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Article

'The March Is Not Ended': 'Church' Confronting the State over the Zimbabwean Crisis

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Abstract: The Zimbabwean crisis has been on-going since the year 2000. The various ecumenical bodies of the church in Zimbabwe have been voicing their concerns to the state through meetings and pastoral letters. While the church has been touted as a critical player in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, concerns about the church have been raised. One of these has been the issue of a divided organization that has failed to speak with one voice. With the coming into power of the so called 'Second Republic', hopes were raised that the state would be willing to have the crisis resolved. However, the crisis has just worsened, and the church has again been forced to break its silence. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the pastoral letter that was issued by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference on 14 August 2020, titled 'The March is not Ended', which sought to respond to the crisis in Zimbabwe. The paper seeks to establish what religious groups can achieve in the event that they set aside their differences for the common good in conflict situations. Data for the paper were gathered through the issued pastoral letter, as well as the responses to it on online media.

Keywords: the march is not ended; crisis; churches; ecumenical; conflict; pastoral letter; statement; new dispensation; second republic; Zimbabwe



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1. Introduction

This article analyses a pastoral letter that was released by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) on 14 August 2020. The pastoral letter is titled 'The March is not ended'. Taking into cognizance the fact that Zimbabwe is a state in crisis, the pastoral letter can be viewed as a response that was meant to intervene in the conflict that was unfolding. In order to put the pastoral letter into perspective, it is imperative for the study to examine the intersections among religion, conflict and peacebuilding. Scholarship on religion, conflict and peacebuilding has noted not only the significance, but also the ambivalence of religion in both conflict and peacebuilding. While some have advocated for religion to be accorded a significant role in resolving conflict and championing peace, others have argued that religion can also promote conflict and derail peacebuilding processes. Samuel Huntington is renowned for predicting that the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict was going to be cultural, with religion playing a pivotal role (Huntington 1996). Kmec and Ganiel (2019, p. 6) view Huntington's view as having shaped the discourses of the role of religion in conflict and peace. Thus, on one hand, religion has been viewed as a tool for exclusion and discrimination (Galtung 1969; Stuart 2010; Manyonganise 2020; Uzochukwu et al. 2020). In the same vein, Boulding (1986) is of the view that religion has always failed to deploy its potential for peacebuilding, which at times may lead it to act as an impediment to peace. However, the British Academy (Silvestri and Fba 2015, p. 4) has cautioned us from amplifying religion as a source of conflict while neglecting its potential to foster peace. Around the world, scholarship has started to take seriously the potential of religion to contribute positively to peacebuilding

([Silvestri and Fba 2015](#); [Tarusarira 2020a](#); [Manyonganise 2016, 2020](#)). Scholars supporting this idea base their argument on the evidence that religious leaders have played pivotal roles in not only influencing the cessation of conflict, but also in uniting communities, thereby bringing healing and reconciliation. The fact that religious leaders may have a large number of followers in certain contexts provides them with opportunities to persuade them to adhere to peaceful resolution to conflict. Religious leaders also hold privileged social positions and may challenge political leaders whenever they are fomenting conflict.

Within the Zimbabwean context, church¹ leaders have historically rebuked politicians for causing conflict and for ill-treating citizens. When the churches' response was felt to be inadequate, new church groups emerged to confront the state. In his study of the Zimbabwean context, Joram [Tarusarira \(2020a\)](#) notes the emergence of religious groups at the beginning of the year 2000. As shall be discussed later, this is when the Zimbabwean crisis began. While historical groups such as the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe had sought to engage the government in non-confrontational ways such as holding meetings with government officials as well as issuing pastoral letters, the new groups that emerged such as the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance and Churches in Manicaland, among others, were confrontational, as they sought to respond to the unfolding crisis. It is crucial to note that the voice of the churches is important in Zimbabwean society because the majority of Zimbabweans are Christians. Christian leaders interact with members of their churches at a more personal level, and they have the power to influence their members' political choices. This makes politicians uncomfortable when church leaders speak out publicly against the government. When discussing the new church groups that emerged in Zimbabwe since the year 2000, [Tarusarira](#) is of the view that by abandoning the non-confrontational ways in their engagement with the government, the groups provided new avenues of engagement which have reshaped the meaning and method of pursuing peace in Zimbabwe. He applauds these groups for bringing in new ideas and direction in the search for peace and reconciliation ([Tarusarira 2020a](#)). Historical church bodies had been criticized for issuing pastoral letters whose message would rarely reach the common people in the communities who at most were the victims of conflict (see [Chitando and Manyonganise 2011](#); [Chitando 2013](#); [Manyonganise 2013](#); [Tarusarira 2020a](#)). However, in the age of information technology, the use of social media like Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp platforms have resulted in pastoral letters reaching their intended readers more widely, serving as a source of political consciousness as well as mobilization tools as citizens identify with raised issues. For example, The ZCBC, ZCC and EFZ have Twitter handles and Facebook pages where they post their pastoral letters. It is easy for people to download and share these on WhatsApp groups. This is the context in which the ZCBC pastoral letter of 14 August 2020 was released. The title of the pastoral letter was taken from John Robert Lewis who was an American politician and civil-rights leader. He had declared that the march for freedom, particularly for black African Americans, had not ended; rather, it continues within this present epoch. The Zimbabwe Catholic bishops found his statement to resonate with events within the Zimbabwean context forty years after independence. In order to place this pastoral letter in its proper context, an understanding of the nature of the Zimbabwean crisis is significant.

