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From Kairos to Kairos: Prophetic witness in post-apartheid and Global South contexts

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The Kairos Document of 1985 emerged from the praxis of the oppressed in South Africa's struggle against apartheid, offering an incisive moment of ecclesial self-critique and prophetic theological engagement. Articulated through the Institute for Contextual Theology, it confronted the structural sin embedded in State and Church theologies and called the Church towards radical discipleship rooted in justice and solidarity. This article marks the 40th anniversary of that seminal text by honouring its authors, the fallen heroes and the faith-based and academic communities who embodied its vision. Yet, the signs of the times reveal that the work of liberation remains incomplete. Persisting economic inequality, ecological devastation and social fragmentation testify to the need for renewed discernment. This article proposes that a new Kairos has arrived, one that demands a liberative hermeneutic attentive to the cries of the crucified peoples of history. Drawing upon the theological motifs of the original document and lessons from contemporary liberation movements across the Global South, it calls for the drafting of a new Kairos Document that can reawaken the prophetic witness of the Church for our age.

Contribution: A new theological manifesto grounded in liberation, pan-African solidarity and postcolonial critique, offering global relevance for the Global South.

Keywords: Kairos Document; liberation theology; public theology; Global South Christianity; prophetic witness; postcolonial theology; ecclesial resistance.

Introduction

In 1985, South Africa reached a decisive historical and theological crossroads. The apartheid regime had intensified its brutal repression of the black majority, fortified not only by state power but also by religious institutions that, either through silence or theological justification, remained complicit in systemic violence (Goba 1987:79). Amid this crisis, a collective of Christian theologians, clergy and grassroots faith communities issued what would become the Kairos Document, a bold and prophetic theological intervention that denounced both State Theology and Church Theology and called the Church into radical discipleship and solidarity with the oppressed (Kairos Theologians 1985:6). The document declared this to be a *Kairos*, a moment of truth and judgement, where neutrality was no longer tenable, and where the Church was summoned to recover its prophetic vocation (Le Bruyns 2012:5). Grounded in the praxis of liberation, it was not merely a critique of theological distortions but a call to reimagine Christian witness as resistance, as public theology rooted in the experience of the crucified peoples of history (Buttelli 2012:24).

This article commemorates 40 years of the Kairos Document not as a relic of the past but as a living tradition of contextual theology and prophetic imagination. It honours the fallen heroes and heroines, the authors and contributors, many of whom remain unnamed, whose theological courage challenged the powers of their day. At the same time, the article argues that our present moment, shaped by persistent structural sin, including economic inequality, ecological collapse, gender-based violence and social fragmentation, constitutes a new Kairos (Solomons 2022:173). As such, this article proposes a theological project: to revise and reimagine the Kairos Document for today's South Africa, the African continent and the broader Global South. It seeks to discern the signs of the times and call the Church, once again, into radical witness and faithful resistance.

The methodological approach for this study is threefold. Firstly, it offers a historical-theological analysis of the original Kairos Document, situating it within the broader trajectory of liberation theology. Secondly, it engages a liberative hermeneutic, interpreting contemporary socio-political

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realities through the lens of prophetic theology and the lived experience of the marginalised (Van Wyngaard 2016:4). Thirdly, it draws on the insights of contextual and public theology, particularly from post-apartheid South African and wider Global South theological scholarship, to envision the contours of a renewed Kairos consciousness (Swart 2013:142).

Remembering the 1985 Kairos Document: Historical and theological context

The *Kairos Document* emerged during one of the most intense periods of South Africa's apartheid regime. Apartheid was not merely a political system but a theological crisis, underpinned by racialised policies and legitimised by segments of the Christian church. The state, bolstered by a civil religion of white supremacy, wielded Christian rhetoric to justify violence, land dispossession and structural inequality (Goba 1987:80; Kairos Theologians 1985:2). Many churches, particularly in the mainline denominations, either remained silent or promoted a non-confrontational theology that failed to challenge the socio-political status quo. This historical moment constituted a Kairos, a time of urgent decision and divine confrontation. It exposed the inadequacy of traditional ecclesial responses and demanded a new theological articulation grounded in justice, resistance and truth-telling (Le Bruyns 2012:3).

The Kairos Document was a collaborative work authored by a group of anonymous theologians, clergy and lay leaders convened by the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT). Anonymity was a strategic choice, intended to protect those involved from persecution by the apartheid state (Denis 2021:323). However, several key figures shaped its theological vision and public reception: Frank Chikane, Albert Nolan, Itumeleng Mosala, Frans Kekana and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who lent moral and theological authority as a prominent endorser (Le Bruyns 2012:9). Their collective vision reflected a deep commitment to contextual theology: theology born not in abstraction, but in the lived struggles of oppressed communities. It was a theology of the streets, forged in protest, prayer and prophetic imagination.

