

Synodality and interreligious developments in Kairos theology: Pathways for today's Catholic Church

**Author:**Marcus Timothy Haworth¹ **Affiliation:**¹Department of Theology, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, United States**Corresponding author:**

Marcus Timothy Haworth, mhawort1@nd.edu

Dates:

Received: 04 July 2025

Accepted: 22 Sept. 2025

Published: 19 Nov. 2025

How to cite this article:Haworth, M.T., 2025, 'Synodality and interreligious developments in Kairos theology: Pathways for today's Catholic Church', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a10905. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10905>**Copyright:**

© 2025. The Author.

Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

In April 2021, the late Pope Francis approved the initial programme for the celebration of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops within the Catholic Church with the theme 'For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission'. While the timeline for the Synod on Synodality, the colloquial appellation given to this event, was extended until 2024, its goals did not deviate from those laid out in this initial programme. In this article, the author takes one of these goals, and a neglected one at that – dialogue in church and society, with a particular focus on interreligious engagement – as his point of departure. In doing so, the author examines the import of the 1985 South African Kairos Document and the interreligious developments in Kairos theology it spawned in the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document for more faithfully enacting the synodal missional ecclesiology called for by the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality within the Catholic Church today.

Contribution: The author argues that Kairos theology offers a number of promising interreligious pathways for furthering the development of a Catholic synodal missional ecclesiology in the present, in part because its means of production is inherently of the people – operating as a protological and prototypical form of what an authentic Catholic synodal missional ecclesiology is and can be – and also because this form of being and doing church has practical, pastoral, and theological applications for advancing the shared experiences of dialogue and commitment that Christian believers share with those of other religions and with non-believers alike.

Keywords: 1985 South African Kairos Document; 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document; 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality; Catholic synodality; communion, participation, and mission; interreligious dialogue; Kairos theology; synodal missional ecclesiology.

Introduction

On 24 April 2021, in a meeting with Mario Cardinal Grech, the General Secretary for the Synod of Bishops (a permanent institution of the Roman Curia at the service of the Synod of Bishops and directly subject to the Roman Pontiff within the hierarchy of the Catholic Church), the late Pope Francis approved the initial programme for the celebration of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops 2021a). In doing so, he instantiated a process that was to run from 09 October 2021 to an unspecified date in October 2023 and focus on the theme 'For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission'. While the Synod on Synodality (the colloquial appellation given to the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops) was extended until 27 October 2024 in order to facilitate deeper theological reflection and practical discernment on this theme, Grech's message in an official Secretariat document published shortly after his audience with Francis nevertheless remains a pertinent – and increasingly theologically prophetic – statement for the present moment in which the Catholic Church finds itself: a time fluctuating between disruption and encounter (Faggioli & Froehle 2025). As the Cardinal-Deacon of Rome's Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian incisively stated then:

Synodality refers to the very essence of the church, its constitutive reality, and is thus oriented towards evangelisation. It is an ecclesial way of being and a prophetic example for today's world. (General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops 2021a:1)

Here, he declared:

In a spirit of collaboration, the General Secretariat of the Synod is open to clarify and accompany any moment of this synodal process, which must be, essentially, a spiritual event of discernment: 'one listening

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'The Kairos Document for Contemporary Crisis', under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Gift Tlharhani Baloyi and Prof. Eugene Baron.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

to the others; and all listening to the Holy Spirit'. (General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops 2021a:4, quoting Francis 2015)

Thus, it is no surprise that one of the main objectives of the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality was to listen to the *totality* of the various voices within the Catholic Church through close, global, and diocesan-led consultation sessions in order to generate a wide range of responses to the question: 'What steps does the [Holy] Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our "journeying together", that is, in synodality?' (General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops 2021b:30).

While much scholarly attention has been given to the Synod on Synodality, including, for example, critiques of its practical design process (Gruber 2020; Haworth 2024), explanations of its pastoral mechanisms (Colberg & Moons 2025; Noceti 2023), and reflections on its theological underpinnings (Faggioli 2020; Pierre 2021), little, if any, academic and ecclesial work has focused on its faithfulness to responding to one of the 10 thematic nuclei it identified and set out to explore in its infancy stages: dialogue in church and society, with a particular focus on interreligious engagement (General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops 2021b:36). As the *Preparatory Document for the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality* rightly highlights: 'Dialogue is a path of perseverance that also includes silence and suffering, but which is capable of gathering the experience of persons and peoples [together]' (General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops 2021b:36). In stating this reality, the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops keenly asked participants to consider the following three questions (General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops 2021b:36):

- What are the places and modes of dialogue within our particular church?
- What experiences of dialogue and shared commitment do we have with believers of other religions and non-believers?
- How does the church dialogue with and learn from other sectors of society?

