walshe, 'the struggle against apartheid in South Africa was both political and theological' (Walshe 1987:303). The Catholic bishops cited Micah 7:3, which states that, 'Both hands are skilled in doing evil; the ruler demands gifts, the judge accepts bribes, the powerful dictate what they desire – They all conspire together'. This corruption is being done in a country where President Emmerson Mnangagwa was being declared as the biblical Joshua of Zimbabwe by his Deputy President, Dr Constantino Chiwenga (Mubayiwa 2018:1).

When the Kairos theologians were attacking the state theology of South Africa, they were attacking the powers who used the Bible for their selfish gain. Some speeches supported the state as God-ordained, while many people were suffering. They used the media to promote propaganda in the name of the church. The Catholic bishops' statement nails it on the head when they state that, 'corruption has reached an alarming rate, the government and the civic society agree on that, but the government is practising catch and release of the criminals' (ZCBC 2020:2). The level of corruption is shocking because in 2017, when the coup was enacted, the justification was to remove President Robert Mugabe and to deal with the criminals around the Head of State. Unfortunately, the criminals around President Mnangagwa have proliferated, yet he is still regarded as the redeemer of Zimbabwe by Andrew Wutawashe (New Zimbabwe 2024). That:

Zimbabwe is making significant progress and moving forward. The servant we were given [*President Mnangagwa*] gave us the vision of 2030 in the same spirit as that of Joshua and Caleb. People who speak badly on social media about Zimbabwe, saying the country is struggling and there is hunger, are not qualified to utter such statements. They know nothing... Programmes such as *pfumvudza* bring plentiful harvests. Dams and roads point to a country that is being uplifted. The church believes the government has a bright future under the leadership of the Zimbabwean Joshua. (p. 1)

The Catholic bishops caution this state's theology as miserable. They cited Micah 7:1–6, where the prophet was grappling with the deplorable state of Judah. For them, Micah was a prophet from a rural area. He condemned the state of affairs in Judah in the same way the Catholic bishops were doing in Zimbabwe, where leaders were pointed out for using power for personal gains (ZCBC 2020:2). Just like the Kairos theologians, the Catholic bishops advocated for the poor and the oppressed. They expressed concern over a system that continued to promote the minority at the expense of the majority. For the bishops, this was a result of corrupt leaders who did not care about the corporate or common good (ZCBC 2020:4).

The bishops challenged the notion that state theology promotes reconciliation, yet politicians were the perpetrators of violence. To this, the bishops mentioned the unresolved conflicts caused by the *Gukurahundi* atrocities. The Kairos theologians express similar sentiments, arguing that reconciliation is the key to resolving problems.

However, reconciliation does not work when one powerless side is labelled wrong and the powerful side feels that it is always right. One side is an armed and violent oppressor. At the same time, the other is defenceless and oppressed (The Kairos Document 1985:16). The Zimbabwean history is clear that there were perpetrators of violence during *Gukurahundi*; as such, to invite the victims to reconciliation is to benefit from the conflicts of the superior and the inferior, injustice and justice, good and evil, and yet these are irreconcilable (The Kairos Document 1985:17). No reconciliation, no forgiveness, no negotiation are possible without repentance. The sinner needs to repent first before being forgiven. Reconciliation must be genuine, and peace must be peaceful (Jn 14:27). This peace is based on truth and repentance on the part of the regime. For the Kairos theologians, justice should not be determined by the oppressor who gives it as a kind of concession.

The Catholic bishops also condemned the discriminatory application of the law in Zimbabwe. Just like the Kairos theologians, they echoed that violence is used discriminatively to oppress people from mostly low-income groups. The Kairos theologians complained that when the poor burn tyres, throw stones, burn cars and buildings in their defence, it is viewed as violence, while state violence is viewed as maintaining order. As such, violence came to refer to what the oppressed were doing and not the brutal actions of the police and the army. Violence and self-defence have been defined together (The Kairos Document 1985:17). The violation of human rights was expressed by the Catholic bishops, when they said:

[T]he voices of various governments, the European Union, the African Union and the United Nations on the desperate situation in Zimbabwe have not only confirmed the seriousness of human rights breaches by government agents but the need to rally behind #zimbabweanlivesmatter. (ZCBC 2020:1)

The abuse of the majority of Zimbabweans came on 31 July 2020, when people demonstrated, but in response were arrested, abducted, maimed and brutalised. The incident resulted in South African President Cyril Ramaphosa sending envoys to Zimbabwe; but unfortunately, they were not allowed to speak to the church and civic society. The bishops further highlighted the crisis posed by institutionalised violence that has led to some citizens living in hiding, some incarcerated, and some on the run because they had different opinion from the government (ZCBC 2020:1). It is evident from the comparisons raised in this paragraph that the underpinnings of the Kairos Document had everlasting implication in the life of the church years after its publication in South Africa.

