

'Same storm – Different boats': A Southern African Methodist response to socio-economic inequalities exposed by the COVID-19 storm

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This article critiques the theological basis for the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's response to the socio-economic impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. In light of the fact that there are few (if any) clergy historical accounts on how to respond to a deadly pandemic like COVID-19, this article is an analytic description that weaves together narrative renditions of the authors' experiences with formal correspondence of the institution's documentation on the inequalities exposed by the imposition of the lockdown in South Africa and countries that form part of the Methodist Connexion. Theological questions of human dignity, solidarity, and economic justice that have been surfaced by the pandemic are also raised. The article makes practical observations and offers insights that contribute to the ongoing dialogue and institutional strategies for responding to COVID-19. It further offers a resource for future researchers and communities who may respond to a similar pandemic in the future.

Keywords: Methodism; COVID-19; Southern Africa; socio-economic inequalities; social justice.

Introduction

With the emergence of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA), like many other denominations across the world, realised that there is little historical precedence on how to navigate the effects of the pandemic. Even with the Spanish flu, very little was documented by the church on its journey through the pastoral, social and economic effects of the pandemic. Without the historical evidence and documented academic resources, ministers, leaders and lay Methodist people soon realised the need to creatively respond to the social and economic impact of COVID-19. It is the lack of these resources and precedence that this article seeks to respond to. The guiding question for the article is: How can the MCSA effectively respond to the socio-economic inequalities exposed by COVID-19 within the church and in the countries of its Connexion? To respond to this question, the authors weave personal narrative reflections with official correspondence from the Methodist Connexional Office (MCO). Special attention is given to correspondence that highlights how the MCSA sought to respond to the social and economic effects of COVID-19.

The article opens with a minister's (Author 1) personal account of entering into the first South African National lockdown in March 2020. In the form of life story, this account gives context to the multidimensional inequalities exposed by COVID-19 as well as illustrates how congregations began to galvanise their resources to adapt to the unfolding circumstances. Secondly, the article discusses the inequalities exposed by the pandemic across the different levels of the MCSA. The discussion interweaves the churches' responses with the systemic challenges that the very interventions were unravelling. Once the responses and challenges are foregrounded, the article then moves on to explore how the church can theologically and practically respond to inequality within its context.

Personal reflection: Coming to terms with the pandemic and lockdown

I clearly remember the 23rd of March 2020, the day on which the South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa announced the first nationwide lockdown as part of the efforts to curb the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the country. Many people assumed that COVID-19 would be contained within months, and life would soon get back to 'normal'. A year and a half later, we are still experiencing long drawn-out stages of the lockdown, with the possibility of a series of COVID-19

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variants and more waves of infection. To date, millions have been infected, and thousands of lives and livelihoods have been lost. Notwithstanding the cumulative trauma of trying to avoid contracting the vicious virus and receiving daily infection and mortality statistics, the impact of the pandemic is far beyond a health crisis. The Presiding Bishop of the MCSA, the Rev. Purity Malinga (2020b:1) has described this impact as 'multiple, parallel pandemics'. In its wake, the former Deputy Finance Minister of South Africa, Jonas (2020) observes that the pandemic has graphically exposed 'global and societal inequalities that have been hiding in plain sight all the time'.

It is one thing to come to terms with the news about the contraction of the economy and infection, recovery, and mortality rates on the news, but another to witness countless breadwinners lose their jobs and to pastorally deal with a family that has lost five of its members because of the COVID-19 disease. As we began to grapple with the material and psychological losses, the complicated waves of grief and mourning, and the socio-economic ramifications of the pandemic, we soon came to realise that COVID-19 is far beyond a health crisis – it is a human tragedy. As Pillay (2020:1) observes, the pandemic 'disrupted economies, social life, mass transportation, work and employment, supply chains, leisure, sport, international relations, academic programmes; literally everything'. Along with every other institution, churches and religious communities have also been severely affected and permanently transformed by the pandemic (Pillay 2020:1). Confronted by the effects of this deadly pandemic, every institution has to regroup and restructure itself to save lives and livelihoods, and to navigate the stormy waters of an uncertain future.