It is precisely within this academic and ecclesial lacuna that examining a historical, and profoundly prophetic, theological statement like the 1985 South African Kairos Document – and the accompanying Christian theology it generated and continues to generate today, known as Kairos theology – can offer a number of promising pathways for furthering the development of a synodal missional ecclesiology within today's Catholic Church. This is especially the case as this relates to the shared experiences of dialogue and commitment that Christian believers share with those of other religions and with non-believers alike since the inbreaking of the non-violent peaceable kin-dom of God that is synodal communion, participation, and mission with God and neighbour fundamentally depends on the Catholic Church's grace-invoked response to heed God's call in various *Kairos* moments in our contemporary world. Importantly, the 1985 South African Kairos Document, specifically its means of

production and the ongoing theological tradition it perpetuated, directly highlights this reality, thereby offering itself as a protological and prototypical form of what an authentic Catholic synodal missional ecclesiology is and can be, one in which the ideas expressed in the *Preparatory Document for the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality* are retroactively mirrored and brought to life with greater structural, pastoral, and theological fidelity, sincerity, and clarity.

Accordingly, in this article, I employ historical and textual analysis to argue from a Christian theological perspective sensitive to interreligious concerns that the 1985 South African Kairos Document and the subsequent Christian theology it generated and continues to generate today can provide promising pathways for furthering the development of a Catholic synodal missional ecclesiology in the present. This is especially the case as such developmental and relationally drawn out pathways relate to questions like: Where do Catholics understand the Holy Spirit to be involved in the world today? And, where do they, as members of the one human family, equally bring their understandings of the Holy Spirit to be involved in the world today? Fundamentally, the answer to each of these questions depends on deepening Catholic theological reflection on the places, modes of dialogue, and experiences of shared commitment that Catholics have with believers of other religions and with non-believers alike. Engaging such questions is critical if the Catholic Church is to be and further become a truly synodal church that listens to and for the invitations of the Holy Spirit today. My argument proceeds in three parts.

Understanding Kairos theology as a protological and prototypical form of a Catholic synodal missional ecclesiology: The 1985 South African Kairos Document

'In the latter half of the 20th century, a wave of liberation movements swept across the globe as colonised and exploited people undertook seismic struggles for self-determination', writes Dean Detloff (2024:1), the Canadian systematic theologian and scholar of Christian social movements. 'These movements', Detloff insightfully observes:

... had a profound influence not only on global politics, but also on intellectual trends and the political left, for whom 'the masses' took on new significance and previous orthodoxies seemed out of step with the times. Theology was no exception, and from the 1970s on Christian theology would not only reinterpret itself through the lens of liberation around the world, but would also become a primary organising force in the struggle for liberation [itself]. (Detloff 2024:1)

As we will see, such was the case with the 1985 South African Kairos Document and its undergirding theology of the people in apartheid South Africa.

In July of 1985, a group of ecumenical theologians from across the Rainbow Nation, now known as the South African

Kairos Theologians, met at Ipelegeng Community Centre in Soweto, Johannesburg, to discuss what to do about a number of disturbing and escalating tragedies in their country. These included, among others, the compounding nature of the formal adoption of the National Party's policy of apartheid in 1948; the massacre of at least 91 people by officers of the South African Police in the Transvaal township of Sharpeville in 1960; the jailing of the African National Congress opposition leader Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela in 1962; the murder of no less than 176 people, including 13-year-old Hector Pieteron, by a militarised state police force carrying automatic rifles and stun guns in the Johannesburg township of Soweto in 1976; and the declaration of a partial State of Emergency throughout 36 magisterial districts in the Eastern Cape and Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging region of South Africa by the then-president Pieter Willem Botha in 1985. Gravely concerned about these developments within the context of an increasingly authoritarian apartheid regime and a voiceless – and often complicit – church, this gathering of prophetic voices focused on crafting 'a Christian, biblical, and theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa' that would specifically: (1) confront the way in which Christian theological material was being produced to bolster, either implicitly or explicitly, apartheid's system of institutionalised racial segregation and oppression; and (2) revolutionise the existing structures in which this theology was pastorally carried out and practically lived (South African Kairos Theologians 1985). The production of a document:

... attempt[ing] to develop, out of this perplexing situation, an alternative biblical and theological model that [would] in turn lead to forms of activity that [would] make a real difference to the future of [South Africa] ensued. (South African Kairos Theologians 1985:i)

Meeting in secrecy over the course of two short months in various locations, this group of brave, everyday Christians would go on to produce a statement worthy of their hallmark legacy, one that would fundamentally change the way in which the church in South Africa operated and the means by which Christian political theology is done and carried out: the 1985 South African Kairos Document.