The theological core of the Kairos Document was its critique of the dominant theological frameworks of the time. It categorised prevailing theologies into three types: State Theology, Church Theology and prophetic theology (Kairos Theologians 1985:2–12). State Theology employed Scripture to justify apartheid, equating order with divine sanction. Church Theology, while critical of apartheid, opted for neutrality and reconciliation without justice, thus failing to engage structural sin. In contrast, prophetic theology was rooted in the biblical witness of justice and liberation. It called for radical discipleship, a commitment to act in solidarity with the poor, to name injustice as sin and to pursue transformation of the unjust structures of society (Buttelli 2012: 26). This was theology as praxis: lived, embodied and disruptive.

The Kairos Document received significant traction both locally and globally. Within South Africa, it invigorated ecumenical resistance and gave theological language to the political instincts of oppressed communities. Internationally, it was endorsed by the World Council of Churches and engaged by theologians across Latin America and the Middle East, inspiring movements such as Kairos Palestine (Swart 2013:144). Its legacy lies not only in its content, but in its method: it modelled how theology could arise from below, from within the crucible of suffering and speak prophetically to power. The Kairos Document endures as a landmark in liberation theology and remains a template for the Church's response to injustice.

Honouring the pillars of prophetic resistance

The history of the Kairos Document cannot be adequately told without honouring the silent architects of its vision: the unnamed martyrs, grassroots faith leaders and everyday believers who gave their lives and their faith in resistance to the theological and political machinery of apartheid. These were not only the theologians who wrote and spoke publicly, but also those who lived prophetically in the shadows, bearing witness through suffering, endurance and acts of costly solidarity.

The Kairos Document emerged from a community in struggle, not merely from the academy. Behind its words were the voices of countless ordinary Christians – catechists, mothers, lay leaders, youth activists and domestic workers – who risked harassment, detention and death for refusing to baptise the status quo (Denis 2021:324; Solomons 2022:170). Many of these individuals will never appear in scholarly footnotes or public honours, yet they form the cloud of witnesses that surrounded the emergence of this prophetic theology.

Their witness aligns with the biblical motif of the crucified peoples of history, a phrase invoked by liberation theologians to describe those whose lives are rendered disposable by systems of domination (Gutiérrez 1988:275). These are the martyrs who, by their faith and resistance, reveal the living presence of God among the oppressed. In remembering them, we are not indulging nostalgia; we are recovering a theological memory that unsettles the present and calls the Church back to its cruciform vocation.

The sacrifice of these grassroots believers was not in vain. It was their embodied theology, their acts of courage, hospitality, refusal and hope that gave the Kairos Document its authority. They remind us that prophetic theology is never the possession of the learned alone but is most potent when born from below, in blood and dust, among the living witnesses of God's justice. Their embodied faith forged in protest, prayer and peril gave the Kairos Document its moral authority. It is in remembering these unnamed saints that the Church retrieves a liberative theological memory, one which bears witness to the God who suffers with the oppressed and calls

the Church to costly discipleship. But this prophetic resistance was not born in isolation; it was nurtured within a community of theological discernment that became the furnace for a new kind of ecclesial imagination.

Central to this prophetic emergence was the ICT, a theological collective that offered more than intellectual resources; it offered sanctuary, strategy and solidarity. Founded in 1981 in Johannesburg, the ICT was conceived as a response to the urgent need for a theology that could speak meaningfully from the underside of apartheid's violence. It created a space where theologians, pastors and lay leaders could grapple with Scripture, society and struggle in deeply contextual ways (Duncan & Egan 2019:12).

The ICT rejected abstract, ivory-tower theology in favour of what it termed 'theology from below', a model rooted in lived experience and accountable to the suffering. As Van Wyngaard (2016:5) notes, the ICT facilitated a theology that moved 'from the academy to the street and back again', resisting both elitism and quietism. It hosted critical forums, ran underground workshops and fostered ecumenical collaboration across race, denomination and class lines.

Leadership within the ICT was marked by its commitment to collective authorship and decentralised authority. Prominent figures such as Albert Nolan, Frank Chikane and Itumeleng Mosala worked in tandem with local faith communities to develop a theological vocabulary that could name apartheid not merely as a political failure, but as structural sin – a system fundamentally opposed to the kingdom of God (Swart 2013:146). In this way, the ICT did not just critique the dominant theological paradigms of the time; it subverted them.