In writing this article, one of the authors also recalls being in a special leaders' meeting of a local society¹ on the 25th of March 2020. The country was about to begin the first 21-day lockdown. As a minister in a church where the rich and poor, young and old, powerful and disempowered sit in the same pew and receive the ministry of Word and Sacrament, it was fascinating to listen to the scenarios of how every person was planning to face the full national lockdown. Discussions of possible scenarios for pastoral care, worship services, the imminent closure of church offices and sanctuaries, outreach ministries, and virtual and online communication became an area of contest. When it came to the possibility of closing feeding scheme and outreach programmes, the meeting realised that the vulnerable and homeless in our community and neighbourhood would be immediately thrown into a state of despair. At the heart of our deliberations were demographic questions about an inequality of access to basic resources and mediums of communications within the congregation. For instance, we realised that in order to reach every member of the congregation, we needed every form of

communication at our disposal; short message services (SMS), WhatsApp messages and groups, emails, virtual platforms for video conferencing, like Zoom and Microsoft Team, and Facebook and YouTube for streaming prayer and worship services.

Central to the evening's debates was a search for adequate and inclusive responses and choices that would give dignity to the poor and vulnerable within and beyond the church community. By the end of the day, the leaders' meeting decided to set up a COVID Mission Response and a COVID Relief Task Team that would assist with mapping out well-targeted responses to the unfolding reality of living with COVID-19 and taking care of the vulnerable.

Upon returning from the meeting, the author (along with ministers and leaders of the MCSA), received a letter from the Office of the Presiding Bishop, Rev. Purity Malinga, in which she wrote:

The Coronavirus will have a significant impact on the most vulnerable among us like the elderly, the orphaned, the sick, the unemployed, and the children of the poor. Lockdown will have a cascading effect on various social classes in one of the most unequal countries in the world, but we are encouraged not to forget the most vulnerable in our country and to find creative and practical ways of supporting them. My thoughts are with those who live from hand to mouth for whom lockdown means even more difficult access to food. To the landless, waterless and those squashed in shacks, social distancing and hand washing are luxuries they cannot afford ...

As a church in solidarity with the poor, we dare not forget the vulnerable. Leaders of groups i.e., classes, cells, organisations, etc. are encouraged to identify such people among us and put plans in place to care for them. In the midst of this crisis, we must hear Jesus say, 'I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat ... I was sick, you visited me ...' (Matthew 25: 35ff.). (Malinga 2020b, p. 1)

The following months revealed the intensifying nature of the inequalities and the impact of the lockdown and pandemic especially on the poor and vulnerable. While the Presiding Bishop's message postured the MCSA as a 'church in solidarity with the poor' and called for creative and practical ways of support, we estimate that most local Methodist societies and circuits struggled to put this into action. Also, while the Presiding Bishop's letter carries a very strong pastoral and emotional appeal, it neither addresses the root causes nor provides possible economic solutions to the impact of such a pandemic. At the least, the letter assumes that regardless of location, every Methodist society would have enough pastoral and practical resources 'to stay afloat' and to support the poor in their respective communities.

Key to the Presiding Bishop's approach to COVID-19 was an invitation to all methodist members, organisations and ministers to creatively respond to the challenges the pandemic was unfolding. It would seem that the MCSA as a denomination is yet to purify its mind and strategies to

1. Author 1 is a minister stationed in the Johannesburg area at the Bethesda Methodist Mission society. A Society in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa is the equivalent local church or parish in any denomination. Author 2 is a seconded minister, assisting at the Glen Society in Pretoria.

effectively navigate and respond to the socio-economic inequalities the pandemic is revealing across the countries of the Connexion.²

Using different boats to enter the COVID-19 storm

On April 2020, a tweet by Damian Barr made global headlines:

We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm. Some are on superyachts. Some have just the one oar. – Damian Barr (@Damian_Barr) April 21, 2020.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world in early 2020 forcing many countries to go into partial or full lockdown, we all experienced a substantial amount of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. In part, this anxiety was about the common shock and struggle to adapt to the new reality with limited knowledge about this novel virus. At another level, the lockdown began to unveil truths we often choose to ignore or have become complacent about. In particular, the truths about the deep inequalities that run through our society are damaging to our social fabric (Perfect 2020).

It is against the background of these anxieties and realities that people began punctuating their reflections by saying, 'We are all in this together...we are all in the same boat'. While some claimed that the COVID-19 outbreak was a great equaliser, its impact has fallen unevenly and unequally on society. There are ways in which the COVID-19 is a universal storm that affects all of us. It is also true that some have better chances of surviving and others will need greater support to make it beyond the storm. Damian's tweet, an excerpt of a poem published during the peak of the pandemic, highlights the extent to which COVID-19 unveils the systemic and endemic levels of inequality in our society – 'the yachts and rowing boats, the haves and have-nots' (Barr 2020).

