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Rethinking ecclesiology and the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi

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Abstract

This study discusses the phenomena of ecclesiology and the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi. The study aims to investigate the resilience and adaptation of the church in Malawi to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It used qualitative research methods: literature review and interviews. The study argues for the necessity of rethinking ecclesiology and the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi in the following areas: (1) the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) Malawi government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) the importance of re-defining the *being* and *doing* of the church; and (4) the viability of house churches in the Malawian context. The study has one major implication: "maintaining the Biblical view of the *being* and *doing* of the Church given the dynamic changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi."

Introduction

This study discusses the phenomena of ecclesiology and the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi. The study aims to investigate the resilience and adaptation of the church in Malawi to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) presents a global unprecedented challenge in all aspects of life including the church. Under the current circumstances, it is imperative to redefine the *being* and *doing* of the church. This type of understanding could be helpful for the church in negotiating with some COVID-19 restriction measures; particularly, limitations on church gatherings and actual church closures. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has

occasioned an opportunity for the church in Malawi to engage in an ecclesiological reflection that ensures its sustainability amidst uncertainty and turmoil caused by the coronavirus.

In line with the aim of the study, the paper addresses the following four sections: (1) the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) Malawi government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) the importance of re-defining the *being* and *doing* of the church; and (4) the viability of house churches in the Malawian context.

The global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic

Wu et al (2020:44-48) contend that the first outbreak of a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) was reported in Wuhan, Hubei province, mainland China in December 2019. Patients who were infected by the virus and were admitted to hospital demonstrated conditions characterised by pneumonia and respiratory failure. Additionally, COVID-19 infection has the following symptoms: high temperature, a new continuous cough, and a loss or change of a person's sense of smell and taste. These symptoms then progress to shortness of breath.

Ferrer (2020:323-324) observes that the World Health Organization (WHO) named this etiological agent 'Coronavirus Disease 2019' (COVID-19) on 11th February 2020. On 11 March 2020, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, General Director of the WHO, declared COVID-19 as a pandemic.

Velavan and Meyer (2020:278-280) claim that SARS-CoV-2 evidently succeeded in making its transition from animals to humans on the Huanan seafood market in Wuhan, China. However, endeavours to identify potential intermediate hosts seem to have been neglected in Wuhan and the exact route of transmission remains unclarified. Rothe et al. (2020:970-971) maintain that the global spread of COVID-19 can be largely attributed to its person-to-person transmission. Cucinotta and Vanelli (2020:157-160) contend that the COVID-19 pandemic has become a public health emergency of global concern which requires an urgent, high-level, and coordinated effort to control the outbreak.

Ji et al. (2020:1-4) insinuate that human-to-human transmission was initially verified in family/friend clusters. Hu et al (2020:1) argue that super-spreading events, mainly during social gatherings, have played a crucial role in the worldwide spread of the novel coronavirus. These events include parties, religious services, weddings, funerals, sports events, carnival celebrations and political rallies. Liu et al. (2020:557-560) relay that dense transmission has also been documented in hospitals and nursing homes possibly through aerosols.

As of 22 September 2021, over 230 million confirmed COVID-19 cases were reported worldwide, with 207 million recoveries and 4,7 million deaths. The USA accounted for 43 million COVID -19 confirmed cases, 33 million recoveries, and 700 000 deaths. South Africa is the leading African country with over 2,9 million COVID -19 confirmed cases, 2,7 million recoveries, and 86 000 deaths. Malawi had reported 62 000 COVID-19 confirmed cases, 53 000 recoveries, and 2300 deaths (Worldometers 2021).

Malawi government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Malawi, a sub-Saharan African country has not been spared from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Patel et al. (2020:71) argue that the Malawian health sector which battles the epidemic is already challenged by inadequate funding, insufficient staffing, dilapidated infrastructure, and lack of essential medicines and equipment. Together with a high poverty level and poor health literacy, all these posed further challenges towards an effective containment. Aggravating the already tense situation, health personnel went on strike for two weeks forcing the government to employ more personnel, provide enough personal protective equipment and increase hazard allowances. Inadequacy of equipment adds to the grim picture as the country has a total of only 25 intensive care units (ICUs) and 7 functioning ventilators. Mhango (2021:1) reports that Malawi's decrepit healthcare system rendered frontline health personnel incapable of mounting an adequate response to critically ill COVID-19 patients who required ventilation during the surge of patients during the peak of the epidemic as was experienced from January to February 2021. This led to one of the nurses at a COVID-19 Isolation Centre in Lilongwe to cry out loudly: "Malawi can't breathe. Lord, please hear our cries and heal our land."