2. The Nature of the Crisis in Zimbabwe

Since the year 2000, Zimbabwe has been in unending crises. The crises can be located within the socio-economic as well as the political spheres. Generally, Zimbabwe's economy has been on a downward spiral, while its politics have been characterised by violence, intolerance, and hate, as well as allegations that elections are illegitimate. This has led its social space to be very toxic, as supporters of different political formations fail to relate in ways that accept divergent views. It has not been possible to explain the source of the crises in linear form.

Various scholars have grappled with the crises as they endeavoured to pinpoint the causes. Some scholars have opined that Zimbabwe's crises emanated from its failure to

have a smooth political transition at the turn of the new millennium (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003; Chitando and Manyonganise 2011). Such failure is seen as having given birth to other crises, namely misgovernance, corruption, and political violence, among other ills (Mlambo 2006). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2003, p. 100) views the political culture in Zimbabwe as greatly shaped and influenced by the liberation struggle, which from his perspective instilled in many political leaders and their supporters a militaristic conception and perception of politics and political processes. In 2002, Ndlovu-Gatsheni noted that the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union—Patriotic Front (ZANU PF), prided “itself in its violent past and its capacity to deploy this infrastructure of violent politics to those who dare challenge it” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003, p. 103). In his opinion, the Zimbabwean state was preoccupied with what he called ‘regime security’ rather than ‘human security’, and this was rooted in the nationalist struggle for independence. The threat posed to ZANU PF by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) from 1999 made it rethink its position, and it began to project itself as a people’s movement. However, it has continued to glorify the party and its leader, resulting in a personality cult. It is important to note that the revered leader has almost always been a man. From Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s analysis “the African patriarchal ideologies were combined with nationalist authoritarianism to produce a ‘father figure’ in the nationalist leader” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003, p. 109). For him, the “glorification of the nationalist leaders engineered a feeling of indispensability as well as irreplaceability” while the “elevation of the nationalist party above everything else generated rigid party loyalties and a preparedness to kill and be killed in defence of the party” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2003, p. 109; 2012). Hence, Clemens and Moss (2005) note that the political violence that accompanied the fast-track land reform programme, beginning in 2000, gave birth to the economic crisis. The analyses of scholars who have located the genesis of the crisis in Zimbabwe as political is crucial for this study, as it informs it on not only the genesis of the crises, but also on the character of a political party that has governed Zimbabwe since 1980. Such analyses are important in constructing useful political narratives; and such framing needs to explore whether the government post-Robert Mugabe (President 1987–2017) is new or is the same old government pretending to put on new robes.

Other scholars have analysed the crisis from an economic perspective (see Clemens and Moss 2005; Mlambo 2006; Bond 2007; Munangagwa 2009; Masiyandima and Edwards 2018). Scholars sharing this view have pointed out that Zimbabwe’s economy has suffered from economic policy inconsistency, corruption, economic mismanagement, and the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) to mention but a few. Bond (2007, p. 149) questions why an economy that was the fastest growing and the breadbasket of all of Africa became the fastest shrinking and a basket case in a very short space of time. Various scholars have answered this question by pointing out reckless monetary decisions that were taken by the government, one of which was the payment of unbudgeted allowances to veterans of the liberation struggle. The 1997 payment of large sums of money is blamed for worsening the economic situation in Zimbabwe. This payment was seen as buying the loyalty and political support of war veterans in the subsequent elections. Apart from this, Clemens and Moss (2005), Mlambo (2006), as well as Besada and Moyo (2008), are in agreement that the negative international response to the crisis, which led to the withdrawal of donor funding, worsened the crisis and led to the devaluing of the Zimbabwean dollar (Besada and Moyo 2008). Analysing the genesis of the Zimbabwean crisis using an economic lens provides a different angle from which to understand the crisis, and underscores the links between political and economic policies and their consequences.

The uncertain political environment has continued to shape the economy of Zimbabwe. As the economy continues to move in a downward trend, the social fabric has also been disrupted. It has become difficult for Zimbabweans to live harmoniously with people who have different political views. Family members supporting different political parties have meted violence against one another. This has destroyed relationships in families, churches and communities. As alluded to earlier, when the crises unfolded, various stakeholders

responded in various ways. Christian leaders added their voices in not only condemning the deteriorating socio-economic and political situation in Zimbabwe, but by suggesting ways in which the situation could be salvaged.

3. The Church and State in Zimbabwe: From 2000 to the Present'

The Church in Zimbabwe and its role in politics has a long history. Its interaction with the state has been documented by many scholars who have focused on the pre-colonial, the colonial as well as the post-colonial periods. Zvobgo (1996) has analysed the church–state relations from the sixteenth century when the Mutapa Empire interacted with the Portuguese. Thomas (1985) examines the relationship between the church and the State in colonial Zimbabwe. While Ganiel and Tarusarira (2014) note that the missionaries accompanied the Pioneer Column when it entered Mashonaland in 1890 showing a close relationship between religion and politics, Thomas (1985) records that this relationship soured from 1962 to 1980 as the State moved to sideline the church due in part to the criticism that was coming from the church because of the ill-treatment of the colonised people. Tarusarira (2016) explores the dynamics of Christianity in the midst of oppression, repression and conflict in Zimbabwe, concluding that Christianity has been both an agent of oppression and resistance. Manyonganise (2020) has given a candid analysis of the public role of the church after independence. She argues that “after the attainment of independence, the church in Zimbabwe pulled away from the political scene and concentrated on socio-religious issues” (Manyonganise 2020, p. 39). While the church had largely remained quiet against the excesses of government, they started to speak out from the year 2005 and going forward. Manyonganise (2020, p. 39) views the breaking of silence by the church as having been necessitated by the ‘chaotic’ land reform programme, which started in 2000, and Operation Murambatsvina. Operation Murambatsvina was carried out by the ZANU PF government after the 2005 elections, in which ZANU PF lost the majority of urban seats to the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Carried out under the guise of cleaning up urban cities, people’s accommodation and vending stalls were demolished.