What emerged was not only a powerful document but a new model of ecclesial formation, one that saw the Church not as an institution of refuge but as an agent of disruption and witness. The ICT formed leaders who were as comfortable in the pulpit as they were in protest marches, who treated theological education as an act of defiance. Vellem (2010:3) describes this as the cultivation of a 'resistance ecclesiology', where theology and justice became inseparable.

Even under constant state surveillance, the ICT remained undeterred. It became a sanctuary of prophetic courage and theological creativity, modelling what it meant for the Church to discern the signs of the times (Duncan & Egan 2019:14). Its role in producing and promoting the Kairos Document was not incidental; it was generative. It gave the South African Church a prophetic language with which to confront power, and a renewed understanding of the Gospel as public truth.

The Kairos Document did not remain confined to the realm of resistance theology or underground activism; it profoundly shaped academic discourse and ecclesial practice across Southern Africa. In the wake of its publication, numerous theological institutions and ecumenical organisations recognised its potential not merely as a prophetic text, but as a pedagogical tool that could renew theological education and deepen Christian discipleship.

Seminaries such as the University of the Western Cape (UWC), the Federal Theological Seminary (Fedsem) and later institutions such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) began to formally integrate the Kairos theology into their curricula. This shift represented more than curricular reform; it was a theological repositioning. As Conradie (2021:340) notes in his study of systematic theology at UWC, the Kairos Document initiated a transformation in how theology was taught, privileging social analysis, lived experience and political agency as integral to theological formation. Students were increasingly invited to read Scripture 'from below', allowing the voices of the marginalised to interrogate dominant theological paradigms.

Moreover, ecumenical bodies such as the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa (EFSA) and faith-based organisations including the Church Land Programme (CLP) and the ICT played a catalytic role in promoting Kairos consciousness. These institutions created workshops, Bible study collectives and grassroots theological forums where the Kairos Document was not only read but lived (Göranzon 2010:188). In doing so, they extended its reach beyond seminary walls and into the lifeblood of congregational life and community action.

This theological energy was also reflected in the restructuring of theological education itself. As De Beer (2019:3) argues, the post-apartheid theological curriculum was decisively shaped by public theology and Kairos sensibility, ensuring that theology was no longer a discipline divorced from struggle, but one immersed in it. Key theological faculties developed programmes focused on justice-oriented ministry, contextual Bible study and theology of land – all deeply indebted to Kairos theology.

In the broader African context, Bongmba (2020:94) notes that Kairos theology contributed to the emergence of African public theology, particularly in its insistence on prophetic speech and solidarity with the poor as essential components of the Church's mission. This theological heritage has continued to inform ecumenical conferences, social justice campaigns and theological syllabi across the continent.

In summary, the Kairos Document not only confronted the Church with a prophetic challenge in 1985, but it also seeded a pedagogical and institutional legacy. By reshaping curricula, reconfiguring theological imagination and embedding justice into the heartbeat of Christian formation, Kairos theology became both a prophetic and pedagogical revolution.

The original Kairos Document of 1985: A prophetic text

The primary purpose of the Kairos Document was both theological and political: to expose and repudiate the theological legitimations of apartheid, and to summon the

Church into active, uncompromising resistance. It was a moment of prophetic confrontation, born out of the realisation that apartheid was not merely a political aberration, but a profound heresy against the very heart of the Christian faith (Kairos Theologians 1985:1). The document unmasked how Scripture had been weaponised to buttress racial domination and revealed the complicity of churches that, through silence or moderation, buttressed the status quo.

Central to the document's intent was the exposure of what it termed 'State Theology' – a theological narrative that transposed the interests of the apartheid regime into divine will. By invoking Romans 13 to justify obedience to oppressive governance and framing resistance as rebellion against God, State Theology provided a religious veneer to systemic violence (Kairos Theologians 1985:3–4). In response, the Kairos Document asserted that such theological positions were not only erroneous but idolatrous, serving a political idol in place of the God of justice.

In equal measure, the document critiqued 'Church Theology', a mode of ecclesial response characterised by vague moralising, an uncritical call for reconciliation and a dangerous theological neutrality in the face of structural injustice. Such theology, the authors argued, failed to name apartheid as sin, failed to side with the oppressed and instead sought peace without justice – a peace that the prophets had long warned against (Jr 6:14) (Vellem 2010:5).

The call to active resistance was, therefore, rooted not in political ideology but in theological necessity. Faithfulness to the Gospel demanded confrontation with injustice, not negotiation with it. The Kairos Document reasserted a biblical vision where divine justice is non-negotiable, and where discipleship requires concrete acts of solidarity with the poor and the crucified peoples of history (Gutiérrez 1988:276; Mosala 1989:17).