By September 1985, the Kairos Document, officially titled *Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*, was ready for issue. It was subsequently published and released on the 25th of that month and distributed throughout the country, with 35 000 copies being produced free of charge prior to the promulgation of the statement's second edition in 1986 (Denis 2017:16). For the South African Kairos Theologians themselves, *Challenge to the Church* represented, above all else, 'a people's document' that laid the foundation for 'further discussion by all Christians in the country' on questions surrounding the conflation between 'the test of biblical faith and [the lived] Christian experience in South Africa', with particular concern being given to the way in which the lives of the poor and oppressed – black and coloured South Africans – were considered subaltern in South African society

under the oppressive policies of the white apartheid state (South African Kairos Theologians 1985:i-ii). As the document stated then: 'A crisis is a moment of truth that shows us up for what we really are', and for the South African Kairos Theologians, this crisis made it clear that:

... the time has come. The moment of truth has arrived [for South Africa] ... It is the *Kairos* or moment of truth not only for apartheid but also for the church ... [Now is] the favourable time in which God has [issued] a challenge to decisive action. (South African Kairos Theologians 1985:1)

As they poignantly observed:

[This] is a dangerous time because, if this opportunity is missed, and allowed to pass, the loss for the church, for the gospel, and for all the people of South Africa will be immeasurable ... [This] moment of truth has compelled us to analyse more carefully the different theologies in our churches and to speak out more boldly about the real significance of these theologies [for forming genuine communion, that is, solidarity, among all peoples]. (South African Kairos Theologians 1985:1-2)

Indeed, *Challenge to the Church* did just this, issuing a prophetic, liberative, and contextually derived summons to the churches and People of God within South Africa and across the world.

While a number of scholars have argued that the theological method present in the 1985 South African Kairos Document is acutely different from that of other global, Christian liberation theologies (Vellem 2010:3fn4), such a claim fails to recognise the basic precept undergirding all bottom-up theologies: the pivotal role of the people themselves. In the case of the Kairos Document, this is especially clear in the statement's writing process. As Philippe Denis, the Belgian-born and South African-based Dominican brother and historian of Catholicism in Africa, has written:

The activists, ministers of religion, and theologians who jointly produced the Kairos Document felt closely associated with the 'ordinary people', those of Soweto for example. They had a common cause. If, [however], relatively few people were involved in the production of the Kairos Document, many more read it ... For that reason also the Kairos Document can claim to be, if not [only] a 'people's document', at least a document which reached a popular audience. (Denis 2017:19)

While the justification for such a claim is duly in need of additional scholarly research – one that I eventually hope to further strengthen and substantiate – the critical point to grasp here is that the creation of the 1985 South African Kairos Document was not produced in a single go by an elite group of writers. Rather, like the biblical text itself, it was crafted with various layers of textual composition. And this was derived from a proto-synodal form of missional ecclesiology, one that was keenly attuned to:

... the fraternity born of the realisation that all of us are embraced by the one love of God ... [and that], in the one People of God ... [we] journey together in order to experience a church that

receives and lives this gift of unity, and is open to the voice of the [Holy] Spirit. (Francis 2021:n.p.)

Thus, as Robert McAfee Brown, the late American Presbyterian minister and theologian, has helpfully written:

Without claiming that Kairos documents [from around the world] ... [are] exclusively examples of liberation theology (though the claim could be floated and perhaps sustained), it can be claimed that they represent yet another instance of the reality that those on the periphery ... are speaking powerful words that those in the centre ... have no choice but to take seriously. (ed. Brown 1990:3)

And this, as the *Final Document for the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality* has stated, is the ‘heart of synodality’ and the ‘heart of the church’:

The church is called to be poor with those who are poor, who often constitute the majority of the faithful, to listen to them, learning together how to recognise the charisms they receive from the Spirit ... [and] to recognise them as agents of evangelisation [themselves]. (Francis & 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2024:10)

Although it is true that the 1985 South African Kairos Document did not itself address people of other religious traditions or no religious tradition – something that it has been rightly criticised for eluding (Esack 1986) – the ongoing theological tradition it perpetuated has, in fact, done so on more than one occasion. Keeping in mind the proto-synodal missional ecclesiological method of theological production instantiated by the 1985 South African Kairos Document – and carried out in large part by succeeding Kairos documents from across the globe, though not always in as strong of a fashion – I now turn to an examination of the interreligious developments that have taken place within Kairos theology, focusing specifically on the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document, in order to foreground the ways in which Kairos theology can provide prospective, even if imperfect, interreligious pathways for furthering this aspect of a synodal missional ecclesiology within today’s Catholic Church.

Interreligious developments in Kairos theology: The 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document

Since the ideas behind the 1985 South African Kairos Document first emerged on the world’s theological stage 40 years ago, a global, explosion within Kairos theology has occurred, with new and emerging contexts forming novel bases for Kairos-based theologising to take place in our world today. In fact, as of 2025, a Kairos Document has emerged in a new context – and among an original people – roughly every 2 years since 1985. This has occurred within confessional contexts, including three documents from South Africa: one Reformed (1986), one Evangelical (1986), and one Pentecostal (1988), each focusing on apartheid. This has also unfolded within national boundaries, such as with the Kairos documents produced in Korea (1988), Kenya (1991), Zimbabwe (1998), India (2000), Israel-Palestine (2009), the