In order to dilute the influence of the church in public life, the state resorted to co-opt certain religious leaders. A book edited by Ezra Chitando (2013) titled *Prayers and Players: Religion and Politics in Zimbabwe* exposes the way religion and politics interact within the Zimbabwean context. It shows a political leadership that plays religion to gain religious capital while religious leaders also play politics for political capital. In other words, particularly beyond the year 2000, religion and politics at times invested in each other for ‘mutual’ benefit. In a polarised environment such as Zimbabwe, religious leaders are most of the time afraid of being viewed as supporting a ‘wrong’ political party. They, therefore, cannot turn down an invitation of influential political leaders. On the other hand, the religious leaders are forced to invite political leaders to their meetings and conferences where, in most cases, they pledge their allegiances and give promises of all their members voting for the political leaders. This usually happens when ZANU PF politicians attend African Initiated Churches (AICs). For example, religious leaders such as Nehemiah Mutendi, Ezekiel Guti, Emmanuel Makandiwa, and Walter Magaya, among others, have graced political functions, while figures like the late Robert Gabriel Mugabe, Grace Mugabe, Joyce Mujuru, Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, and Morgan Richard Tsvangirai, to name but a few, have attended religious meetings and conferences. Currently, Nelson Chamisa, the leader of the MDC Alliance, is not only a trained pastor, but has also appropriated religion in his political messaging and is known for his Godisinit hashtag. Tarusarira (2020b) has examined the deployment of religion by Chamisa, which clearly shows that political leaders in Zimbabwe at times practice what he terms ‘religious politics’.

Chitando (2013) and Manyonganise (2013) analysed a pastoral letter that was released by the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference titled *God Hears the Cry of the Oppressed* (Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference 2007) and the National Vision Discussion Document (NVDD) titled *The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe* (2006), respectively. Chitando applauds the Catholic bishops for speaking truth to power. On

the other hand, Manyonganise while applauding the Heads of Christian Denominations (HOCD), criticises them for failing to ward off political interference. Manyonganise (2016) analysed the individual as well as joint statements that were issued by the ecumenical bodies in Zimbabwe against the violence that was being meted on the citizenry by the government. Apart from the NVDD discussed above, she also critiqued the joint pastoral letter titled '*A Call to Conscience*'. Her critique centred on how the pastoral letter is evidence of early collaboration among the three church bodies, that is, the ZCBC, the EFZ, and the ZCC. Furthermore, Manyonganise (2020) analyses the way the ecumenical bodies in Zimbabwe have related throughout the years. Her focus is on the collaborative efforts among these bodies. She examined in great detail the contents of the individual and joint pastoral letters by placing them into their proper context. She gives credit to the church bodies for standing up to the violent government that showed that power was more important than the welfare of citizens. She further examined the role of Churches in Manicaland (CIM), which belongs to groups which Tarusarira (2016) calls non-conformist, in the national healing and reconciliation process in Zimbabwe, albeit from a gender perspective. This analysis sought to establish whether in its participation in the national healing and reconciliation process, CIM pays particular attention to the gendered power dynamics at play, particularly women's experiences of political violence in Zimbabwe. Through interviews, the study found out that CIM did not make a deliberate effort to make gender the agenda in their determination to build peace in communities in Manicaland.

After the Government of National Unity was formed in 2009, life became unbearable for most citizens, and a number of social movements emerged, some led by clergy. Evan Mawarire of the hashtagThisFlag Movement is a pastor. Using the Zimbabwean flag as a symbol of protest and resistance, he galvanised support from citizens who shared his views both within and out of Zimbabwe through the use of social media. When he was arrested for calling for a stay away that paralysed government, prominent Christian leaders like Tudor Bismack, founder and overseer of Jabula New Life Ministries, and Takesure Zama, leader of Worship Addicts, attended court on his trial. They sang and prayed with the rest of the people who had gathered for the trial. In a way, prayer and song were used to express public anger not only for Mawarire's arrest, but also for the government's failure to attend to issues that were being raised by Mawarire's social media messages, which resonated with the majority of Zimbabweans. Both the church leaders and the public were optimistic that the mode of governance would change after Mugabe was out of office.

Robert Mugabe was removed from power on 17 November 2017 through a military coup, which the coup leaders termed 'Operation Restore Legacy'. While this political transition is unconstitutional, the courts in Zimbabwe sanitised it, and citizens celebrated Mugabe's removal. Church leaders did not openly criticize the coup leaders, which may have been a silent approval of Mugabe's removal. In fact, Father Fidelis Mukonori, a Catholic priest, mediated between Mugabe and the coup leaders in a bid to ensure a 'bloodless' political transition. On the other hand, the people who had suffered during the Mugabe years anticipated that the new political leadership would change the trajectory. To their dismay, after protests against elections results after the 31 July 2018 elections, the government used the military, killing six civilians. More civilians were killed in January 2019 after demonstrations against high costs of living. This prompted people to question whether there was anything new to expect from the political leadership.