A patient who died of COVID-19-related illnesses posted an SOS message on his Facebook page as he was on his deathbed gasping for oxygen to breathe at the Kamuzu Central Hospital (KCH). He lamented as follows (Msoma 2021):

In Hospital, diagnosed covid positive. The hospital staff are so wonderful and I can see pain in their eyes. Yes they have oxygen cylinders but in my case they cant connect me to the much needed Oxygen because the whole KCH has no Oxygen flowmeter. My situation is getting bad and I desperately need oxygen. Anyone who can urgently help out there please please help by donating this very gadget (sic).

His cry for help deeply moved Malawians of goodwill to start a fund-raising initiative to complement government efforts in containing the pandemic (Nyasa Times Reporter 2021).

On 20 March 2020 Peter Mutharika, former President of Malawi, declared a COVID-19 national disaster even before any COVID-19 case was reported in the country (Chilora 2020:1). He instituted a COVID-19 Taskforce Committee to oversee the pandemic and set aside funds amounting to \$20 million to mitigate its impact. Some of the preventative measures included the closure of schools and universities on 23 March 2020. Authorities also banned public gatherings of more than 100 people and this applied to weddings, funerals, religious congregations, rallies, and government meetings. Security forces were deployed to enforce these restrictions.

Chilora furthermore reports that President Peter Mutharika appealed to the religious fraternity to intervene in the crisis. He called upon all Malawians of different denominations and faiths “to turn to God in times of fear and uncertainty as we do in times of joy and celebration. Let us join together as we pray for God’s heart of love, mercy and truth to dwell in us and show us how to face challenges posed by the Coronavirus.”

Tengatenga (2006:12) is of the opinion that Mutharika’s appeal reverberates with the notion that Malawi is a God-fearing nation and recognises the crucial role which the church plays in the country’s socio-political sphere.

On 2 April 2020, President Peter Mutharika confirmed the country's first three cases of COVID-19 (Kaponda 2020). The cases involved a resident of Lilongwe who had travelled to India, one of their relatives, and their maid.

Twelve days later, on 14 April 2020, President Mutharika announced a 21-day nationwide lockdown aimed at preventing, containing and managing the further spread of COVID-19. He made the announcement together with the then Minister of Health, Jappie Mhango, who was also the chairperson of the Presidential Task Force for COVID-19. At the time of the announcement of the lockdown measures, statistics showed that Malawi had registered 16 confirmed cases and two deaths due to COVID-19 (Kaunga 2020).

Kaunga furthermore noted that the lockdown measures were met with fierce criticism from traders, religious communities, civil society organisations, and the general public. Consequently, numerous protests were held throughout the country against the lockdown measures. Protesters accused the president of failing to consider the well-being of ordinary poor Malawians. The demonstrators demanded upkeep money from the government to survive the lockdown period.

The Human Rights Defenders Coalition (HRDC) obtained a court injunction on 17 April 2020 restraining the government from implementing the lockdown measures. According to Gift Trapence, chairperson of the HRDC, they had obtained the injunction because of the government's failure to announce any measures to cushion the poor during the lockdown (Chiuta 2020:1).

Kaponda (2020) reports that on 10 August 2020, Malawi's new administration led by President, Dr Lazarus Chakwera imposed new COVID-19 restrictions. Among other things, the government restricted public gatherings, including religious meetings, to a maximum of ten people.

The religious fraternity in Malawi was extremely infuriated with this restriction on the number of people who could attend public worship services. The Episcopal Conference in Malawi (ECM), a group of Catholic Bishops, accused the government of announcing the new measures without consulting the country's faith leaders to hear their views on the restrictions. But, they

nevertheless advised their flock to abide by the regulations announced by the government (APA-Lilongwe 2020).

Rev Collin Mbawa, the General Secretary of the General Synod of the Church of Central African Presbyterian (CCAP) reported that the General Assembly met on 12 August 2020 in Lilongwe to deliberate on the government's new COVID-19 restrictions. They unanimously agreed to defy the new COVID-19 restriction capacity of 10 people and instead maintain its church gathering capacity to 100 people while observing all COVID-19 preventative measures (Nation Publications Limited 2020).

An Assemblies of God pastor who was interviewed for this study vehemently defied the government's COVID-19 restrictions which stipulated that a church gathering should have only ten people per service. He explained:

I am told that the government has banned the gathering of more than 10 people, what does this mean? How many services does a big church like mine going to have on a Sunday? Indirectly you are telling us to close the church ... Let the government know that Walemera Assemblies of God will not close the church but we will try our best to have a bucket of water outside and handwashing soap, all members to put on face-masks, observe social distance and avoid greeting each other by hands. We will continue with our church services.

Study findings also revealed that there were disagreements between the clergy and the laity. An Evangelical church member argued that as much as the pastors are saying that the government has not consulted them, the same pastors have also not consulted their church members so that they can have a consensus on the way forward. She explained:

I commend the government for bringing stringent COVID-19 restrictions because the aim is to avoid exposing us to the risks of contracting COVID-19 and saving lives in the process. But, our pastors are speaking their views as if they have consulted us. It's our own lives that are in danger. Myself and my family we have

decided to stop attending church services until the situation stabilises.