In framing its call, the Kairos Document reclaimed the biblical notion of Kairos as a decisive moment of truth and judgement, a critical opportunity wherein the Church must choose either fidelity or complicity (Le Bruyns 2012:6). It did not present resistance as a matter of political preference but as a theological imperative. Indeed, as Vellem (2017:3–4) reminds us, in the context of apartheid, neutrality itself was a betrayal of the Gospel.

Moreover, the Kairos Document was not content with theoretical pronouncements; it urged the Church towards concrete action. It called for acts of civil disobedience, solidarity with the oppressed, economic boycotts and open theological denunciation of the regime. It demanded that faith be embodied in praxis, that the Church risk its comfort, its privileges and even its institutional survival for the sake of justice (Kumalo 2013:120).

Thus, the Kairos Document stands not only as a theological protest against the distortions of Christianity under apartheid but also as an enduring summons to an engaged, embodied and prophetic ecclesiology. It remains a clarion call for the Church to discern the signs of the times, to speak with boldness and to act with costly love in the face of injustice.

Key theological contributions: Beyond categorisation

The Kairos Document's tripartite typology – State Theology, Church Theology and prophetic theology – has often been hailed as one of its enduring legacies (Kairos Theologians 1985:2–12; Le Bruyns 2012:4). Yet, its deeper significance lies not merely in these analytical categories, but in how it redefined the very task of theology within contexts of systemic oppression. It is to this methodological revolution that we must turn if we are to grasp its full contribution.

Rather than offering detached academic critique, the Kairos theologians modelled a contextual theological discernment: a mode of engaging faith and politics that insisted on beginning with the lived reality of the oppressed. They shifted theological discourse from the rarefied spaces of the academy into the contested streets of history. In this, they rejected both quietist spirituality and disembodied dogmatics. As Maluleke (1997:24) rightly notes, the Kairos Document embodies a 'hermeneutic of suspicion and solidarity', interrogating not only state power but also ecclesial complacency. Yet, it must be added that this was more than methodological suspicion; it was a profound act of faith, a wager that God's presence is discernible among the crucified peoples of history.

The typology also inaugurated a new ecclesial imagination. The Church was no longer to be seen as a neutral observer offering moral commentary from the sidelines. It was called to become a community of resistance, a sacramental sign of God's preferential option for the poor. Tlhagale (1985:7) captures the radicality of this move, describing it as a fundamental ecclesiological reorientation. Yet, one must press further: it was not simply an addendum to ecclesial mission; it was a retrieval of the Church's original vocation as ekklesia, the called-out community standing in defiant hope against the empires of death.

Importantly, the Kairos typology was not confined to theoretical realms. It catalysed practical ecclesial subversions: resistance liturgies that named structural sin, sanctuary movements that protected the persecuted, solidarity economies that refused the economic architecture of apartheid (Denis 2021:325). These were not auxiliary activities; they were theological acts in themselves. They embodied a Kairos consciousness where orthodoxy and orthopraxis became inseparable.

Moreover, the Kairos theologians made it theologically untenable for churches to claim neutrality in the face of injustice. As Kritzinger (2012:50) underscores, silence itself became a form of betrayal. Here, the prophetic character of Kairos theology shines forth most clearly: it was not content

with diagnosing the sickness of the Church; it demanded costly repentance and reorientation. The resonance of this methodological breakthrough stretches beyond South Africa. Sobrino's (1984:80) reflections from El Salvador echo the same conviction: that authentic theology must be forged 'in the crucible of oppression'. Yet, building upon Sobrino's insight, one must emphasise that the Kairos Document uniquely modelled a collective ecclesial discernment, a communal reading of the signs of the times, rather than the insights of isolated prophets.

In our contemporary moment, marked by persistent economic injustice, ecological devastation and rising authoritarianism, the methodological gift of the Kairos Document remains urgently relevant. It challenges theologians, clergy and faith communities to reject the seductions of detached critique and to embrace a theology that bleeds, struggles and hopes with the oppressed. It calls us not merely to analyse injustice but to risk ourselves in acts of prophetic solidarity.

Thus, the true genius of the Kairos Document's theological contribution lies not only in its typology but in its bold retrieval of theology as a dangerous memory and dangerous hope, a summons we dare not ignore.

Influence on Global South theologies

The influence of the Kairos Document extended far beyond the borders of South Africa, resonating powerfully with liberation movements and contextual theologies across the Global South. Its prophetic methodology and theological audacity found deep parallels with Latin American liberation theology, while its specific framing of a Kairos moment later inspired theological movements such as Kairos Palestine.