The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions called for demonstrations, which were to take place on 31 July 2020. These demonstrations were to coincide with a general strike in protest against the high rising cost of living for the general population. However, before the demonstrations could take place, the government responded harshly by arresting and jailing prominent figures who had spoken in support. Some of these were Hopewell Chin'ono, a journalist; and Jacob Ngarivhume, leader of Transform Zimbabwe, an opposition political party. Due to this crackdown, a number of opposition political activists went into hiding, including labour movement leaders. The demonstrations were billed to happen within a context of alleged corruption pertaining the awarding of tenders for

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the fight against COVID-19. The demonstrations were a show of protest against the government's ineptitude, corruption and nepotistic behaviour. [Maulani et al. \(2020\)](#) note the "disturbing scenes of violence against unarmed civilians as the military and police used live ammunition" after the deployment of soldiers and police in Harare on 28 July 2020. Instead of paying attention to the concerns of citizens, the government used violence in a bid to silence critical voices. In a way, the response of the government showed that its heavy-handedness was reminiscent of the Mugabe era if not worse. While the church had supported the violent political transition with the hope that the 'New dispensation' would live up to its name, the crackdown on the labour movement and opposition members was evidence that the purported 'new' was in fact the 'old'. What it meant was that in fact the struggle for the peoples' freedoms and rights continue. The march to realising these had not stopped by the coming into power of the so-called 'New dispensation' or 'the Second republic'. While the president of the republic had openly declared that the 'voice of the people is the voice of God' as well as describing himself as a 'listening president', the violent response had proved otherwise. Several interviewees interviewed by Alexander [Noyes \(2020, p. ix\)](#) indicated that "Mnangagwa is in many ways governing in a more repressive manner than Mugabe". Writing to Alpha Media House Voices, Collet [Ndoro \(2020\)](#) argued that Mnangagwa pretends as if he is a listening president, yet in reality he is not. In response to the police blitz of 28 July 2020, a number of media houses viewed the crackdown as repression and a way of instilling fear in opposing voices. It was in this context that the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference pastoral letter, which is the main concern of this article, was released. I proceed to present the contents of the pastoral letter.

4. 'The March Is Not Ended': The Pastoral Letter That Shook the Political Establishment

As mentioned earlier, the pastoral letter was released on 14 August 2020. The pastoral letter is a clarion call to self-introspection. The bishops analysed events occurring within Zimbabwe in 2020 and concluded that the differences in perception between "those who think they have arrived and those on the march has resulted in a multi-layered crisis of the convergence of economic collapse, deepening poverty, food insecurity, corruption and human rights abuses among other crises in urgent need of resolution" ([Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference 2020](#)). They noted the call for demonstrations in Zimbabwe as a result of "growing frustration and aggravation caused by the conditions that the majority of Zimbabweans find themselves in" ([Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference 2020](#)). From their point of view, it was detrimental for the government to try and suppress the anger of the people, as this would only make the crisis worse. Going down memory lane, the bishops highlighted that unresolved past hurts continued to give rise to angrier generations. These included the Gukurahundi (1983–1987), an operation which was carried out by the North Korean trained Fifth Brigade in the Midlands and Matabeleland Provinces. The government alleged it targeted dissidents who had rebelled against it, though most of the victims were innocent civilians. It is estimated that around 20,000 Ndebele people were killed.

The bishops went further to castigate the South African government for failing to consult with the churches in Zimbabwe, as well as civil society after the 31 July 2020 demonstrations. After the 31 July 2020 demonstrations, the South African government sent a delegation to Zimbabwe to understand the nature of the crisis as well as consult on possible ways to deal with it. This was applauded as a positive response, since South Africa has always been viewed as having a leverage in solving the crisis in Zimbabwe, particularly because millions of Zimbabweans have sought political asylum and some are economic refugees in that country. It was envisaged that the South African delegation would hold consultative meetings with the government, opposition officials, and church bodies, as well as civil society. However, at the influence of ZANU PF, the delegation ended up meeting only ZANU PF government officials, who rejected the notion that there was

a crisis in Zimbabwe. This irked a number of groups that viewed themselves as critical stakeholders, the churches included.

The bishops further condemned the Zimbabwe government's response to those that took part in or organised these demonstrations as only causing the people to be fearful. In their opinion, the government needed to respect those people whose views differed with it. It was an abuse for the government to label anyone who differed with them an enemy of the state. Citing Micah 7:3, the bishops condemned corruption that is endemic within Zimbabwean society and opined that it was against the concept of servant leadership, which the propagators of the 'second republic' said they were following. Critiquing the significance of Heroes and Defence Forces days, the bishops said:

As your Shepherds, we are sensing that our national leaders want to take us back to the mentality and practices of the war times where it was 'us against them'. We want our politics to build a united nation and not to divide us, turning the military who ought to continue the memory of the late heroes against the people who fed them and clothed them and who gathered intelligence at great risk and saved many of our fighters from peril. Some of our vocal political leaders are busy re-creating the war situation of us and them, abdicating from the responsibility to build a united nation. Have we not all been divided by this divisive political environment to the detriment of the national common good? ([Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference 2020](#))