United States (2012 and 2015), Eswatini (2015), and Nigeria (2015). Kairos documents have likewise been birthed from within regional and continental contexts, including the Central American (1988) and European (1998) Kairos Documents and the multinational Kairos work colloquially known as the Damascus Document (1989). And they have been rendered in response to thematic issues, such as in the case of the Kairos documents on violence (1990) and LGBTQIA+ issues (2024). In total, at least 17 Kairos documents have been produced since 1985, with many more responses to these documents – some of them Kairos documents themselves – likewise being proliferated during this period. Importantly, each document displays with emphatic clarity what Allen Aubrey Boesak, the Reformed South African theologian and acclaimed anti-apartheid leader, suggests are the three ‘marks’ of Kairos theology that self-define its meaning and method (Boesak 2015:69–92). From my perspective, these can be summarised – with slight alteration – as follows:

- **Confession:** The first mark of Kairos theology is a confession or statement about Christian belief. Fundamentally, this mark aims to answer Jesus’ question to his disciples: ‘Who do you say that I am?’ (see Mt 16:15, Mk 8:29, and Lk 9:20). In doing so, it addresses questions like: What is the relationship between who we, as Christians, confess Jesus to be and who we are as Christians ourselves? And what does this understanding necessitate for how we live our lives in the here-and-now? At base, Kairos theologians understand God as a God who works in history, as a God who became incarnate among the poor and outcast, and as a God who walks with his people towards liberation, inaugurating the path towards the non-violent peaceable kin-dom that is communion with God and neighbour. Thus, to confess Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ – as God incarnate – carries heavy co-participatory soteriological baggage for Kairos theologians. It demands that Christians be priests, prophets, and kings, being endowed as collaborative agents of the mission of God in the here-and-now, prophetically denouncing injustice, and building up God’s kin-dom in the contemporary through non-violent and peaceable means akin to those of Jesus of Nazareth himself.
- **Conversion:** While confession – or belief – marks the first movement out of which Kairos theology operates, understanding Kairos theology as conversion is equally important. For Kairos theologians, conversion entails an examination of the ways in which Christians have failed to live up to the beliefs they confess. In the 1985 South African Kairos Document – and in later Kairos documents – conversion centres on an examination of the imaginaries operative in what Kairos theologians call ‘church theology’ and ‘state theology’. The former looks at the ways in which the church has been indifferent to the realities of the People of God and has failed to live up to its prophetic call to denounce injustice and announce the kin-dom of God. The latter examines the ways in which the state has either co-opted the Christian message

for its own gain or has implicitly instilled within Christians an antithetical theology to that of the message of Jesus of Nazareth.

- **Commitment:** While confession and conversion – or belief and repentance – serve as the initial movements within Kairos theology, commitment is notably the hallmark of Kairos theology insofar as it moves Kairos theology from descriptive analysis to prescriptive action. It is precisely in this phase that the meaning of a prophetic church becomes apparent: one that encounters through identification with, discerns through listening, to and acts on behalf of the people.

Notably, these phases of – or movements within – Kairos theology operate in both an internal and external direction, with the former being a scrutiny of Kairos theology's confession, conversion, and commitment to intra-Christian and church issues and the latter moving these phases out into the world. In this way, the internal direction of Kairos theologising underscores the ways in which it is a theology of action for the church, asking and responding to the trilateral question: 'Who are, what is, what is the church for?' or more simply, 'What does it mean to be the church?', and the external direction of Kairos theologising emphasises the ways in which it extends the work of the church's mission into the world itself.

In the case of the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document, the external direction of these three phases moves to engage a field otherwise left undiscussed in previous iterations of Kairos theology: dialogue in church and society, with a particular focus on interreligious engagement. While such a development is a natural extension of the ecumenical, political, and intra-ecclesial arenas engaged in the 1985 South African Kairos Document, as well as in subsequent Kairos theologies, the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document's focus on interreligious engagement, in particular, reflects two novel aspects. Firstly, it demonstrates an acute attunement to the happenings of the immediate, globalised context in which it was produced on the micro, meso, and macro levels. And, secondly, it shows the widening engagement of Kairos theology to embrace interreligious issues more generally, something that importantly demonstrates, as the American scholar of comparative theology Paul Francis Knitter puts it, 'some form of common ground or shared experience or global, ethic that ... sustain[s] the dialogue of understanding, or spirituality, or action', since:

... without anything in common, or not being able to know if there is anything in common, among the religions, the beliefs and truth claims of the different religions are, in postmodern jargon, incommensurable: it is impossible to grasp and assess one in the light of the other. (Knitter 2013:137)

Composed by both lay and ordained Israeli and Palestinian Christian leaders representing a variety of churches and church-related organisations, and with the endorsement of almost all the ecumenical heads of the 13 major Christian churches in Israel-Palestine, *A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope, and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering*, as

the document is officially titled, addresses itself to the churches and peoples of the world about the situation taking place in the Holy Land today (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:2). As a prefatory addition to the document summarises:

This document is the Christian Palestinians' word to the world about what is happening in [Israel]-Palestine ... As Palestinian Christians we hope that this document will provide the turning point to focus the efforts of all peace-loving peoples in the world ... We pray [to] God to inspire us all, particularly our leaders and policy-makers, to find the way of justice and equality, and to realise that it is the only way that leads to the genuine peace we are seeking. (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:3-4)