Impact of prophetic public theology in the context of oppression

Although the state would use all its machinations to oppress the poor, the church remains the mouthpiece of the voiceless populace. The Kairos Document and the Catholic bishops' pastoral letter remain the audible voices of justice in the

context of oppression. Prophetic public theology helps the church proclaim its purpose. In South Africa, theology played a crucial role in navigating a context marked by uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the Christian evaluation of the democratic dispensation and the government's transformation policies (De Villiers 2011:2013). The Kairos Document proposed how the church should play a prophetic and constructive role in society. Prophetic public theology was introduced as a significant concept because of the privatisation of the church by the Nationalists. The Kairos Document called for a response from Christians that is both biblical and spiritual, pastoral and prophetic. The Kairos theologians argued that social analysis involves the reading of the signs of the times (Mt 16:3). The situation was one of oppression. People with low incomes and the state were two irreconcilable institutions, defined as just and unjust by an oppressive regime (The Kairos Document 1985:17).

In Zimbabwe, prophetic public theology challenges the wealthy, who benefit from a system that encourages them to accumulate wealth. Some do not benefit in any way and are treated as merely labour units who are paid starvation wages. The Kairos theologians disagreed with the politicians who were committed to maintaining the system at all costs, and the other side promoted a position that was dedicated to change at all costs (The Kairos Document 1985:24). In response, the Catholic bishops chastised the Zimbabwean government for implementing policies that drove the country towards a capitalist direction. They decried the conditions of the country:

The poor have no one to defend them; they do not seem to be on the national agenda. Their cries for an improved healthcare system are received with disdain. Their cry for transport is suspended until the next campaign rally. The government is not taking ownership of the nation's deplorable state; instead, it blames everyone for its failures except itself. They mention some unknown foreigners, white colonialists and the undefined internal dictators. These blame shifts were used as tools to empower the judiciary, so that whoever is accused of being an enemy should not receive any justice. (ZCBC 2020:3)

Although the church is the mouthpiece of justice, the Zimbabwean government labelled them as agents of regime change. The Catholic bishops accused the ZANU-PF government for failing to recognise the need for change. They proclaimed their prophetic public theology by citing Jeremiah 9:11, which says, 'Who is so wise that he can understand this? Let him to whom the mouth of the Lord has spoken make it known ...' This text was used to confront the leaders of Jeremiah's time, who were perceived as lacking integrity (ZCBC 2020:4). The bishops used it to highlight to the government the issues that were a reality in the country. The same stance resonates with the Kairos Document, where theologians reminded the state that oppression was common in the Bible, but justice threads through every chapter of the very same Bible. The Bible describes oppression as the experience of being cursed, degraded, humiliated, exploited, impoverished, defrauded, deceived and enslaved. In contrast, oppressors are described

as cruel, ruthless, arrogant, greedy, violent and tyrannical and as enemies (Kairos Document 1985:18). Israel suffered under oppression and repression throughout its history. God revealed Godself in the context of their suffering. God is not neutral but has a preferential option for the poor and is their liberator. Oppression is a sin and cannot be compromised with; it must be eradicated. The Kairos theologians reminded the Nationalist government that God sides with the poor (Ps 103:6, Lk 4:18-19).

The need for the church to deliberately take the side of the poor was buttressed by Desmond Tutu who emphatically stated that:

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality. (Brown 1984:19)

This was the same message of the bishops to the ZANU PF government that God loves, cares and provides for the vulnerable. Still, the leaders must be responsible as stewards appointed for such a task. In their call for action, the Catholic bishops challenged the government to stop blaming people who are not in leadership positions, to face the country's realities and to be prepared to deal with these crises. They raised five issues: namely, a victim-led process of reconciliation, an agreed process towards rule of law and constitutionalism, a new social contract based on inclusive economic vision, a broad-based inclusive national emergency and the mending of bilateral relations (ZCBC 2020:4). For them, facing reality and naming the problem is the only way to address fundamental challenges.

Conclusion

Although the Kairos Document was written during the dark days of South Africa's sociopolitical life, its underpinnings have influenced many countries, including Zimbabwe. The ZCBC is using these formulations to challenge the Zimbabwean leadership, which is an independent country. The article argued that the underpinnings of the Kairos Document remain alive as long as politicians use and abuse the Bible for their selfish gains. It also encourages churches to continue using these foundations as a tool of justice in whatever oppressive circumstances they may encounter.

The Zimbabwe Catholic bishops sharpened their theological swords to use theology as a means of confronting an evil system. Having drawn the two articles side by side, the article resonates with the Catholic bishops that 'The March Is Not ended'. Those who think they have arrived need to look back at those they are leading to find out whether they have arrived with them. In addition, those who still feel that we have not yet arrived also need to calculate the distance. In this process of reducing and increasing the spread of political tolerance, the church remains a conduit of unity, peace and reconciliation. That being said, church leaders are encouraged to live by the biblical principle of speaking and advocating for the poor. The article also calls for theologians

to distance themselves from state theology that supports the minority powerful and to speak for the voices of those in the margins, as this is the call of the church. Lastly, given that the lives of ordinary people in Zimbabwe seem far from being better, public theology remains an instrument of justice and a weapon of liberation, which the ZCBC must hold on to until the Zimbabweans are liberated.

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Authors' contributions

M.M. wrote the concept, methodology and the Zimbabwean Concept, and did the analysis. W.B. wrote the justification for the study, the concept in the Kairos Document and its impact in South Africa.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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