The politics of division have characterised Zimbabwe since independence in 1980. Turning to the re-engagement mantra of the so-called 'new dispensation', the bishops reminded the politicians that they needed to first pay attention to the groups in Zimbabwe who had been impoverished and made vulnerable by the poor economic policies of those in power. The poor health and transport system points to a dearth of leadership in Zimbabwe's politics. Passing their verdict on the character of the political leadership, the bishops saw a leadership that is not prepared for the task at hand. They argued "it is not clear to us as your Bishops that the national leadership we have has the knowledge, social skills, emotional stability and social orientation to handle the issues that we face as a nation" ([Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference 2020](#)). The continued blaming of exterior forces was seen by the bishops as lacking substance and a failure by the political leadership to take responsibility of the crises. The bishops noted that this lack of accountability is happening at a time when the judiciary's independence is compromised, the health system has collapsed and the brain drain of key professionals is taking place. They castigated the government for failing to accept the church's assistance in opening dialogue between itself and the health professionals. The government's misplaced priorities was highlighted. The government officials had more Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) than the health professionals which was harmful in the COVID-19 context. Citing Jeremiah 9:12, the bishops called the political leadership to prioritise national transformation in ways that would deal with the deepening poverty among citizens. They called on the government to recognise the proposed National Convergence Platform which had brought together different Apex church bodies, such as the ZCBC, the ZCC and the EFZ. Civil society organisations, business bodies, and professional bodies had launched the Comprehensive National Settlement Framework (CNSF) on 5 August 2020. This framework sought to establish consensus among the citizens as to what should constitute a comprehensive agenda towards a lasting solution for Zimbabwe's challenges and was a deliberate effort to build a convergence agenda among citizens towards the Zimbabwe We [all] Want. The CNSF focus is on five core issues, namely: a victim-led process which adheres to globally accepted norms and international law; a broadly agreed reform process towards constitutionalism and the rule of law; a new social contract on the basis of an inclusive national economic vision; a broad-based and inclusive national humanitarian and emergency response, and mending of regional, continental and global relations. The bishops pleaded for peace and nation building through inclusive engagement, dialogue and collective responsibility for transformation. In concluding their pastoral letter, they reiterated John Robert Lewis's statement that the march is never ended,

but also noted that total inclusivity would enable the nation as a collective to overcome the challenges that Zimbabwe faces.

5. 'Evil-Minded Bishops!': Political Push Backs

In response to the pastoral letter, the government, through its minister of Information and Publicity, Monica Mutsvangwa, described the bishops as evil and narrow-minded. She accused the bishops of being "reckless regime change agents whose objective was to incite the public to rise against the government." In reference to the pastoral letter, Mutsvangwa said:

Its evil message reeks with all vices that have personally hobbled the progress of Africa. It trumpets petty tribal feuds, internecine strife as a prelude to civil war and national disintegration.

Drawing comparisons with the Rwandan genocide, Mutsvangwa singled out the Archbishop of Harare, Robert Christopher Ndlovu, and accused him of inciting tribal conflict. She charged "With nefarious cynicism to history, Archbishop Robert Christopher is itching to lead the Zimbabwe Catholic congregation into the darkest dungeons of Rwanda-type genocide". Characterising the Ndebele as a minority group in comparison to the Shona, Mutsvangwa continued as she castigated the Archbishop,

He wants to posit as the leader of the Ndebele minority by fanning the psychosis of tribal victimisation. Concurrently, he sows sins of collective guilt on the Shona majority. That way, he seeks to numb the spirit of collective vigilance against the known and proven enemies of the populace of Zimbabwe. His transgressions acquire a geopolitical dimension as the chief priest of the agenda of regime change and is the hallmark of the post-imperial major Western powers for the last two decades.

While the government accused the bishops of fanning tribal conflict, the above statement is testament to the fact that, it is the government which is guilty of this crime by categorising certain tribal groups within Zimbabwe as minor and others as major. By attributing the challenges that Zimbabwe faces to 'external known enemies', the government runs away from being accountable and taking responsibility for the same.

Despite the numerous human rights abuses that have occurred in Zimbabwe in the post-independence era, the government chose to ignore the content of the letter, which called on it to respect the rights of citizens. Instead, it accused the bishops of making accusations that were not backed by evidence. In reference to this, Mutsvangwa said:

The letter is full of generalised accusations. By way of contrast, the meticulous CCJP [Catholic Commission on Justice and Peace] collated, compiled and published dossiers of specific crimes committed by the colonial settler minority regime. The Archbishop and his flock of misled Catholic bishops have none of that diligence. Instead, they wallow in generalised and baseless accusations. Absolutely, no shred of reported evidence of so-called victims.

The above statement from the government clearly shows it is cornered. A historical analysis of the work of the CCJP shows they not only recorded the excesses of the colonial government, but that of the liberation fighters as well. A careful reading of the book *The Man in the Middle: Torture, Resettlement and Eviction* (Catholic Institute for International Relations 1975) shows that the CCJP was and continues to be impartial in its work of advocating for social justice. Manyonganise (2016, p. 118) notes that in this book, the CCJP not only reported the atrocities committed by the Rhodesian forces, but also condemned the violence that was being meted on the general public. The Commission noted that the generality of the populace were victims of both the insurgents and security forces. In its condemnation of the violence, the commission said:

we do say ... with great emphasis and in all seriousness that violence in all its forms is abroad in this country of ours and that some of those whose duty it is

to give a lead often seem to be persuaded that violence can best be met with violence. We condemn violence as being contrary to the whole ethic of Christianity and we draw attention to the fact that violence is neither simply defined nor is it necessarily merely a matter of physical injury. Violence and counter violence leave no room for reconciliation and it is Christian reconciliation, true justice and true peace which we seek for Rhodesia. (CCJP cited in [Manyonganise \(2016, p. 118\)](#))