Understanding that the pandemic affects individuals, communities, organisations, and countries differently is fundamental to the shape of the church's response to the storm. At a theological and moral level, it is important to hold onto the concept of a 'same storm' because it points to human solidarity, common good, common humanity, and the possibility of shared socio-economic futures. On the other hand, the church needs squarely come to terms with the 'different sizes and types of boats' people are using to brave the storm. Also, there is a need to craft a compelling vision of how we can partner with every stakeholder and work towards making sure that we ALL survive and land on a safe harbour. Let us now consider the practical effects of the storm on society and the church.

Social and economic effects of the storm

Writing for the *International Federation of Accountants*, Bleetman (2021) observes, 'the COVID-19 pandemic has

²The MCSA Connexion consists of six countries, namely South Africa, Eswatini, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho and Mozambique.

affected every corner of the world and all aspects of society, and the impacts of it will be felt for decades to come'. Expressing a similar sentiment at the 2020 Annual Nelson Mandela lecture, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres (2020) asserted that COVID-19 is 'shining a spotlight' and exacerbates pre-existing inequalities and risks we have ignored for decades, including inadequate health systems, gaps in social protection, structural inequalities, environmental degradation, and the climate crisis. Using metaphors of an x-ray and a boat, Guterres (2020) went on to say:

COVID-19 has been likened to an x-ray, revealing fractures in the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. It is exposing fallacies and falsehoods everywhere: The lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all; The fiction that unpaid care work is not work; The delusion that we live in a post-racist world; The myth that we are all in the same boat. While we are all floating on the same sea, it's clear that some are in super yachts, while others are clinging to the drifting debris.

While these imbalances were already defining the global economy before the COVID-19 pandemic, the emergence of the virus has exposed, fed off, and increased existing inequalities of wealth, gender, and race (Perfect 2020). Consequentialists would argue that high levels of inequality often lead to economic instability, corruption, financial crises, violence against women and children, increased crime, and poor physical and mental health (Guterres 2020). As at the time of writing this article, globally COVID-19 has claimed more than 3.1 million lives and rising, 120 million people pushed into extreme poverty, and the world wrestling another massive global economic recession (Ferreira 2021). Certainly, the COVID-19 storms will be easier to weather for people with secure assets, stable employment, and jobs that can be continued remotely (Perfect 2020).

To return to Guterres's phrase, we should also be mindful of those, who because of the pre-existing factors and the current storm, is 'clinging to the drifting debris' of the economy. These include men and women in unstable accommodation, vulnerable or short-term employment, disposable and low-paid informal workers, the vulnerable, and the homeless (Perfect 2020). The magnitude of the poverty and inequality exposed is sub-Saharan African countries who have been hit by 2 or 3 outbreaks (with the possibility of more waves) of COVID-19 and in the process depleted fiscal and monetary buffers and increased their fiscal and public debt (International Monetary Fund 2021:v). The IMF also estimates that in 2020, sub-Saharan Africa's revenue will decrease on average by 2.6% of GDP, with an average 1.9% contraction of the economy because of slow activity (International Monetary Fund 2021). The disruption of economic activity in the region has resulted in slower supply chains, the rise of commodity prices, stock market volatility, and closures of many firms, thus leading to 8.1% decline in employment – more than 32 million people were thrown into extreme poverty (International Monetary Fund 2021). The reality of these stats across a region with high levels of poverty, leads to further disruption of 'millions of people's livelihoods, with a

disproportionate impact on poor households and small and informal businesses' (Craven, Mysore & Wilson 2020:1).

Drawing closer to the Southern African context, a Southern African Development Community (SADC) (2020:4) report points out that the slowing down of activity across a variety of sectors including, tourism and leisure, aviation and maritime, automotive, construction and real estate, manufacturing, financial services, education, and the oil industry was inevitable. As a region with deeply interwoven markets and supply chains, the shrinking of the economy might begin to unveil the depth and cumulative cost of the crisis. As we speak, the sub-region is already battling with the incapacity of its health infrastructure and the vulnerability of the small and medium sectors of business. Beyond the storm, we suspect the region might need to be resuscitated in a giant intensive care unit. Sadly, that will push Southern Africa into deeper debt and continue to be at the mercy of international rescue operations. To use South Africa as a case in point, Francis, Valodia and Webster (2020) claim that:

On average, these poorest households have about five members and a total monthly household income of R2600 (or about R567 per person in the household). Only 45 percent of households have an employed member. Much of this income would have been lost as the shutdown began ...