On 10 January 2021, the President of Malawi said that he was saddened by statistics showing an alarming spike in coronavirus infections in the country. In a radio address, he announced that he was starting a 21-day prayer and fasting to seek divine intervention into the COVID-19 pandemic (Masina 2021). However, health experts and other social commentators argued that the situation needed more than prayers.

President Chakwera's resort to prayer and fasting demonstrates the role of prayer in Malawi's socio-political sphere (Van Dijk 1998:156). However, the president, who is also an ordained minister of the Malawi Assemblies of God (MAG), goes beyond the scientific interventions employed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and engages in prayer and fasting as weapons of spiritual warfare.

The foregoing discussion further demonstrates the interaction of the Church and State in Malawi. However, any church's engagement in public theology entails the church's self-understanding to preserve its identity and mission. Therefore, the next section of the paper presents an ecclesiological reflection amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and attempts to respond to the question: "What is the church?"

Re-defining the being and doing of the church

In continuing with the discussion on the ecclesiology and COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi, it is imperative to re-define the *being* and *doing* of the church. This type of understanding could be helpful for the church in negotiating with some COVID-19 restriction measures; particularly, limitations on church gatherings and actual church closures.

The believer's need for the church cannot be disputed. McGrath (1997:198-199) recounts that John Calvin identified the church as a divinely founded body, within which God affects the sanctification of his people. Thus, Calvin confirms the importance of the church by using two of Cyprian's great

ecclesiological aphorisms: (1) “You cannot have God as your Father unless you have the church as your mother,” and (2) “Outside the church, there is no hope of remission of sins nor any salvation.” Therefore, the institution of the church is a necessary, helpful, God-given and God-ordained means of spiritual growth and development.

As we reflect on the question “What is the being of the church?” I am of the view that the nature of the church can only be properly understood in its relationship with the triune God. Ormerod (2015:1) submits that there exists a web of symbiotic relationships between the Christian faith in the triune God and our understanding of the nature and purpose of the church. If indeed we are “partakers of the divine life” (2 Peter 1:4) and that life is trinitarian, then undoubtedly there must be some way in which the church’s life reflects the life of the Trinity. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, I will employ three primary New Testament metaphors for the church which are grounded in the Triune God. These are the people of God, the body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit to construct a Trinitarian ecclesiological framework.

The church as the people of God

Migliore (2014) argues that one of the biblical images of the church is the people of God. The theme of the covenant between God and God’s elect people is deeply embedded in both the Old and the New Testaments. “I will be your God and you shall be my people” (Leviticus 26:12). “You are God’s own people, in order to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9). Van Rensburg (1981:139-179) asserts that the term “people of God” is closely related to the term “children of God” which refers to people who have been called by God and adopted through Jesus Christ by the regeneration of the Spirit. Thus, the call of God the Father of a people to Himself serves as a basis of the church’s foundational identity as the family of God.

Bosch (2011:10) avers that as a people called by the God of Jesus Christ, the church participates in the mission of God. The Son sends the church into the world with the power of the Spirit on a mission to glorify God by making disciples of all nations, baptising them in the Trinitarian name of “...the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Thus, as the people of

God, we are united in Christ and sent in the power of the Spirit to proclaim the gospel so that people from all nations might become part of God's family. However, this mission is accomplished as the church functions as the body of Christ for the glory of God as witnesses in the world.

The church as the Body of Christ

Hultgren (2002:127) argues that the phrase "the Body of Christ" is a common New Testament metaphor for the church and it refers to both the universal as well as the local church. Paul speaks of the church as a universal entity (1 Corinthians 10:32; 15:9; Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6) or as a specific congregation, meaning the church in that particular place (Romans 16:1, 5; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1).

Kreeft (2011) argues that the catechism of the Catholic Church states that the comparison of the church with the body casts light on the intimate bond between Christ and His church. Not only is she gathered around Him; she is united in Him, in His body. Three aspects of the church as the Body of Christ are to be more specifically noted: the unity of all her members with each other as a result of their union with Christ; Christ as head of the Body; and the church as the bride of Christ.

The image of the church as the body of Christ makes a provision for grounding the church in Christology. Bonhoeffer (1991) avers that the church means community through Jesus Christ because no Christian community is more or less than this. T.F. Torrance (1958:8-9) states that the image of the "body of Christ" has at least three implications. First, it refers us directly to Christ Himself, the Head and Saviour of the body. Second, it recognises that the incarnate Son of God has identified Himself with us, and assumes us into union and communion or fellowship with Him. Third, it points to the fact that as the church we find our essential being and life, not in ourselves but everything is derived from Him alone and that we owe our continued existence to Him.