At its core, the Kairos Document articulated a truth that liberation theologians across continents had long intuited: that theology must be born of, and accountable to, historical struggles for justice. Figures such as Gustavo Gutiérrez (1988:275) in Latin America had already insisted that the option for the poor was not a pastoral preference but a theological necessity. Similarly, the Kairos theologians discerned that neutrality in the face of apartheid was itself a violent theological act. In this convergence, we see not mere imitation but a shared pneumatological discernment, what Sobrino (1984:80) describes as 'reading the signs of the times from below'.

However, while Latin American liberation theology often emerged from peasant and indigenous struggles against capitalist imperialism, the South African context gave the Kairos Document a distinctive character shaped by racialised colonialism and ecclesial complicity. As Maluleke (1997:28) reminds us, African liberation theologies must be understood in their own right, not merely as regional applications of Latin American models. The Kairos Document, in this sense, represents an indigenous African theological voice, deeply rooted in the anti-apartheid struggle and the particular ecclesiologies that developed therein.

The theological motif of Kairos itself, as articulated in 1985, proved fertile for other contexts of oppression. Nowhere is this more evident than in the development of Kairos Palestine in 2009. Palestinian Christian leaders, inspired directly by the South African experience, issued their own Kairos Document, proclaiming their reality as a moment of divine judgement and decision, calling the global Church into solidarity with their struggle against Israeli occupation (Kairos Palestine 2009:1). Here, the original South African text served not merely as a model but as a theological catalyst, demonstrating how prophetic theology could be contextualised across vastly different historical terrains.

Yet it is crucial to note that this transnational adoption did not entail mere replication. As Ateek (2010:12) suggests, Kairos Palestine reinterpreted the Kairos motif through the lenses of occupation, displacement and settler colonialism, giving it a distinctive theological texture. Similarly, theologians in other Global South contexts such as eco-theologians in Latin America, indigenous theologians in the Philippines and black theologians in the United States of America have drawn upon Kairos consciousness to name their own decisive moments of resistance and hope (De La Torre 2015:3). The global spread of Kairos theology thus underscores its methodological brilliance: it offers not a static blueprint, but a dynamic hermeneutical tool. It teaches oppressed communities how to read their histories theologically, to discern moments of decision and to articulate resistance as a form of Christian witness. In a world still marked by empire, apartheid and ecological devastation, Kairos theology offers an enduring summons for the Church to recover its prophetic voice.

For theologians today, particularly those working within the Global South, the legacy of the Kairos Document is both inspiration and challenge. Inspiration, because it models a theology deeply immersed in history yet transcending local struggle. Challenge, because it reminds us that prophetic theology cannot remain trapped in academia or rhetorical protest; it must be lived, embodied and risked anew in every generation. As we face our own signs of the times – economic exclusion, ecological collapse and neocolonialism – we are confronted once again with the question the Kairos theologians posed so starkly: where does the Church stand?

Forty years later: Why we need a new Kairos Document

Forty years after the original Kairos Document summoned the Church into radical discipleship, the dream of liberation remains painfully incomplete. Political apartheid may have been dismantled, but the structures of economic apartheid endure with relentless ferocity. South Africa today is one of the most unequal societies globally, with wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, and black communities still

disproportionately trapped in cycles of poverty and marginalisation (Pillay 2017:62). As Terreblanche (2012:49) argues, the negotiated settlement of 1994 secured political rights without dismantling economic power, a compromise that has come at an enduring cost.

This unfinished liberation manifests not only in material deprivation but also in social fragmentation. The rise of xenophobia and Afrophobia reveals how economic desperation has been weaponised against the most vulnerable: migrants and refugees from elsewhere on the continent. Violent attacks on African nationals are often fuelled by the perception that foreign-born Africans compete for scarce resources, yet beneath this hostility lies a deeper malaise: a wounded society that has internalised colonial categories of belonging and exclusion (Nyamnjoh 2006:47). In the face of such divisions, the Church's silence, or its hesitant responses, betray the very Kairos consciousness that once animated its prophetic witness. A new Kairos Document is therefore necessary, not merely to revisit old wounds, but to confront new forms of apartheid and to reimagine solidarity in a post-national, pan-African horizon. The unfinished project of liberation demands a theological reckoning with the structures that perpetuate exclusion within and beyond South Africa's borders.

Beyond South Africa, the wider Global South faces interconnected crises that call for renewed theological discernment. The old imperial orders have mutated but not disappeared; imperialism today often wears the masks of extractivism, debt and trade imbalances. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015:24) notes, coloniality persists not merely in political forms but in economic and epistemic structures that subjugate the Global South to global capital. The systematic extraction of natural resources, particularly from African and Latin American nations, continues to enrich multinational corporations while leaving local communities impoverished and ecologically devastated. Debt crises compound this injustice, as nations find themselves shackled by financial instruments that transfer sovereignty to international financial institutions. The architecture of empire, though rebranded, remains intact.