Consisting of 10 sections, half of which address various groups and call for detailed practical action, the document focuses on three prominent themes – a word of faith, a word of hope, and a word of love – with each being situated within an overall assessment of 'the reality on the ground', that is, the humanitarian crisis contemporaneously unfolding in Israel-Palestine (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:5). While the writers are quick to state that their document is 'not a theoretical theological study or a [public] policy paper', but instead 'a document of faith and work' from a Palestinian perspective, they are also keen to demonstrate the fraught Israeli theo-politics they believe has led to 'a dead end in the tragedy of the Palestinian people [themselves]' (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:3-4). As they write, the Word of God has been transformed by the State of Israel into 'letters of stone that pervert the love of God and his providence in the life of both peoples and individuals' (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:8). This, they contend, has led to a situation in which 'everyone is speaking about peace in the Middle East, and the peace process', without taking into account that which mechanistically props up the structures in which the lived suffering experienced by Palestinians continues to manifest itself on the ground: state theology (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:5). As the writers bluntly assert, it is precisely Israel's state theology that 'justif[ies] crimes perpetrated against our people and the dispossession of the land' that undergird Israel's 'occupation of Palestinian territories, [the] deprivation of our freedom, and all that results from this situation', including, but not limited to, the separation of Palestinian families through the creation of nearly inaccessible Palestinian territorial enclaves, restrictions on Palestinian access to holy sites within Israeli-controlled territory, and the demolition of Palestinian homes and businesses, neighbourhoods and towns (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:5-7).

It is within this context that the writers of the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document offer their first word: that of faith (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:7-9). While explicating a Christian theology of a good and just God, the authors contend that the tragedies occurring in the Holy Land today are a result of a 'fundamentalist biblical interpretation' that uses the Bible as 'a weapon in our present history in order to deprive us of our rights in our own land' (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:9). This, they state, is

antithetical to both the person of God and the divine will itself. Specifically, the writers isolate the way in which the Bible's account of land has been stripped of its universality and has become subject to the 'political programme' of the Israeli nation-state (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:8). Much like how the South African Kairos Theologians critiqued their government's 'use of Romans 13:1-7 to give an absolute and "divine" authority to the [apartheidic] state' in which 'the status quo of racism, capitalism, and totalitarianism' were given theological justification (South African Kairos Theologians 1985:3), the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document states that such an exclusivist theology of land by the State of Israel 'distorts the image of God' and makes God into 'an occupier', thereby 'transform[ing] religion into human ideology and strip[ping] the Word of God of its holiness, its universality, and [its] truth' (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:9). As such, the writers declare that:

... those who use the Bible to threaten our existence as Christian and Muslim Palestinians [and who use] ... the Bible to legitimise or support political options and positions that are based upon injustice, imposed by one person on another, or by one people on another ... subordinat[e] God to temporary human interests, and distort the divine image in human beings. (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:8-9).

While the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document's word on faith positions the landed theology of the State of Israel in contrast with the landed theology mandated by the God of the Bible, and while it likewise discusses this theology's detrimental effects on the Palestinian people – notably, both Christians and Muslims – the document's second and third words on hope and love respectively offer a glimmer of invitatory and prophetic expectation for the future. In doing so, these sections, like the 'prophetic theology' and 'challenge to action' sections of the 1985 South Africa Kairos Document, implore Christians to 'take sides unequivocally with the poor and the oppressed', that is, with Palestine and the Palestinian people, if the church is to 'have the hope of participating in [Christ's] Resurrection' (South African Kairos Theologians 1985:21). Accordingly, the document calls on international states, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), churches, companies, and individuals from across the globe to engage in concrete, practical acts of resistance to the State of Israel's exclusivist theology of land by, for example, engaging in 'divestment and in an economic and commercial boycott of everything produced by the occupation' much to the same degree as the called-for global, divestiture that occurred in protest to South Africa's apartheid government from the 1950s to the 1990s (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:13).

While all of these international entities are addressed in the document, the Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians primarily speak to two audiences throughout the majority of the text: (1) churches around the world; and (2) Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims. It is evident that while the former is the primary audience, both by the way it is positioned within the document

and in the document's lengthy message about the need for ecclesial repentance in the wake of 'fundamentalist theological positions that support certain unjust political options with regard to the Palestinian people', the latter audience is also heavily centred (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:14). This is striking because, while the 1985 South Africa Kairos Document stressed a critique of an indifferent 'church theology', the Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians both do this and stress interreligiosity and the need for *Kairotic* interreligious theo-political dialogue to take place in this particular historical time and space. Put another way, while the history of the global, Kairos movement is traditionally ecclesially centred, the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document is both ecclesially and interreligiously centred, establishing interreligious dialogue and shared cross-confessional concerns as important and distinctive developments within Kairos theology. This is something that later Kairos statements, such as the 2012 American and 2015 Eswatini Kairos Documents, likewise heed with unambiguous clarity.