The church as the temple of the Holy Spirit

Averbeck (2008:40) explains that the image of the church as the temple of God is illuminated in 2 Corinthians 3. The Corinthians are said to be, "a letter from Christ, ...written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (v. 3), and Paul is a minister of "a new

covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (v. 6). The passage goes on to emphasise the overwhelming glory of this work of the Holy Spirit (vv. 8, 17–18; see also 5:5), contrasting it with the glory of the old covenant (vv. 7–18; see also 4:6, 17). The concluding verses are almost poetic in nature: “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (vv. 17–18). Thus, the spiritual formation work of the Holy Spirit consists of transforming us into the likeness of Christ. We become the glory of Christ in this world as we increasingly reflect His glory to the world through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Chia (2020:22) deduces that in grounding ecclesiology in the triune God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the church can remain confident about its identity and the authenticity of its ministries in the face of challenging circumstances due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To be sure, the church is no stranger to disruptions because in its long history it has faced various challenges both moral and natural evil but has always emerged triumphant in all the circumstances. This should remind us of Christ’s promise concerning the building of his church which says: “Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means ‘rock’), and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it (Matthew 16:18) (NLT).

The foregoing discussion has ecclesiological implications given the current COVID-19 outbreak. Pillay (2020:17) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic raises at least four ecclesiological questions. First, what it means to be the church (body of Christ) without going to church (a place of worship or a building)? Second, what is the possibility of being a church without our understanding of the church as an institution which is usually associated with buildings, offices, organisational arrangements, budgets, ministry, leaders, theology, doctrine, and visibility? Third, is COVID-19 teaching us what it means to be the invisible church since churches are not allowed to meet physically? How can we reimagine the idea of the church as a community (*koinonia*)?

Although churches in Malawi are allowed to congregate with a restriction of no more than 100 people in attendance, some churches have chosen to close

down while very few churches have opted to use the digital platforms to continue with the ministry. Thus, COVID-19 has disrupted the external structures of the visible church including its public worship and ministry. Nevertheless, COVID-19 is teaching us to appreciate the importance of having a living faith in Jesus Christ despite the apparent dismantling of the church as a community (Tengatenga, Duley, and Tengatenga 2021:20).

Okoro (2015:1-9) is of the opinion that the idea of the church as community resonates with the African idea of *Ubuntu* whose cardinal spirit is expressed in Xhosa language as: “*Umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu,*” understood in English as: “People are people through other people” and “I am human because I belong to the human community and I view and treat others accordingly.” In this respect, COVID-19 has also disrupted African communal life by affecting people’s gatherings in community events such as weddings and funerals which are also officiated by the church.

Therefore, COVID-19 challenges theologians to reimagine the idea of the church as a community. Pillay (2016:16-18) argues that the Christian call to community is definitive for both the Christian faith and practice. The very notion of community is established in the Godhead; God is a trinitarian community (i.e. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and the church (*ekklesia: the gathering of those summoned or called out*) refers to the gathering of a community of believers whether it is a local church, a citywide church or as the universal church. God works with a community and whenever God does work with individuals, He sends them right back into the community. In other words, the church exists by virtue of the various relationships between and among believers. So, the question is: what happens when the relationships within the Christian community are disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic? Imagine a church that has closed and cannot meet for a Sunday worship service, a Bible study, a discipleship class, or an evangelistic outreach event.

It should be noted that the above-mentioned questions can be answered differently depending on our various contexts. Chia (2020:23) argues that one of the most effective ecclesiological responses to the novel coronavirus in most developed countries has been the employment of virtual or digital ways of being and doing church. Churches are continuing with their core ministerial activities using Zoom, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, WhatsApp,

YouTube, TV, Radio, and other such media. Certainly, a virtual community has been created replacing the physical, person-to-person relationships which form the basic units of a traditional, ecclesiological community. Partly, the virtual community provides a perfect answer to the question of social distancing as one of the primary preventative measures of mitigating the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bryson et. al (2020:1) explains the church's experience in the UK when the state imposed a lockdown on 23 March 2020; consequently, affecting the closure of the churches. Most religious denominations transitioned towards widespread adoption of telemediated virtual worship forms, very different from professionally broadcast Sunday services. The virtual service can connect worshippers who are in their respective homes and bring them together for a worship experience at the same time. Virtual services can be live-streamed or recorded, edited and delivered as real-time experiences, but are digitally stored and open to all. Such an approach sustains the service beyond a specific time and date, being in principle more spatially and socially inclusive. This demonstrates that COVID-19 has stimulated rapid shifts in ecclesiological practices calling for innovation and improvisation. It has transformed homes, via telemediated worship, into sacred places in which homes become linked together to share in common worship.