Similar dynamics of structural injustice, state fragility and ecclesial complicity are witnessed across the African continent. In Nigeria, the entanglement between religion and political violence – exemplified by Boko Haram's insurgency – calls for a Kairos response that holds both state and religious actors accountable to the ethics of peace and justice (Falola & Heaton 2008:321). In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), churches often find themselves negotiating their prophetic voice amid mineral exploitation, militia violence and fragile governance, where theology must speak not only to peacebuilding but also ecological and economic justice (Kavusa 2020:207). In Kenya, post-election violence and ethnic nationalism challenge churches to confront their roles in either perpetuating or resisting socio-political division (Gifford 2009:45). These contexts, while distinct, echo the Kairos dynamic – a decisive theological moment demanding truth-telling and structural transformation. A renewed Kairos Document must therefore be pan-African in its vision, incorporating diverse African theological reflections rooted in lived struggles.

These dynamics feed directly into the escalating catastrophe of climate injustice. Communities across the Global South, least responsible for historical carbon emissions, bear the brunt of ecological collapse: rising sea levels, droughts, food insecurity and displacement (Gutiérrez 2011:93). The cry of the earth is inseparable from the cry of the poor. Yet, theological responses have often lagged behind these realities. As De La Torre (2017:5) argues, ethical reflection without political action amounts to complicity. A new Kairos Document must confront these global injustices with the same moral urgency that characterised the original text. It must name the ecological crisis not as an unfortunate accident but as the predictable outcome of economic systems built on exploitation, and it must call for a theology of resistance grounded in eco-justice and planetary solidarity.

Compounding these crises is the tragic transformation of much of the Church itself. Where once it stood as a prophetic witness against injustice, today it often echoes the ideologies of consumerism and individualism it once resisted. The rise of prosperity theologies, promising wealth and success as signs of divine favour, has displaced the Church's historic preferential option for the poor. In many pulpits across South Africa and the Global South, the Gospel has been commodified into a transactional faith, offering personal breakthroughs while ignoring systemic oppression (Balcomb 2010:437). This theological shift has contributed to the loss of the Church's moral voice in public affairs. Instead of confronting corruption, inequality and violence, many churches have retreated into spiritualised escapism or aligned themselves with political elites. As Vellem (2014:5) laments, the Church has too often exchanged its prophetic mantle for the seductive comforts of power and respectability.

Without a recovery of Kairos consciousness, the Church risks irrelevance – or worse, complicity. A new Kairos Document is urgently needed to reawaken the Church's vocation as a critical conscience in society. It must call Christian communities to reject the false promises of prosperity gospel, to confront structural sin anew and to rediscover the liberating Jesus who stands with the crucified peoples of history. In doing so, the Church will not only honour the memory of the 1985 Kairos Document; it will embody its spirit, breathing new life into a prophetic tradition desperately needed for our time.

Reimagining a new Kairos Document for our time

If the Kairos Document of 1985 emerged from a decisive historical rupture, so too must a new theological manifesto be crafted to meet the exigencies of our age. Yet the new Kairos demands a framework more expansive and nuanced

than that of four decades ago. It must name not only the enduring structures of racial and economic injustice, but also the interwoven oppressions of gender, sexuality, ecology and empire. A new theological imagination must arise, one capable of embracing intersectionality without sacrificing prophetic clarity.

The struggles of today are not neatly compartmentalised. Economic exploitation cannot be disentangled from ecological devastation; racial marginalisation is compounded by gendered and sexual violence; colonial legacies persist not only politically but also epistemologically and spiritually. Thus, the theological framework of a renewed Kairos Document must be intersectional, resisting the temptation to prioritise one axis of injustice over others. As scholars such as Dube (2000:134) argue, theologies that fail to attend to gender and ecological concerns are themselves complicit in forms of domination. Similarly, Musa Dube's vision of 'hermeneutics of liberation' challenges any theology that speaks of freedom while ignoring the violence inflicted on bodies, lands and languages.

Equally vital is the retrieval and celebration of postcolonial and pan-African spiritualities. Decolonising the theological imagination means not merely critiquing empire but nurturing alternative visions rooted in indigenous cosmologies, African communal ethics and postcolonial epistemologies. The new Kairos Document must resist the homogenising impulses of Western theological frameworks and instead affirm the plurality of African and Global South voices. As Maluleke (2005:192) insists, authentic African Christianity must arise from the soil of the continent's own histories, hopes and struggles, not from imported templates.