In contrast, seven million people live in the richest 20 percent of households, with approximately two people per home (the average size is 1.93 people per household). The average monthly income for these households is almost R38 000 per month (or R21 000 per person). Many of the people in the richest households can continue to earn an income by working from home, and many will actually save money due to reduced expenditure on things like eating out, holidays, and entertainment. (p. 347)

Following Francis et al.'s (2020) estimation, in June 2021 Statistics South Africa reported Total employment decreased by 5.4% year-on-year between March 2020 and March 2021. If one factor in which 34% of workers in South Africa are informally employed, with little or no protection, the level of vulnerability across the duration of lockdowns multiplies (Francis et al. 2020). Given the pre-existing racial and gender occupational differences, the economic impact of these unemployment rates are likely to fall disproportionately according to race, gender, and social class widening the gap between the rich and poor (Ferreira 2021; Francis et al. 2020). To illustrate the point, Francis et al. (2020) estimate that at midnight on Thursday, 26 March 2020 possibly more than a million people who are domestic workers (mostly women), many without employment contracts or unemployment benefits lost their capacity to earn an income as the full lockdown began.

Considering the historical economic injustices and vulnerabilities, the high-income inequalities, and unemployment levels in southern Africa, the COVID-19 storm also exposes the fragility of our social security structures. People living in poverty, unemployment, and under-employment, and

those with inadequate access to healthcare, education, and basic resources will certainly come in a worse position than before the pandemic (Oxfam International 2021). A South African study revealed that when someone from a vulnerable section are infected with COVID-19, they are likely to lose their job and income which in turn results in reduced access to healthcare and a nutritious diet. A compounding of these factors is a recipe for an economic time bomb. As history suggests, the higher the levels of desperation and inequality, the deeper the social problems of crime, lawlessness, corruption, poverty, and unemployment (SACBC 1999).

There are ways that during the lockdown the novel coronavirus is seen to threaten everyone equally. From CEOs to workers, all sorts of people are being hurt by the economic crisis. It has its beneficiaries among the already super-rich, Jeff Bezos of Amazon and founder of Zoom, for whom the new reality and lockdown exponentially grew their wealth (Rudin 2020). Observing the practical manifestation of the economic impact on individuals and families, the following observation can be made:

During the lockdown, some were excited about binge-watching their favourite shows on Netflix, while others had to work two jobs and trying to home school their kids. Some were angry; some are bored; some are terrified at the possibility of losing their jobs, and some are trapped inside a house with someone abusive. Others had enough savings and others could barely make it past the first week of the lockdown. Some people in cities could afford to remain indoors, in the townships and rural areas a different etiquette of life exists. (Vilakati 2020, p. 2)

While referring to the economic impact of the lockdown strategies, President Cyril Ramaphosa (2020) wrote:

Many countries around the world have imposed coronavirus lockdowns to save the lives of their citizens. We have done the same in our country, but our lockdown has revealed a very sad fault line in our society that reveals how grinding poverty, inequality, and unemployment is tearing the fabric of our communities apart.

A combination of the household financial stress with the underlying social fissures that shape family life often leads to increased substance abuse and gender-based violence. In a September article in the *Times LIVE*, Farber (2020, para. 2) claimed that in South Africa 'the government GBV and femicide command centre alone recorded more than 120 000 victims in the first 3 weeks of lockdown'.

The complex socio-economic factors cited above are further moderated by individual countries' economic policy frameworks, levels of poverty, political stability, and health and public infrastructure capacity (International Monetary Fund 2021). Comprehending these factors and the impact of COVID-19 as well as setting the pace of recovery will require an inclusive approach involving multiple stakeholders including governments, businesses, and civic society. Having highlighted the broad socio-economic factors

facing the sub-region, let us now consider the impact of COVID-19 on the church.