The development of an ecclesiological virtual community serves as an opportunity for creativity and the ability to reach audiences outside of the usual physical gatherings. However, in Malawi, the church is lagging in shifting to virtual services for various reasons. First, a lack of access to internet connectivity. Kainja (2019) paints a picture that truly reflects the situation of most churches in Malawi regarding internet connectivity. He observes that the Internet-enabled device, the power needed to run the device and the Internet data all have costs that must be met by the would-be Internet user. It is, therefore, very possible that the Internet may be available, meaning that the Internet coverage is there in a certain area, but people in that area would still not have access to the Internet because it is beyond their financial means.

Kainja's assertion can further be buttressed by the Inclusive Internet Index (2021) report which revealed that out of the 120 countries accessed in the report, Malawi has an overall rank of 114th in the global index and 27th in Africa.

Moreover, the country's efforts to extend Internet access are stymied by low digital literacy, high prices for data (relative to per-capita national income), poor network quality and coverage, and a dearth of relevant content. As a result, usage, even of mobile services, is exceedingly low by international standards.

Second, lack of adequate electricity due to persistent blackouts as a result of ESCOM's load shedding program (Electricity Supply Corporation of Malawi 2017). Third, the socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi are widespread. Alfonso (2020:11-15) established three critical findings in this regard. First, the majority of Malawians (80%) reported that their households are economically hit by COVID-19. Second, the majority of Malawians (87%) are worried that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the economy. Third, about 6 out of 10 Malawians (58%) are seriously worried that the COVID-19 pandemic has put Malawi's economy in tatters. The above-mentioned study findings conclude that most churches in Malawi do not have the financial capacity to access Internet connectivity. Also, it should be mentioned that church offerings and tithes have been affected during this period of the COVID-19 pandemic since most church members are living on a 'hand to mouth' existence. They are preoccupied with finding the daily bread to feed their families; hence, resulting in low giving to the church. As such, it's difficult for the churches in Malawi to sustain virtual services.

Now, if the church in Malawi has not effectively transitioned to the provision of virtual or digital services, what is the viable alternative given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic? I propose that the most effective way of being and doing church in Malawi during the COVID-19 pandemic is the establishment of house churches. Thus, the next section of the paper presents a discussion on the viability of house churches in Malawi.

The viability of house churches in Malawi

The current COVID-19 situation in Malawi necessitates an ecclesiological rethinking on the viability of house churches, home churches, or home cells (*Domus ecclesiae*). In this section of the study, I present the biblical and historical basis for house churches.

The biblical and historical basis for house churches

Corpuz and Sarmiento (2021:115) argues that the Lord Jesus Christ gave us an example of worship that took place in a house church. Luke 22:8-22 narrates a story in which Jesus tasked Peter and John to prepare the Passover meal in a large upper room of a house in Jerusalem. Therefore, it was in a house church where Jesus instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist or Holy Communion.

They furthermore observe that the gathering of Christians in hospitable homes goes back to the very first days of the Early Church (117). Acts 1:12-15, portrays the disciples, after Christ's ascension, as returning from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem, entering a house whereupon they went into an upper room. The upper room, a common architectural feature of the East in those days was built on the second or third floor of a house. It was a fairly large room mainly used for rest. It is in the upper room where the disciples and the Christian believers totalling up to 120 continually gathered, experienced community, prayed, (Acts 1:14; 4:31) and possibly breaking bread and teaching and preaching (Acts 2:46; 5:42). Therefore, we can infer that this upper room served as a house church.

Chupungco (1997:106) explains that a feature of the early Christian church was the celebration of the breaking of bread in the houses of believers, as Acts 2.46; 20.7-12 narrates. The domestic or house liturgy was the tradition that the disciples initiated in the Graeco-Roman world.

Witherington (1998:163; 241) points out that the early Christians were meeting daily, sharing food "from house to house" which might suggest that they rotated where they ate and worshipped God, or more likely that since there was a good number they shared in various homes (Acts 2:46-47). Moreover, the apostles continued to teach the gospel daily in the temple and from house (church) to house (church) proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah (Acts 5:42).

Filson (1939:105-112) argues that the specific mention of a prayer meeting in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, (Acts 12: 12) serves as a reminder that when the early Christians wanted to meet as Christians, no place suited their need except the homes of their members. Moreover, the book of Acts 12:17 suggests that this was not a meeting of the whole Jerusalem church, but

only of one group. Therefore, it indicates that as the church grew in size it became increasingly difficult for all the believers in the city to meet in one house. One would imagine that for all ministerial and liturgical meetings, then, the total number of Christians could be divided into smaller groups, housed in the homes of believers.

Payne (2008:1-2) indicates that Paul's missionary activities are replete with the concept of house churches. For instance, in Acts 16:40, when Paul and Silas had come out of the prison, they went "to Lydia's house where they saw and encouraged the brothers and then left". In Romans 16: 3-5, Paul states: "Greet Priscila and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus... greet also the church in their house." In Colossians 4:15, Paul says: "give greetings to the brothers in Laodicea and to Nympha and the church in her house." When Paul writes to Philemon in verses 1-2, he states: "Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus and Timothy our Brother, to Philemon, our beloved and our Co-worker, to Apphia our Sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church at your house."