Yet a renewed theology cannot remain the preserve of theologians and clergy alone. One of the Kairos Document's most powerful insights was its communal genesis: theology arising from the streets as well as the seminaries. A contemporary Kairos initiative must therefore intentionally centre the participation of those most marginalised within the church and society. Youth, rural communities, indigenous peoples, domestic workers and migrants are not peripheral actors but indispensable theologians of our time. Their voices, shaped by lived experiences of exclusion and resilience, are vital for any faithful discernment of the signs of the times.

Theologically, this inclusion embodies a praxis of radical hospitality and epistemic humility. It acknowledges that God's Spirit is not confined to academic guilds or ecclesial hierarchies, but blows where it will, often unsettling our comfortable certainties. As West (2016:11) observes, reading Scripture 'with ordinary and marginalised readers' is not a charitable exercise but a theological necessity if the Church is to remain faithful to its liberative calling. Thus, the process of drafting a new Kairos Document must itself embody the liberation it proclaims, dismantling barriers to participation and elevating the wisdom of the crucified peoples of our own day.

Building such a coalition will require careful, intentional work. Ecumenical bodies, which once provided fertile ground for prophetic resistance, must be revitalised as spaces of critical solidarity rather than institutional inertia. Seminaries must reimagine their vocation, shifting from producing religious professionals to forming prophetic witnesses. Grassroots movements, often ignored or co-opted by institutional churches, must be given equal voice in the theological discernment process. As Kritzinger (2008:10) argues, mission and theology must be reconceived as 'mutual vulnerability', not one-way proclamation.

Moreover, the new Kairos demands innovative methods of consultation and mobilisation. Digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for widespread participation, allowing rural communities, diasporas and activist networks to contribute to the drafting, reflection and dissemination processes. A new Kairos Document should not be a static text authored by a small elite; it should be a living, breathing testimony crafted through dynamic dialogue across borders, languages and traditions.

In this way, reimagining a new Kairos Document is not simply an intellectual or ecclesial project. It is a profoundly spiritual act: an act of collective discernment, of listening for the voice of God amid the cries of the earth and the poor. It calls for moral courage, epistemic humility and prophetic imagination. It demands a Church willing to risk comfort for the sake of fidelity, willing to exchange prestige for solidarity and willing to be reborn as a community of costly hope. Only such a Church will be worthy of the Kairos unfolding in our midst.

Global South solidarity and liberation theologies

The reimagining of a new Kairos Document cannot be a solitary endeavour confined to the South African context alone. From its inception, the spirit of Kairos theology gestured towards a broader solidarity among oppressed peoples, a recognition that struggles against apartheid, colonialism and systemic injustice are deeply intertwined across the Global South. Today, that vision demands renewal. A new Kairos consciousness must explicitly embrace the transnational character of prophetic resistance, forging links with liberation theologies emerging from Latin America, Palestine, Asia and beyond.

The 1985 Kairos Document was never an isolated phenomenon. It drew inspiration from the ferment of Latin American liberation theology, which had, since the Medellín Conference of 1968, challenged the Church to read the Gospel through the eyes of the poor and to commit to concrete acts of social transformation (Boff & Boff 1987:9). The South African contribution sharpened this project by framing moments of historical crisis not only as contexts for reflection but as decisive calls to action, moments when neutrality became theological betrayal.

Nowhere is this global resonance more evident than in the emergence of Kairos Palestine in 2009. Palestinian Christian leaders, facing the daily brutalities of occupation, issued their own Kairos Document, consciously adopting the South African language of a decisive moment of judgement and hope. They declared:

We have reached a dead end in the tragedy of the Palestinian people. The decision-makers content themselves with managing the crisis rather than committing to the requirements of truth. (Kairos Palestine 2009:1)

Their appeal to the global Church mirrored the original South African call for solidarity, civil disobedience and theological clarity in the face of systemic oppression.

Similarly, in Latin America, theologians have continued to evolve liberationist paradigms that integrate critiques of neoliberalism, ecological devastation and indigenous dispossession. Figures such as Leonardo Boff (1995:27) have extended liberation theology into eco-theology, recognising that the exploitation of the earth is inseparable from the exploitation of the poor. These theological movements have refused to let the project of liberation be domesticated or absorbed into status-quo ecclesiologies.

Across Africa, contextual theological movements continue to emerge with equally liberative impulses. In Nigeria, Pentecostal and mainline churches have birthed ecumenical responses to corruption, youth unemployment and religious extremism, offering a mixture of prophetic critique and practical action (Burgess 2020:33). In Kenya, the work of theologians such as Jesse Mugambi has highlighted reconstruction theology as a post-conflict paradigm that builds on Kairos impulses towards healing and systemic reform (Mugambi 1995:98). Meanwhile, in the DRC, feminist theologians and ecumenical networks have foregrounded gender justice as essential to any liberationist framework, advancing the Kairos ethos in contexts of patriarchal and militarised oppression.