A church in the perfect storm

In her address to the 2020 Connexional executive, the Presiding Bishop wrote, 'COVID-19 has been a light bearer, shining an illuminating beam onto the multiple, parallel pandemics destroying the world, in particular, the continent of Africa' (Malinga 2020a:2). The Bishop went on to highlight social and economic issues she termed the 'pandemics' including racism, gender-based violence, and femicide, climate change, the violence of unequal education and exclusion of young people, the dehumanization of LGBTIQ³ members of church and society, and the 'unequal access to health care facilities and medicine and the unequal access to basic human needs like shelter, water, and food' (Malinga 2020a:2).

To these, the Presiding Bishop further extrapolated into some of the contributing factors of these social inequalities. She said the following:

The glaring realities that we see are that of self-serving and corrupt governments and politicians; rising levels of poverty, hunger, and unemployment as the socio-economic divide widens even further! (Malinga 2020a:2-3)

Consistent in the Presiding Bishop's messages, is her call for contextual relevance and locating the people called methodist the church in the heart of the COVID-19 storm as active change agents. While the MCSA leadership seems to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not clear that whether it can translate its responses into well-targeted strategies that could effectively address the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on the church and its communities. Before considering how this could be possible, let us first look at how the MCSA seems to address the crisis at a Connexion, Synod, Circuit, and local society levels.

Connexional responses

The MCSA Connexion is governed centrally through the⁴ MCO. This means that under normal circumstances, a directive from the Connexional Office would apply across every level and country within the Connexion. When COVID-19 came, the different countries of the Connexion went into lockdown at different times and with varying COVID-19 safety regulations. Realising the difference, the Connexional office needed to allow flexibility in the manner in which synods, circuits and societies across the countries of the connexion responding to the government lockdown gazettes and COVID-19 regulations. For instance, there was an instance in 2020 where South Africa was still in full lockdown and Botswana had loosened its regulations and allowed churches to resume activity.

3.LGBTIQ -lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer or questioning.

4.The MCO hosts the office of the Presiding Bishop, General Secretary and all the administrative units of the church including finance, mission, education for ministry and mission, human resources and communications. This office through appointed or employed personnel coordinates the mission, policies, finance and strategic direction of the MCSA.

Similarly, governmental regulations of COVID-19 protocols on safety, travel and public gatherings had constitutional and polity implications for the annual governance and regulatory procedures of the MCSA. Every level of the church struggled to maintain their regular planning, governance, accountability meetings and annual conventions for organisations. Failure to have some of these meetings meant that the church had not complied with its own constitution. Realising the challenge, Connexional leadership needed to creatively suspend some governance procedures and regulations, and optimise others, in order to assist societies, circuits, synods, organisations and Conference⁵ to optimally achieve their functions. Each of the units, formations and organisations were advised to be creative and refocus their mission, reduce representation for its key governance meetings, postpone aspects of their work, such as annual conventions, inductions, and elections. In some of these features, there was no precedence, so there was a need for extensive consultation and adaptive leadership (Malinga & Hansrod 2020).

Across the MCSA, from its head office to the smallest congregation is that bishops, unit leaders, ministers, and lay leaders are nervously watching their budgets and payments of their staff, mission, and essential services. While the impact will be felt differently between affluent and poor circuits, the anxiety is real. After the General Treasurers' first letter, which expressed anxiety and seemed to miscalculate the financial anxiety across the whole denomination, the church began a process of consultation. Coming out of the consultation with the MCSA's investment administrators, economists, Finance Unit staff, and Connexional Officers, Malinga, Hansrod, and Ngonyama (2020) wrote:

The Finance Executive noted that COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings are placing a tremendous strain on the economy and finances of many of our Circuits who may not be able to meet monthly Assessments. This in the midst of a huge global economic meltdown is exacerbated by the pandemic. It is clear that this pandemic has further highlighted the huge disparities in our society in general and illuminated the inequality, levels of poverty and unemployment in ways unimaginable.

The Finance Unit reported that the MCO April Assessments showed a slight decline, for this huge effort on the part of everyone, we commend and applaud the Connexion for pulling together at this time and are deeply aware that this would be short-lived as the lockdown continues.