Cairns (1967) postulates that the historical basis for house churches during the period of Apostolic Christianity was primarily because of fear of persecution by the Romans. Moreover, the domestic worship of early Christians from the first to third centuries was in harmony with the spirit of early Christianity. In the first century, Christianity was not free to erect buildings for use in worship. In Jerusalem, for a very short time, Christians worshipped at the temple and in the synagogues, under the umbrella of Judaism, which was a *religio licita* (permitted religion). For three hundred years, Christians endured different forms of persecution until Constantine legalised Christianity by issuing the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. Also, Theodosius I (347-395 A.D.) contributed to the flourishing of Christianity by making it the state religion of the Roman Empire and developing great architectural projects in Constantinople.

The Early Church practice for worship in house churches was due to political, economic, and sociocultural reasons (Hannah 2019:95). But, I infer that the contemporary house churches being proposed in this paper are due to lockdowns, home quarantine, and social distancing to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, the church in Malawi should consider reviving the house churches during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic and provide opportunities for families and friends to engage in worship, prayer, Bible study, faith-sharing, and the breaking of the bread. In this vein, the house churches would meet the reformation criteria of a true church: where the word of God is preached and sacraments are administered (McGrath 1997:188-200).

“Mphakati”: house-church theology in Malawi

In this section of the paper, I will engage with Bishop Patrick Augustine Kalilombe’s *m’phakati* theology (1999) as one of the ecclesiological models from the Malawian soil. In 1973, he catechised an ecclesiological rethinking on house churches, home churches or home cells which would be comprised of small Christian communities (*m’phakati*).

Corpuz and Sarmiento (2021:117) agree with Kalilombe by arguing that house churches and their emphasis on liturgical renewal has the potential of substantially and positively impacting the spiritual lives of the faithful during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In engaging with Kalilombe’s *m’phakati* theology, I will present his ecclesiological conceptualisation of house churches in three sections. These are: (1) the vision of the *m’phakati*; (2) the nature and mission of the church; and (3) the formation of small Christian communities (*m’phakati*).

The vision of the m’phakati

Kalilombe (1999:33-34) argues for the necessity of building a self-reliant church in Malawi based on the principles of self-ministering, self-propagating, and self-supporting. The realisation of this vision was based on the creation of grassroots Christian communities in which the laity are fully empowered to participate in the church’s life and mission. The *m’phakati* theology was based on the ecclesiological model of Vatican II whose motto was: “The Model of People of God and Mystical Body of Christ.” – church that sees itself as the evangelical light, salt, and leaven planted amid the world to minister as the “sacrament of the coming kingdom of God.”

Kalilombe (1999:45) postulates that a successful ecclesiological re-thinking needs to be worked out and applied to fit concrete circumstances of a particular place, people, and time. The church should be able to discern the signs of the times. This is reminiscent of 1 Chronicles 12:32 which states that: “From the tribe of Issachar, there were 200 leaders of the tribe with their relatives. All these men understood the signs of the times and knew the best course for Israel to take” (NLT).

Similarly, the contemporary church must understand the times we are living in and confront the challenges that we are currently facing. Mwakikunga (2021) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has not spared the church in Malawi. We have lost prominent Christian leaders who were faithful and committed to the advancement of God’s kingdom here on earth. For instance, two prominent Malawian clergies, Bishop Dr Charles Tsukuluza of the Revival Life Ministries and Rev. Dr Edward Chitsonga, the immediate past president of the Malawi Assemblies of God succumbed to COVID-19 in early January 2021.

Kadewere (2021) reports that the Episcopal Conference of Malawi (ECM) also bemoaned the death of two of their priests due to COVID-19. For instance, Rev. Fr. Dr Dominic Kadzingatchire, a renowned academician succumbed to COVID-19 on 18 January 2021. Also, Rev. Fr. Kankhono of Thondwe Parish died of COVID-19 on 3 February 2021. Mzumara (2021) accounts that a catholic priest: Fr. Martin Mthumba of the Lilongwe diocese succumbed to COVID-19 on 24 January 2021 at Bwaila COVID-19 Isolation Centre.

Study findings have revealed the need to take COVID-19 seriously by observing the prevention measures. A pastor of the Church of Central African Presbyterian (CCAP) who was infected with COVID-19 and was interviewed for the study narrated his experience as follows:

I was just feeling general body weakness, fever, chest pain or pressure, and difficulty in breathing. Then I went to Zomba General Hospital and they diagnosed me with high levels of Blood Pressure and sugar. I was admitted the same day and had a COVID-19 test. The following day, I got my COVID-19 test results which indicated that I was positive.