Indeed, it is because of this interreligious emphasis that the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document is able to urge its readers to invitationally view the document as 'a call to ... overcome the barriers of fear [and] race in order to ... not remain within the cycle of never-ending manoeuvres that aim to keep the situation as it is', but to move towards 'mutual trust and ability to set in place a new land in this land of God' (Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians 2009:15). Indeed, the document's focus on *Kairotic* interreligious dialogue has been described by Kjetil Fretheim, the Norwegian professor of ethics and public theology, as offering a form of interreligious invitatory discourse that is 'fundamentally open and receptive [to other religious viewpoints], but remains at the same time critical [of them]' (Kjetil 2012:143). This, he keenly suggests, is because the document's discourse is:

... a 'form of communication based on a commitment to equality, recognition, and self-determination', and a discourse that 'promotes change and transformation ... through the incorporation of new ideas and perspectives' ... The implied and explicit criticism of religious leaders, politicians, and others [by] Kairos Palestine does not exclude continued dialogue [with them], but becomes the very reason for involvement and invitation [itself]. (Kjetil 2012:143 [cf. Ellis & Warshel 2010:139])

It is precisely *this* discourse – and the discursive prerogative that is set and only tangibly realisable in the opportunity that a pluralistic engagement with interreligiosity presents – that makes the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document 'such a potent document both theologically and politically', one that noticeably advances the core characteristics of Kairos theology in new and invitatory confessional, conversive, and committed ways (Kjetil 2012:143-144).

Having foregrounded Kairos theology's proto-synodal missional ecclesiological method in the 1985 South African Kairos Document – and having offered an illustration of the interreligious developments that have taken place in Kairos theology over the past 40 years through the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document – I am now in a position to

explore the significance of these developments in Kairos theology for the advancement of a more authentic synodal missional ecclesiology within today's Catholic Church, one in which more conscious attention is given to the shared experiences of dialogue and commitment that Christian believers share with those of other religions and with non-believers alike.

The interreligious import of Kairos theology for Catholic practices of church in the present: Pathways for the furtherance of a synodal missional ecclesiology

After a 2-year, multistage listening and discernment process, on 24 November 2024, the late Pope Francis accepted and approved the *Final Document for the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality* as part of the ordinary magisterium of the Catholic Church. In doing so, the Holy Father authoritatively stated:

I now hand over to the whole church all that is contained in the *Final Document* restoring to the church what has matured over these years through listening and discernment and as an authoritative orientation for the church's life and mission. (Francis & 16th Ordinary General Assembly for the Synod of Bishops 2024:3)

Here, Francis and the 16th Ordinary General Assembly for the Synod of Bishops (2024) noted:

The task of accompanying the 'implementation phase' of the synodal path, on the basis of the guidelines offered by the *Final Document*, is entrusted to the General Secretariat of the Synod together with the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia. (p. 4)

Interestingly, while the theme of dialogue in church and society, with a particular focus on interreligious engagement, did not receive much scholarly or ecclesial attention during the close, global, and diocesan-led consultation sessions nor was this thematic nuclei a major component of the universal phase of the Synod on Synodality, the words 'religion', 'religious', and 'interreligious' appear in the text of the *Final Document for the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality* on 67 separate occasions. Despite this, their usage, while oftentimes theoretically rich, seldom addresses the practicable ways in which interreligious engagement can be fostered within a Catholic synodal missional ecclesiology. From my perspective, Kairos theology can help to address this gap through three promising pathways that it itself offers. These are: (1) the practical notion that synodality is not merely intra-ecclesial but also extra-ecclesial, demanding radical humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality; (2) the pastoral recognition that communion, participation, and mission involve courageous interreligious listening, prophetic interreligious discernment, and decisive interreligious action; and (3) the theological understanding that these aforementioned pathways and critical insights must not only be pursued theoretically as interreligious dialogue but also practically and socio-politically as active interreligious *Kairos* moments that are attentive to what is

being novelly created by the interconnective and cross-confessional work of the Holy Spirit in the here-and-now. Let me briefly explain each of these points:

- **From an intra- to an extra-ecclesial perspective:** The first interreligious pathway that Kairos theology can offer for the further development of a contemporary Catholic synodal missional ecclesiology that is attentive to interreligious concerns is an important reminder that, if the church is authentically committed to walking the synodal path, it must do so not only with fellow Christians but also with those of other religious traditions or no religious tradition themselves. Although such a notion is not foreign to a Catholic synodal missional ecclesiology since the *Final Document for the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality* urges Catholics to walk 'alongside the believers of other religions and people of other beliefs wherever [*synodality*] lives' (Francis & 16th Ordinary General Assembly for the Synod of Bishops 2024:43), the invitation from Kairos theology is to go another step further. Accordingly, Kairos theology suggests that the Catholic Church must commit itself to walk the synodal path not only alongside, but, more importantly, *together with* those of other religious traditions or no religious tradition and to recognise this need as the interreligious and cross-confessional work of the Holy Spirit in the here-and-now. Moreover, it is this extra-ecclesial pneumatological perspective that necessitates an understanding within the Catholic Church of what Catherine Cornille, the Belgian-born and American-based comparative theologian, has described as the 'certain essential [*interreligious*] conditions [*that need*] ... to be fulfilled' for interreligious dialogue to occur: radical humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality (Cornille 2008:4). To shift itself from an intra- to an extra-ecclesial perspective by committing itself more fully to a theology of the people born of a pneumatological understanding of the peoples of the world as the People of God – and practically heeding these aforementioned essential conditions for authentic interreligious dialogue as a result of this movement – is thus to recognise the first interreligious pathway that Kairos theology can offer the Catholic Church for furthering the contemporaneous development of the synodal missional ecclesiology to which it is called to currently instantiate.
- **Communion, participation, and mission as courageous interreligious listening, prophetic interreligious discernment, and decisive interreligious action:** While the shift from an intra- to extra-ecclesial perspective highlights a practical interreligious insight from Kairos theology, this tradition also offers the Catholic Church pastoral lessons for furthering the development of a contemporary synodal missional ecclesiology. Simply put, the pastoral focus that Kairos theology places on understanding the synodal triad of communion, participation, and mission as courageous interreligious listening, prophetic interreligious discernment, and decisive interreligious action can help the church to become more attentive to

interreligious concerns in the spirit of synodality. Reframing communion, participation, and mission as courageous interreligious listening, prophetic interreligious discernment, and decisive interreligious action pastorally awakens the church to what it means to live the essential conditions for authentic interreligious dialogue that indisputably indicate the shift from an intra- to an extra-ecclesial perspective as discussed above. In so doing, Kairos theology enriches Catholic synodal missional ecclesiology, reminding the church that, as we are all eschatologically one, no separation exists between the peoples of the world and the People of God, and, as such, it itself is called to listen to, discern with and, act for the concerns of the whole of humanity, regardless of religious affiliation or non-affiliation. In a global, community composed of interreligious mosaicism and hybridity, it is therefore crucial to recognise that we are all in the same soteriological boat, where one person's problems are the problems of all, and no one is saved alone but only together.

- **Theory and practice as interconnective interreligious *Kairos* moments:** Finally, while Kairos theology shows the importance of an extra-ecclesial perspective for – and the importance of interreligious listening, discernment, and action on – the formation of a more authentic synodal missional ecclesiology, it also enriches how the church can theologially understand these aforementioned points. Specifically, Kairos theology enhances the church's theological perspective on interreligious dialogue as a good that must not only be pursued theoretically but also practically and socio-politically as active interreligious *Kairos* moments that are attentive to what is being novelly created by the interconnective and cross-confessional work of the Holy Spirit in the here-and-now. Accordingly, the formation of a more authentic synodal missional ecclesiology necessarily needs to be understood not just as a way of being, but as a way of *doing* church, one in which the theme of dialogue in church and society, with a particular focus on interreligious engagement, is of critical importance in 'build[ing] together, as sisters and brothers all, in a spirit of mutual activity and aid, justice, solidarity, [and] peace' (Francis & 16th Ordinary General Assembly for the Synod of Bishops 2024:43).

Although these interreligious pathways are neither exhaustive nor immune from practical, pastoral, or theological critique, each of them demonstrates the timely relevance of heeding Kairos theology for the development of a more authentic synodal missional ecclesiology that is attuned to dialogue in church and society, with a particular focus on interreligious engagement. This is because, as Munkee Kim, the South Korean Protestant theologian and peace studies scholar-practitioner, rightly observes: Kairos theology fundamentally calls the church to 'continuously rediscover and reveal the authenticity of the Christian faith, inspiring [*it*] to establish a transformative "moment of

truth" as a unified body, bearing witness against injustice' (Kim 2022:11). And it is precisely this practical, pastoral, and theological boldness – with all of the propheticism it holds – that can more faithfully enact the synodal missional ecclesiology called for by the Synod on Synodality within today's Catholic Church.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to make the case that the 1985 South African Kairos Document is a protological and prototypical form of a synodal missional ecclesiology. In doing so, I have explored the interreligious developments that have taken place in Kairos theology over the past 40 years, specifically focusing on the contributions of the 2009 Israel-Palestine Kairos Document. Throughout, I have argued that Kairos theology offers a number of promising interreligious pathways for furthering the development of a more authentic synodal missional ecclesiology within today's Catholic Church, one in which dialogue in church and society, with a particular focus on interreligious engagement, is not neglected as a peripheral thematic nuclei of Catholic synodality but recognised as concomitant and constitutive of what it means to be a synodal church itself.