Further noting that the MCSA's sole income stream is the Assessments from Circuits of which 87% is in the form of Ministry costs such as stipends, pension, medical aid, etc. We recognized that this income stream remains at a great threat as we face a grim future, which is made worse by the socio-economic factors that have, and will continue to affect the vast majority of our members Connexionally. (pp. 1-2)

At this meeting, four key decisions on the financial resourcing for ministry and mission were taken and these are as follows:

5.An excerpt from a letter written by the Presiding Bishop on the 15th April: Subject to the relaxation of the lockdown regulations in the countries of the Connexion, the Synod Conventions, Annual Meetings and consultations, that were postponed, now be cancelled and replaced by Extended Synod Executive Meetings as per the Constitution of each Organisation to transact essential business (Malinga 2020b).

1) R15 million was taken from a Millennium Mission Resource Fund to set up a Missional Response to the socio-economic effects of COVID-19, 2) reduction of circuit assessment by 15% for 8 months, 3) covering the annual insurance premiums for the whole church from the Connexional Property Fund, and 4) to use the Stipend Augmentation Fund in the short-term to pay a basic stipend and traveling allowances of ministers in circuits who are unable to pay their assessments for 2 months (Malinga et al. 2020).

While these decisions are noble, it is important to highlight some of the underlying anxieties and realities. Firstly, the MCSA does only receive its revenue from open plate offerings, monthly pledges, and dedicated giving and donations. If the current reserves and local societies are unable to collect money because of the closure of church buildings for worship and the economic impact of COVID on its members, the local and regional institutions do not have any other investment to turn to. Perhaps COVID-19 is a wake-up call for the MCSA to consider broadening its income streams and recapitalisation. Secondly, both reliefs on assessments and the mission resource anticipated do not seem like sustainable initiatives. Also, spreading R15 million across six countries and the number of circuits across the connexion is a positive gesture that does not even scratch the magnitude of the socio-economic challenges facing the church and society. Thirdly, all the strategies anticipate that COVID-19 will soon be contained, and the church will resume its business as usual. Fourthly, even though it is a solution in the short, it is a positive thing for the MCSA to try and balance its missional needs with institutional survival in its response.

Synods, circuits, and societies

The reality of COVID-19 imposed challenges was also felt at the Circuit and society levels of the church. As a church whose funding comes from donations, monthly pledges, and Sunday offerings, the closure of church buildings for worship meant that every congregation had to close and quickly figure out what it means to be the church without the buildings. With no Sunday collection and revenue circuits cannot pay the synod and connexional assessments, fund local mission projects, maintain the building and pay services. As a Circuit Superintendent of a Circuit that is geographically located in the margin between the Johannesburg affluent suburbs and poorly resourced informal settlements, the author notes that all six societies within the circuit did not meet their 2020 budget. The ministers in the circuit did not receive their traveling allowance for 4 months. Most circuits across the MCSA were not in great financial shape before COVID-19. The pandemic made the situation worse.

Attending the annual Synod meetings, 4 out of 20 Circuit Superintends reported that their circuits were struggling to meet their monthly assessments, pay staff and pay for maintenance and services. At the same Synod, circuits reported that they had to cut or eliminate every staff salary

and lay off office and other staff. A few circuits proposed resolutions and applications to reduce ministerial agency within their circuits. The hardest thing for ministers in local circuits and societies is that they know the stories of people whose businesses collapsed, those who lost breadwinners to COVID-19, and those who lost their jobs and income. How do you as a minister remind the congregation to keep giving, when you know the domestic worker, the informal employee, the leader whose business has been liquidated, the barber, the electrician, the handyman, and all others whose finances have been rocked by the pandemic storm?

It is then difficult to balance the need to care and be pastoral while asking the same people for financial support to run the institution. Colleagues who have shared their stories attest to the fact that it sometimes seems difficult to hold onto the task of ministry when you haven't received your stipend and allowances for the month. Is that the cost of the call and serving Jesus and the Kingdom?

Ministry and worship in the new reality

The immediate reality of the lockdown is that churches and other places of worship had to find new ways of worship (Bentley 2021). With mask-wearing, sanitising, and physical distancing churches need to learn new ways of worship, fellowship, and connecting. Church traditions and rituals for ministry and worship had to be adapted and move to virtual and online social platforms like YouTube and Facebook. As soon as this migration to social platforms happened many congregations especially those in rural areas did not have access to online services (Bentley 2021:1).