From Manyonganise's perspective, this statement by the CCJP is informative in that then in the struggle as it is now, the church was aware of how the violence of the war was tearing communities apart and leaving scars in their lives which form the basis even today for the call for national healing and reconciliation. The church denounced violence as being contrary to the spirit of reconciliation ([Manyonganise 2016, p. 118](#)). However, the response of the Zimbabwean government in August 2020 to the pastoral letter of the ZCBC sought to turn a blind eye to the excesses of the liberation fighters, some of whom are currently in political leadership while at the same time acknowledging and valorising the excesses of the colonial government. Such distortion of history is what has characterised Zimbabwean politics and failure by government to account for their role in past conflicts has only served to fester the wounds of its victims. In addition, the CCJP and the Legal Resources Foundation responded to the Gukurahundi massacre with its most publicised *Breaking the Silence: Building True Peace* in which they recorded the atrocities of the Mugabe government against the people of the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces. Mutsvangwa, however, chose to remain silent on this work, probably because it implicates some members who constitute the government of the 'second republic'.

The government response can be understood in various ways. First, in running away from taking responsibility for the crises bedevilling Zimbabwe, the government has always blamed internal and external forces which are bent on enforcing regime change. It has particularly blamed Western countries for fomenting conflict and economic collapse to advance a neo-colonial agenda. In this vein, the government views responses from historical ecumenical bodies as not emanating from what is happening on the ground, but as coming from groups that are foreign-sponsored. In this case, the government may have seen the pastoral letter as lacking substance and authority because the ZCBC has its headquarters in Italy. The solidarity messages which were released by Western Church groups may have served to authenticate this perception. Second, the government may have misread the title of the pastoral letter to be a political statement. The 2017 coup that removed Robert Gabriel Mugabe from power was made possible through the mobilization of citizens who were called on to march against Mugabe's refusal to resign. By declaring that 'the march is not ended', the bishops may have been misconstrued to be calling Zimbabweans to return to the streets to march against ZANU PF. The pastoral letter had categorically stated that the political leadership lacked the necessary skills to govern and to come up with a vision for a Zimbabwe that every citizen envisions. Third, the government may have been irked by the strong letter coming from a Catholic organization, as Mugabe belonged to the Catholic Church. It is highly probable that the government may have felt that Catholics in Zimbabwe and beyond had a vendetta against it for humiliating one of their own. While the government's response showed that it continues to be in denial of its role in the crises that have persisted in Zimbabwe since independence, the ZCBC pastoral letter galvanised the other ecumenical bodies, the public, as well as civil society organisations to affirm their strong support and solidarity with the bishops. In the next section, I examine the way in which the pastoral letter became a rallying point for the nation.

6. The March Is Not Ended: The Pastoral Letter That Provided a Rallying Point for the Nation

The government's political response to the ZCBC pastoral letter was perceived as a direct attack on the Church in general. The ecumenical bodies in Zimbabwe and beyond released their statements of solidarity with the bishops. It was a rare show of unity which I argue can provide faith communities with an avenue of speaking with one voice as a way

of dealing with conflict in their different contexts. Internationally, solidarity statements were received from the World Council of Churches, Methodist World Council, the Lutheran World Federation, World Communion of Reformed Churches, Catholic Bishops of Southern Africa and Catholic Bishops of Zambia among others. In Zimbabwe, the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, The Anglican Council of Zimbabwe as well as the Zimbabwe Conference of Major Religious Superiors stood in support of the ZCBC's pastoral letter. As this article is focused on the response within Zimbabwe, I will present the responses of some of its ecumenical bodies.

The EFZ released its own pastoral statement in support of the ZCBC pastoral letter. In the statement, the EFZ affirmed the correctness of the content of the bishop's letter. It argued that:

True democracy is not built on threatening and criticising those who speak up or speak out; it is not in denying inconvenient and unpalatable truth, it is not in demonising those we disagree with. Democracy welcomes truth. Democracy is built on the search for truth.

The EFZ charged that while the government had managed to stop the demonstrations of 31 July 2020, it had not managed to contain the truth. From their perspective, despite the criticism levelled upon the church, for them the truth could not be stopped. They said, "harsh criticism may be levelled against the Church but the truth continues to march on" (EFZ statement, [Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe 2020](#)). Turning to cases of abductions and victimisations of political activists and journalists, the EFZ said "abductions, torture and incarcerations may be unleashed on journalists and every voice of dissent but the truth will still march on like it did during the struggle for independence against more sophisticated and superior force of arms, and a state machinery that made every aspirant of freedom a hunted terrorist" ([Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe 2020](#)). In a direct attack on those in power, the EFZ further charged "Truth may be on the cross today, and wrong may be on the throne but on the third day, it will rise again because the truth still marches on" ([Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe 2020](#)). This was an indictment on the political leadership whom the EFZ perceive as not being relevant to the needs of Zimbabweans. In concluding its statement, the EFZ called for inclusive engagement, dialogue and transformation. Referencing a pastoral letter which it had released on 4 August 2020, the EFZ reiterated that Zimbabwe had multi-layered crises which had given rise to discontent and protest movements such as the hashtagZimbabweanLivesMatter. From the EFZ's standpoint, the government needed to prioritise dialogue to "address the underlying causes of the crisis that exists in Zimbabwe in order to create a Zimbabwe that all citizens yearn for".