The lesson is clear: prophetic theology cannot be confined to critique alone; it must become theological mobilisation. The task is not merely to analyse empire, but to build alternative spaces of solidarity, resistance and hope. As Gebara (1999:15) asserts, authentic liberation theology is deeply relational – it seeks not only the dismantling of oppressive systems but the reweaving of life-giving relationships across boundaries of race, gender, class and geography.

Thus, the call for a new Kairos Document is simultaneously a call for a transnational prophetic movement. Such a movement would bring together theologians, activists, churches and social movements across the Global South to discern the signs of the times collaboratively. It would embrace multiple struggles as interconnected: the fight against settler colonialism in Palestine, the struggle for land and dignity in South Africa, the resistance to extractive capitalism in Latin America and the defence of indigenous sovereignty in the Philippines.

Digital technologies offer unprecedented possibilities for this solidarity. Virtual consultations, collaborative drafting processes and distributed theological forums can ensure that a new Kairos Document emerges not from a single locality but from a symphony of oppressed voices across continents. In this sense, the very method of drafting the document must embody the theology it proclaims: participatory, polyphonic and justice-oriented.

A new transnational Kairos consciousness would recognise the fact that the empire we confront is global, but so too is the Spirit's work of liberation. It would resist both parochial nationalism and imperial cosmopolitanism, insisting instead on a solidarity rooted in particular struggles yet open to universal hope. It would move beyond theological analysis into embodied praxis, forging alliances that can sustain prophetic resistance in the face of new and evolving forms of oppression.

In reclaiming this vision, the Church reaffirms that Kairos is not merely a South African memory; it is a living summons for all who hunger for justice. The fires of liberation theology have not been extinguished; they have migrated, diversified and adapted. The task before us is not to lament their dilution but to rekindle them into a new, transcontinental, Spirit-driven movement for our time.

Conclusion

The Kairos Document of 1985 stands as one of the most luminous moments in the history of contextual and liberation theology. It represents a fearless confrontation with injustice, a profound ecclesial self-critique and a passionate call to embody the liberating spirit of the Gospel. Yet if we are to honour this legacy, we must refuse to entomb it in nostalgia. The memory of 1985 must serve not to pacify us with past victories but to ignite our moral imagination anew. The Kairos consciousness forged in the fires of apartheid must be carried forward to meet the urgencies of our own time, where old empires have evolved and new oppressions have taken root.

The unfinished work of liberation demands more than mere commemoration; it demands action. This article has proposed that a new Kairos Document is urgently needed – a manifesto capable of confronting the intersectional crises of economic injustice, ecological devastation, xenophobia and the theological drift of the contemporary Church. Such a document cannot be crafted in isolation or elitism. It must emerge from a broad, participatory and transnational process, embracing the voices of youth, women, migrants, indigenous communities, LGBTQIA+ persons and all those who bear the scars of systemic violence.

To this end, a formal call must be made to initiate a *Consultative Conference on the 21st Century Kairos Document*. Convened by an alliance of ecumenical bodies, theological institutions, grassroots movements and activist communities across the Global South, such a conference would provide a

platform for collective theological reflection, critical engagement and strategic mobilisation. Its aim would not merely be to produce another text, but to reforge a global prophetic movement rooted in solidarity, intersectionality and radical hope. The drafting process itself must embody the liberative vision it proclaims: democratic, participatory, open to the margins and attentive to the cries of the earth and the poor.

At this critical juncture, the Church stands once more at the crossroads of truth and justice. It faces a choice as stark and consequential as that of 1985: to collude with the powers of death through silence and complicity, or to risk itself in the costly work of prophetic resistance. The signs of the times are clear. Neutrality is no longer an option. As in every Kairos moment, a decision is demanded. Faithfulness to Christ requires discernment, courage and action – anchored not in abstractions but in the lived realities of the suffering and the struggling.

To discern the Kairos of our age is to hear the Spirit's call amid the cries of those rendered invisible by systems of domination. It is to confess that God is still speaking – through the earth that groans in ecological collapse, through the refugee driven from their home, through the worker whose dignity is denied and through the young woman whose voice is silenced. And it is to respond, not with passive lament, but with audacious hope and transformative solidarity.

The future of prophetic Christianity will not be secured by institutional inertia or nostalgic sentimentality. It will be secured only by communities willing to risk themselves anew in the struggle for justice, life and liberation. The time has come. The Kairos is now.

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