A further complication for the urban-rural divide within the MCSA is that rural congregations do not have the luxury of a minister dedicated to local society. Rural and township societies sometimes have to share one circuit minister who can have oversight of more sometimes more than 10 societies. Add lack of resources and extreme distances between these societies and you will soon realise that it is a difficult task for ministers to offer effective ministry under the new COVID-19 protocols. In the cases where financial resources dried up and no stipend and traveling allowances were available to ministers, things became harder. While urban-rural, resourced – poorly resourced (historically in some cases, the black white) inequality has a long history in the church, its impact deepened over the COVID-19 period.

Hence, governments imposed full national lockdown and the subsequent restriction on economic activity and public gatherings, it became apparent that the COVID-19 pandemic would also have a long-term impact on the financial life of congregations, regardless of their denomination, size, or makeup. The Methodist Church of Southern Africa, like other churches, is seemingly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the crisis. As non-profit organisations, churches largely depend on offerings and pledges to fund their mission, maintain properties, and remunerate their personnel. With reduced numbers or no public gatherings, and some church

members confronting anxious economic futures, the church's financial future is vulnerable.

The MCSA's response to the COVID-19 crisis seems to oscillate between thinly veiled anxiety and tentative hopefulness. While the denomination is cognisant of the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, the issues of institutional survival seem to overpower the desire to be in mission and radically address the new reality. In the current crisis, it seems like the church does not have a choice between institutional survival (*form*) and the task of fulfilling its mission (*function*). Is the pandemic a purification of means and purpose? What is the relevance of church polity and theology in shaping our responses to a crisis? These are certainly difficult questions.

Reflecting on the economic realities facing churches, Bill Wilson (cited in Garfield 2020) remarked, 'Is this the death of the church or the rebirth?'. Beyond the debates about institutional survival and mission, for the church to adequately respond to these questions, there is a need for a theological reflection on the public role of the church in the context of a crisis. Perhaps death is a natural consequence of a system that becomes consumed by self-centred panic, and the need to survive, as opposed to living into the dynamic tension between resilience and courageously assuming its role in the public space. Let us now consider some theological and practical insights that can assist the church in responding to the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 storms.

Shaping our responses to the COVID-19 storms

Applying the storm metaphor to contextual culture shifts, Leonard Sweet (2008) observes that storms:

... summon leaders who will leave the comfortable and conventional ... go out into the storm and risk...navigate this sea change, cross this raging 'red sea' and will find a promised land of new beginnings and a new church on the other side.

When everyone and everything is spinning and whirling in the wind, Christians go out to meet the storm. Christians embrace the wind and pass out kites. (pp. 4–5)

Faced with the COVID-19 storm and its socio-economic impact, it will be prudent for Methodists to lean into their Wesleyan heritage and allow their theological roots to invoke insights that may assist them to navigate this 'raging sea' and inform their responses. 'For the other side' of the COVID-19 storm, the MCSA will require what the Presiding Bishop has called a process of re-imagination and a wholesale transformation of the MCSA as an institution and its understanding of its mission in the current context (Malinga 2020a). Describing the call and focus on this process of re-imagination, Bishop Malinga (2020a) writes.

Re-imagining implies change, evaluating and shifting parameters of concepts and perceptions, and even completely renaming outcomes. To re-imagine healing and transformation, therefore, calls upon us to look again at what it means for us to proclaim the Gospel for healing and transformation.

Re-imagining therefore, calls us to be humble enough to admit that now and then our processes, structures, methods, traditions, and practices need re-thinking and review as it is easy for any church to slip into the entrapments and addictions of the 'empire'... All our groupings in the MCSA need to ask the question, which of our practices is life-giving and which ones should be discarded ... we need to reimagine another financing model ... re-imagine models of ministry that are mission-focused and relevant to our context. (p. 4)

Clearly, from its COVID-19 response, the MCSA comprehends the magnitude of the problem for both the church and society. It is also clear that the denomination wants to consider itself to take seriously the conditions of the poor, vulnerable and disposed. What is not clear is the MCSA's ability to hold in dynamic tension its need for the survival and sustainability of the denomination and developing informed and well-targeted responses to the economic threats of COVID-19. The challenge of being a force for social and economic healing and transformation requires the adaptive challenge of articulating the relationship between theological concepts and practical socio-economic inequalities and injustices (ed. Schwarzkopf 2020). Let us consider some principles of engagement.