From my perspective, Kairos theology offers the Catholic Church a promising way forward for enriching its synodal missional ecclesiological journey in Christianity's third millennium, especially with regard to how this journey necessarily relates to people of other religious traditions or no religious tradition. Not only is Kairos theology's prospective promise grounded in a theological method that is inherently of the people, but its theological conviction is born out of the call that being and doing church must always have practical, pastoral, and theological applications for advancing the shared experiences of communion, participation, and mission that the church has through dialogue with and commitment to *all* people – religious or otherwise. To journey with others along the synodal path of friendship, peace, and harmony – especially with those of other religious traditions or no religious tradition – is thus that which is at the heart of Kairos theology and the extra-ecclesial invitation it offers to the Catholic Church to courageously listen, prophetically discern, and decisively act with the peoples of the world as the People of God. It is my hope that the Catholic Church will heed the synodal *Kairos* moment in which it currently finds itself, drawing upon the practical, pastoral, and theological interreligious pathways that Kairos theology offers for contemporaneously building up the non-violent peaceable kin-dom of God that is synodal communion, participation, and mission with God and neighbour.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Rev. Paul Vincent Kollman, C.S.C., at the University of Notre Dame for introducing me to the 1985 South African Kairos Document;

Anré Venter at the University of Notre Dame for teaching me about his beautiful home country when I first visited the Rainbow Nation as an undergraduate student back in 2016; the double-blind peer reviewers who read and reviewed my manuscript; and the guest editors and editorial staff of *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* who, respectively, approved and copyedited this article. Without these persons' comments, guidance, and suggestions, this work would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my parents, Jennifer Grant Haworth and Steven Thomas Haworth, as well as my wife, Jocelyn Danielle Gaona, for their love and support throughout the writing, editing, and revising process of this project.

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships have inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

Author's contribution

M.T.H. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

- Boesak, A.A., 2015, *Kairos, crisis, and global apartheid: The challenge of prophetic resistance*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY.
- Brown, R.M. (ed.), 1990, *Kairos: Three prophetic challenges to the church*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Colberg, K.M. & Moons, J., 2025, *The future of synodality: How we move forward from here*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, PA.
- Cornille, C., 2008, *The im-possibility of interreligious dialogue*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, NY.
- Denis, P., 2017, 'The authorship and composition circumstances of the Kairos Document', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 158(1), 1–19.
- Detloff, D., 2024, *ICSD 132904/232904: God of solidarity: Liberation theology as social movement [syllabus]*, Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto.
- Ellis, D. & Warshel, Y., 2010, 'The contribution of communication and media studies to peace education', in G. Salomon & E. Cairns (eds.), *Handbook on peace education*, pp. 135–154, Psychology Press, New York, NY.
- Esack, F., 1986, 'A Muslim perspective on the Kairos Document', *Newsletter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, South African Chapter* 3(1), 1–2.
- Faggioli, M., 2020, 'From collegiality to synodality: Promise and limits of Francis' "listening primacy"', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85(4), 352–369. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140020916034>
- Faggioli, M. & Froehle, B., 2025, *Global Catholicism: Between disruption and encounter*, Brill, Leiden.
- Francis, 2015, *Address for the ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops*, Vatican Publishing House, Vatican City.
- Francis, 2021, *Address for the opening of the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality*, Vatican Publishing House, Vatican City.
- Francis & 16th Ordinary General Assembly for the Synod of Bishops, 2024, *Final document for the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality*, Vatican Publishing House, Vatican City.
- General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2021a, *16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: 'For a synodal church: Communion, participation, and mission'*, Vatican Publishing House, Vatican City.
- General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2021b, *Preparatory document for the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality*, Vatican Publishing House, Vatican City.
- Gruber, J., 2020, 'Consensus or dissensus? Exploring the theological role of conflict in a synodal church', *Louvain Studies* 43(3), 239–259.
- Haworth, M.T., 2024, 'Lessons from decolonial and mediation studies: A proposal for revising the praxis of the diocesan phase of the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality', paper presented at the 70th Annual Convention of the College Theological Society, Regis University, Denver, CO, 30th May–02nd June.
- Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians, 2009, *A moment of truth: A word of faith, hope, and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering*, Israel-Palestine Kairos Theologians, East Jerusalem.
- Kim, M., 2022, 'A study of the common features of Kairos documents and a comparative analysis of Kairos Korea and Kairos Palestine', MTH thesis, School of Divinity, University of Glasgow in partnership with Edinburgh Theological Seminary.
- Kjetil, F., 2012, 'The power of invitation: The moral discourse of Kairos Palestine', *Dialog* 51(2), 135–144. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2012.00670.x>
- Knitter, P.F., 2013, 'Inter-religious dialogue and social action', in C. Cornille (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to inter-religious dialogue*, pp. 133–148, John Wiley & Sons, Malden, MA.
- Noceti, S., 2023, *Reforming the church: A synodal way of proceeding*, Paulist Press, New York, NY.
- Pierre, C., 2021, 'Synodality and Pope Francis: The church that walks together', *Jurist* 77(1), 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jur.2021.0020>
- South African Kairos Theologians, 1985, *Challenge to the church: A theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa*, South African Kairos Theologians, Braamfontein.
- Vellem, V.S., 2010, 'Prophetic theology in black theology, with special reference to the Kairos Document', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66(1), 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v66i1.800>