I was moved from the general male ward to the COVID-19 Isolation Centre. The doctors also explained that my oxygen level was very low and for three days I was receiving supplemental oxygen. By God's grace and power, I recovered and was discharged out of hospital. But, up to now, I can't smell anything, no taste in any food I eat and still feel general body tiredness. COVID-19 is a dangerous disease and I nearly died. My advice to the church is that they should strictly observe the COVID-19 prevention measures. Prevention is better than cure. It's not a good experience at all to suffer COVID-19.

Mzumara (2021) reports that the surging numbers of COVID-19 infections have subsequently led to the closure of several churches in Malawi, both Catholic and Protestant to facilitate the process of fumigation. Meanwhile, congregants who were in touch with the clergy who have tested positive to COVID-19 have been advised to go for testing and self-isolation.

Therefore, it is in this milieu that Bishop Kalilombe called upon the church to understand the times and re-cast its vision to be relevant in the prevailing circumstances. Nonetheless, any attempt to contextualise the church's ministry given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic should not in any way compromise on the nature and mission of the church.

The nature and mission of the church

I believe that any ecclesiological rethinking should always maintain the integrity of the nature and mission of the church. Even during the raging COVID-19 pandemic, the church should remain true to its holy calling. The Apostle Paul states that: "...if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

Kalilombe (1999:46) articulates an understanding of the church as both a community of salvation and an agency of the same salvation to lost souls (1 Peter 2:9-10). Sonea (2017:73) argues that the *missio Dei* (the mission of God) brings implications for the *missio ecclesia* (the missionary activities of the church). Bosch (2011:391) says that the main purpose of the *missio ecclesia* cannot be limited to the planting of churches but extends to the service of the

missio Dei. It involves representing God in the world by proclaiming the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ to all the nations of the world.

Kalilombe (1999:46) explains the missionary character of the church by grounding it in the triune God. He argues that the church is not a human creation but it is God-given, God structured, God-led, and God-animated. Newbigin (1995:19-29) defines the missionary nature of the church by its participation in the mission of the Triune God. The church's source and identity are rooted in the missionary action of God on behalf of the world. The church participates in the mission of God, continues the mission of Christ, and bears the witness of the Spirit.

Kalilombe (1999:48) argues that the church is a community with a mission of bringing salvation to the world. Schirrmacher (2018:31) concludes that Jesus says in John 17:18, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world," and in John 20:21 he changes this into a personal address to his disciples: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." God the Father sends His Son and His Spirit as missionaries, and the church continues this sending mandate in world missions, whereby it remains dependent upon the exalted Lord (Matthew 28:18–20) and the Holy Spirit's empowerment (Acts 1:8).

Kalilombe's understanding of the church as a community of salvation implies a relationship between the Great Commission and the house church. Green (2004:251) argues that one of the most important methods of spreading the gospel in antiquity was by the use of homes. It had positive advantages: the comparatively small numbers involved made real interchange of views and informed discussion among the participants possible; there was no artificial isolation of a preacher from his or her hearer.

Adubofuor and Badu (2019:83) give at least four reasons why the church can be able to accomplish its mission through house churches. First, house churches are key to evangelism in the communities because they attract new believers who find adequate care in the small groups. Second, they create a new kind of missionary who can meet human needs and make an effective follow-up with the gospel. Third, they create a miracle church, which is a church that is sure to multiply itself through setting and achieving conversion and discipleship goals. Fourth, they facilitate the exercise of authority with love

since the leaders are in constant touch with the members, sharing their achievements and challenges in multiplying their cells.

Thus, any ecclesiological rethinking for the church in Malawi should remain faithful to the nature and mission of the church amid the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic.

The formation of small Christian communities (m'phakati)

Kalilombe (1999:68) explains that the church exists concretely on different levels. However, there is a law that stipulates that the proper functioning of the wider levels of the church are governed by the vitality of the narrower levels of the Christian communities. This can be observed in everyday life experience whereby people do not consciously live as wide communities but as cells: basic and manageable social entities. These cells (herein called the *m'phakati*) provide a sense of communal belonging and form the basic Christian communities of faith.

The *m'phakati* which is comprised of a small grouping of the faithful can easily meet the COVID-19 restriction of social distancing and mitigate its negative implication of collapsing the church community. Cho (2021:16) argues that social distancing is one of the ways employed in preventing the spread of COVID-19. But, if the COVID-19 pandemic is prolonged, “social distancing” will negatively lead to “social isolation.” Social isolation is the lack of people’s social interaction and this lack of community may, in turn, lead to a lack of humanity; subsequently, collapsing the church community. Unquestionably, it should be acknowledged that the church is currently involved in various socio-concern activities that express love, empathy and solidarity amid the suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the gravity of the situation cannot be undermined given the disruptions which the COVID-19 pandemic has caused on the church community. A proper ecclesiological response to the current crisis is to ensure that the four elements of the church community are sustained. Fundamentally, the church is a “community of gathering,” a “community of sharing,” a community of fellowship,” and a “community of communion.” All these four elements of community are essential in fulfilling the church’s purpose and function. Therefore, in this milieu, the *m'phakati* provides an opportunity for Christians in house churches to continue with the

fellowship (*koinonia*) or the communion of the saints (*communio sanctorum*) while strictly adhering to social distancing.