In the same vein, the ZCC also released a statement titled "Echoing 'The March is not ended'". It affirmed its support of the bishops' pastoral letter, which it described as 'honest communication'. In its statement, the ZCC refuted the government's blame of the economic crisis on natural disasters such as Cyclone Idai and the COVID-19 pandemic as well as international isolation. It called on the government to also put into cognisance some of the serious causes of the economic crisis such as corruption, policy inconsistencies and the government's failure to unite the nation towards a common vision. It noted that it has always shifted blame and labelled critical voices as 'regime change agents' or terrorists. Yet, what all this shows is that the government is not willing or able to engage with its citizens on the level of ideas. From the ZCC's analysis, this robs the citizens of any hope that things could improve.

The ZCC further described the government's response as "overtly too emotional and disrespectful for formal communication" ([Zimbabwe Council of Churches 2020](#)). It condemned the personalised attacks on Archbishop Ndlovu. It argued that the singling out of Archbishop Ndlovu was meant to destroy the unity of the church by isolating an individual from the collective discernment process. The aim was seen as that of diluting the collective voice of the churches. As a result, the ZCC condemned the government for misusing public resources to utter disrespectful communication against the person of

Archbishop Ndlovu. In its opinion, this was an inappropriate deployment of state resources by the government. It called on government through its public officials to instil positive engagement on the basis of ideas rather than to use public media to reinforce negativity.

The ZCC further noted that the government's response to the bishops' pastoral letter had missed an opportunity to unite the nation. Furthermore, the ZCC rejected the government's comparison of the pastoral letter with the Rwandan genocide. Such comparison was seen as frivolous and insensitive, while at the same time giving the impression that the government was paying lip-service to national healing and reconciliation. The government was then reminded of the historical critical role that the churches have always played in relation to the state, arguing that the church in its ecumenical form has always fought for justice, peace and unity.

Other solidarity messages came from individual denominations. For example, the Anglican Council of Zimbabwe released its statement on 24 August 2020. Affirming the Church' prophetic role in society, it cited Ezekiel 3:17, which states "Son of Man, I have made you watchman to the House of Israel. Therefore, hear the word at my mouth and give them warning from me". It, therefore, disagreed with the government's response to the bishops' pastoral letter, which seemed to "dismiss the fact that the church is called to exercise its prophetic role, which can mean challenging . . . political leaders on their conduct of affairs, particularly if this affects the people of God" ([Anglican Council of Zimbabwe 2020](#)). The Council reiterated that indeed 'the march is not ended' until and unless the issues raised by the people of Zimbabwe (through the bishops) are attended to and resolved holistically. The Council saw the response of the government as unproductive to the efforts being made by key stakeholders including the church to unite the nation. It, therefore, called on the government to engage all stakeholders in dialogue, to respect the constitution and to respect all section 12 institutions. The Council reiterated that the mandate of the church is to speak to government which believes that "the voice of the people is the voice of God"² without fear or favour.

Apart from ecumenical bodies supporting the bishops, some civil society organisations also released statements of solidarity. The Human Rights NGO Forum affirmed its support for the bishops' pastoral letter. It noted that the response of the government showed that it was in denial of issues raised by the bishops, yet these were already in the public domain, particularly the fact that the letter called for peace, constitutionalism and respect for human rights. It further encouraged the Information Ministry to pay attention to Zimbabwe's Bill of rights specifically to sections 60 which deals with issues pertaining to freedom of conscience and 61, which focuses on freedom of expression. From its analysis, the response of the government infringed on these two constitutionally given rights. It reminded the government of the critical role of the Church in advocating for social justice. Therefore, silencing the Church to speak up against injustices "is deplorable, unwarranted and a betrayal of the people's revolution against autocracy and mass human rights violation which started during the liberation struggle" ([Human Rights NGO Forum 2020](#)). In this regard, the Human Rights NGO Forum called on the government to 1. Respect freedom of expression and human rights. 2. Show tolerance of divergent views and accept constructive criticism. 3. Accept that Zimbabwe is in a crisis and work towards genuine concerns raised by the ZCBC rather than distorting history calculated specifically to discredit the ZCBC. In light of this, the Forum reminded the government and citizens that 'the march is not ended'.

Heal Zimbabwe also issued a statement of support for the bishops. It out rightly condemned the government's attack on the bishops. It viewed the attack as exposing that the government is intolerant of constructive criticism. For Heal Zimbabwe, the singling out of Archbishop Ndlovu was not only unjustifiable, but also showed a government that is not willing to adhere to constitutionalism. Concurring with the Human Rights NGO Forum, Heal Zimbabwe noted the government's disregard for sections 60 and 61 of the constitution. Turning to the process of national healing and reconciliation, it argued:

The letter by the Bishops in which they call for peace and justice adds to similar calls by organisations such as Heal Zimbabwe which over the years have called on

the government to initiate a survivor centred healing and reconciliation process to address past episodes of state sponsored violence and respect for the rule of law.

(Heal Zimbabwe 2020)

Heal Zimbabwe concluded its statement by urging the bishops not to relent, but to continue speaking out against social injustice and calling on the government to respect the rule of law.