Kalilombe's thinking resonates with the New Testament concept of house churches (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 12:12; Romans 16:23; 1 Corinthians. 16:15, 17; Philemon 1-2). The church is called to live and work, in the first and essential place, on this basic community level. It is here where the majority of Christians live and work. Likewise, the same Christians can be organised to gather around the altar where God's word is consistently preached and the church's liturgy celebrated (1999:68-69). Gehring (2004:7) claims that the house church served as a building block and building centre of the church at any given location, as a support base for missional outreach, as a gathering place for the Lord's Supper, as a sanctuary for prayer, as a classroom for catechetical instruction, and as an opportunity to experience and exercise Christian brotherly love.

A pastor of a big Pentecostal church in Lilongwe who is a survivor of the COVID-19 pandemic insisted that the church should utilise the home cells during the COVID-19 pandemic. He narrated his experience as follows:

Myself and my wife were all infected with COVID-19. It was a difficult time for us. We were both doing self-isolation at home. One evening, the situation got worse for my wife due to severe difficulty in breathing. I called one church elder and we picked her and rushed her to the COVID-19 Isolation Centre at Bingu International Stadium. The doctors immediately put her on oxygen therapy. She was admitted for two weeks and then was discharged from the COVID-19 Isolation Centre.

We eventually closed the church for at least three months without holding any church worship services. However, I think that it is possible to continue with church ministry in the home cells that we already have. The most important thing is to follow the COVID-19 preventative measures i.e. limiting the number of participants in the home cell, washing of hands with soap or hand sanitiser when entering the house, wearing face masks, and observing social distancing. In this way, church ministry can continue in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adubofuor and Badu (2019:85) argue that the house church should be considered essential to church survival and growth because it is regarded as a key to durable numerical growth for four reasons. First, the house church serves as a discipleship, fellowship and leadership development tool. Second, the house church offers a natural, informal and caring environment that is essential for meeting personal needs, making even children disciples of Christ, and grooming disciples into leaders under closer family-style supervision. Third, the house church also serves as an evangelistic vehicle because the widespread house church meetings can bear testimony to more parts of the same community than the entire church meeting at one place only. Fourth, the house church is financially viable and sustainable because it does not attract immediate rental and building costs that could be hindrances to starting churches. Rather, it allows for making savings to fund missions and is itself considered a very dynamic and cost-effective way of starting and growing churches in mission areas.

I also interviewed a pastor of a charismatic ministry in Zomba who reiterated the need to utilise home cells during the COVID-19 pandemic. He described his experience as follows:

When the COVID-19 pandemic started in Malawi, we sat down with the church board and made a conscious decision to close the church but continue worshipping in home cells. We divided the church into 6 home cells and appointed a home cell leader for each cell to be leading the services. I was going around the home cell meetings to attend the services with one or two church elders. However, when the COVID-19 restriction measures were eased and church gatherings were allowed, we discovered that church members from one cell were not coming to the church. After some enquiries and follow-up, we discovered that they took advantage of the situation to start a break-away church.

The above-mentioned scenario should serve as a caution that some ill-intentioned members of the church can take advantage of the *m'phakati* (house church) to cause a division or a split in the church to start a breakaway church.

The *m'phakati* theology although conceptualised some four decades before the COVID-19 pandemic offers at least three insights into the viability of house churches in the currently prevailing condition. First, social distancing can be properly maintained at a house church. Second, the restriction of church attendance to either 10, 50 or 100 members can easily be followed at the house church. Third, it is easy to enforce other COVID-19 safety measures such as hand-washing with soap or hand sanitisers and the wearing of face masks at the house church (Masina 2021:1). Therefore, I argue that the house churches (*m'phakati*) serve as a viable alternative for being and doing church in Malawi during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The paper has discussed the phenomena of ecclesiology and the COVID-19 pandemic in Malawi. It has argued for an ecclesiological rethinking given the current COVID-19 pandemic. The church in Malawi must negotiate with COVID-19 developments in at least four areas. These are: (1) the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) the Malawi government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; (3) the importance of re-defining the *being* and *doing* of the church; and (4) the viability of house churches in the Malawian context.

In negotiating with the aforementioned factors, I argue that the church must maintain its nature and mission regardless of the changing dynamics brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, I have demonstrated the viability of house churches (*m'phakati*) in Malawi as one way of being and doing church without compromising its nature and mission.

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