Other voices came from Zimbabweans within and out of the country. Tsitsi Dangarebga (2020), a renowned author, described the bishop's letter as a "beautiful document" that gave her hope that Zimbabweans were beginning to stand in peaceful togetherness across their diversities to reclaim their nation (Twitter post 17 August 2020). Opposition politicians capitalised on the bishops' letter to highlight the various ways in which they were being persecuted by the State which for them was clear evidence that the 'march is not ended'. Hence, in general, the pastoral letter became the rallying point for the majority of Zimbabweans who yearn for change.

7. 'A Church Divided': Echoes of Counter-Messaging

In post independent Zimbabwe, especially beyond the year 2000, the government has responded to the criticism of historical ecumenical bodies by influencing the formation of pro-government church groups. During the Mugabe era, the Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe (ACCZ) was formed to counter the messages of church bodies that were critical of government. In the post-Mugabe era, Zimbabwe witnessed the formation of the Zimbabwe Indigenous Inter-Denominational Council of Churches (ZIICC) for the same purpose. The 'second republic' may have felt that the ACCZ was pro-Mugabe, hence it would not serve its best interests. Thus, despite the bishop's letter galvanising massive support from groups mentioned above, the ZIICC moved in to counter these and show support for the government. The ZIICC through its patron, Nehemiah Mutendi, and spokesperson, Andrew Wutawunashe, reacted to the bishops' letter. Wutawunashe spoke against the bishop's pastoral letter as one that sought to revive old grudges or wounds. He argued:

We take strong exception to and categorically dissociate ourselves from calls by certain religious leaders to march against the government and to reignite conflicts and wounds of the past to heal us, from which God answered our prayers by bringing political leaders to the negotiating table whose reconciliation was achieved (The Herald 19 August 2020).

He rejected the bishops' pastoral letter's narrative that the government was intolerant, corrupt, violating human rights and does not have any regard for the rule of law. Instead, Wutawunashe blamed targeted sanctions for the continued suffering of citizens. On the other hand, Mutendi chastised the bishops for placing judgement on the government rather than advocating for positive and constructive discourse. It is clear from the above that the ZIICC spoke out in favour of government. As a result, Dube (2021) calls its leading members 'regime enablers'. The issue of sanctions has provided cover for the failures of the Zimbabwean government to a point that it does not account for anything without blaming sanctions. However, what is clear is that the church in Zimbabwe continues to have a divided voice when it comes to issues that concern the government. This continues to be the weakness of the church as it seeks relevance within the Zimbabwean political space. This proves Tarusarira's observation correct when he argues that Christian actors in both colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe have played dynamic roles, with some working in collaboration with the perpetrators of violence and fanning conflict, while others resisted and/or intervened to resolve the conflict (Tarusarira 2016, p. 267).

8. Conclusions

The intention of this article was to analyse the ZCBC's pastoral letter that was released on 14 August 2020, titled 'The March is not Ended'. The article presented the issues raised

in the pastoral letter, as well as the responses from various groups within Zimbabwe. Various conclusions can be drawn from the pastoral letter itself, as well as the responses that ensued from both sister ecumenical bodies, the government, and the public, as well as civil society. What is clear from the responses is a convergence of both ecumenical bodies as well as civil society and the public at large. Several conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis. First, we can deduce that the Zimbabwe government is afraid of not only a united but also a vocal church, and its ability to inspire resistance or civil disobedience. [Tarusarira \(2020a\)](#) is of the view that the negative response by the Zimbabwean government to the pastoral letter calls on us to rethink the foundations of our knowledge on the role of religion in society and politics. For example, it is possible that 'The March is Not Ended' marks a new departure in the willingness of mainstream church organizations to speak out against the government; a prophetic edge that was blunted in more recent periods (see [Tarusarira's \(2016\)](#) contrast between timid mainstream church bodies and bold 'non-conformist' Christian organizations). Second, we can also conclude that by confronting the government the way it did through the pastoral letter, the ZCBC exercised its prophetic role by challenging injustice, and especially the effects of injustice upon the most marginalized in society. The response from various groups and the public was clear evidence of the resonance of this message. Third, despite the unity that was exhibited by ecumenical bodies that are widely recognised by Christians in Zimbabwe, it is evident from the responses of ZIICC that the Church in Zimbabwe continues to fall prey to politicians who have managed to influence other sections of the Christian community to support the excesses of the government at the expense of justice and peace. Finally, the relative lack of concrete social or political change to emerge in the wake of 'The March is not Ended' indicates that even if Church leaders are increasingly finding the courage to challenge the State, the State's grip on power is strong and its capacity to change is limited.

Peaceful transformation in Zimbabwe requires a broad-based movement rooted in civil society, motivated by a strong vision of justice and committed to persistent non-violent action. It could be argued that 'The March is not Ended' could serve as a galvanizing manifesto for such a movement, uniting not just a majority of the churches, but also bringing together a diverse range of civil society actors. The reaction to the document within certain civil society organisations seems categorically different from reactions to previous documents. However, for meaningful change to occur, civil society must capitalize on the momentum generated by the document, moving beyond words to concrete actions. We cannot underestimate the challenges of this in a country in political crisis, in which many citizens struggle to meet their basic needs. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these crises. Further research must delve beyond the words of the document and the written responses to it, exploring whether or to what extent people have been empowered to act on its vision.

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Notes

- ¹ I make use of the word 'Church' in this article cognizant of its diverse meanings and implications. I have deliberately used it in this article to refer to its generic function. It should therefore, be understood as referring to all organisations which refer to themselves as 'church' despite the different names with which they are called.
- ² This is a statement that President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa declared as characterising his so-called 'Second Republic' or 'New Dispensation'.

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