Considering the shape of our response

We believe the first task is a call for contextual theological imagination. One of the first tasks for the MCSA is to do what the Presiding Bishop, Rev. Malinga (2020a:4) calls 'evaluating and shifting parameters of concepts and perceptions'. If COVID-19 has revealed the inequalities both within the church and society, it is important to articulate a dynamic Christian and Methodist theology that will dissect the moral quality and implicit drivers of the economic frameworks that have curated the crisis (SACBC 1999) that COVID-19 has unveiled. This implies a need for a fresh look at the biblical concepts of justice, fairness, equity, inequality, and equity (Wells 2017). Schwarzkopf (ed. 2020:4) further argues that the Church in every context, and we argue, especially in the context of the pandemic storm, should also re-imagine theological concepts like providence, humanity in the image of God, salvation, eschatology or the eschaton, confession, faith and trust, and the kingdom of God in relation to modern forms of economic theorising and economic organising.

To take the argument further, this re-imagination should also invoke foundational Christian and African values. Speaking of the risks of economic inequality in the United Kingdom, Perfect (2020) argues that the Christian values of equality, holiness, human solidarity, respect, and love of self and the neighbour, should be central to the economic inequality discourse as well as practical interventions. To these values, African philosophers and theologians would add the African concepts of unity, self-determination, creativity, cooperation, caring, solidarity, connectedness, and respect (Asamoah & Yeboah-Assiamah 2019; Mangaliso & Mangaliso 2013). These values and practices underpin the wisdom that is embedded in African humanism concepts such as *Ubuntu*, *Ujamaa*,

Umoja, Weku, and Botho (Vilakati 2020). When we dissect the forms of interaction between economic thought and Christian concepts and values, we unravel the explicit and implicit mechanisms that shape world economics, markets, and government policies (ed. Schwarzkopf 2020). We hope that interrogating the current context crisis through lensed of concepts and values offers a solid Christian basis for an inclusive economic approach for the sub-continent's recovery and economic transformation.

Second is the call for effective leadership to review the institutional arrangements for contextual relevance and future vitality. If COVID-19 revealed the positive and negative aspects of our centralised and hierarchical leadership, the structural weaknesses in society and the economy, we need responsive, contextually attuned leadership (Khoza 2012) to enact large-scale change and help us make sense of what COVID-19 has revealed (Gittoes 2020). According to Sneader and Singhal (2020:1), leaders across all sectors should expand all existing efforts to safeguard economies and livelihoods across Africa. They suggest that leaders need to act with resolve, nurture resilience and the capacity to see things through, curate strategies for the organisations return, foster re-imaginal galvanise of every resource to rebuild and reform the organisation (Sneader & Singhal 2020).

In addition, Klann (2003:10) points out that while 'crisis tends to bring a high degree of chaos and confusion into an organization...effective crisis leadership can rescue an organization from chaos and deliver opportunities where before there were only disadvantages'. In the context of depleting institution resources at all levels of the MCSA, the collective task of every leader is to dive deep into the crisis and search for opportunities for change and transformation. In seeking to be creative and innovative for the MCSA to arrive at a better and new reality beyond the COVID-19 storm, Rev. Mzwandile Molo (2020) offers an insightful caution:

Every major crisis which fundamentally disrupts life as we know it and dislocates us from our traditional ways of making sense of life in the midst of its destruction creates an opportunity for a deeper reflection ... It will be a tragedy if it is wasted on a search for adjustments and preservation rather than a search for depth and transformative knowledge. Preservation and adjustment are dominated by the mechanics. Polity rather than renewal becomes the focus). (p. 1)

Noting this caution, and the great realisations during the COVID-19 storm, the MCSA needs to adapt and evaluate its traditions, processes, and structures (Malinga 2020a). For any denomination to thrive and remain true to its calling, it needs to decide what do we return to, what do we discard, and what new things do we initiate (Gittoes 2020).

Third and last, the process of transformation should involve collaborative conversations at every level of our ecclesial life. To craft an effective church response to the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, we must recognise that such a task is

multilayered and multilevelled. The basis of such a response will be a firm conviction, at all levels of the MCSA, that responding to the impact of the COVID-19 storm is an intricate part of the call to reimagine healing and transformation in context (Malinga 2020a). According to Conradie (2008), the Church has six levels of analysis or manifestations in the world:

- the 'church' as the individual people that forms the local congregation.
- the church as a worshipping community with an organised liturgical of life and ability to think theologically and engage society.
- the church is a denomination that has particular structures and resources to speak to society and governments.
- the church is an ecumenical structure that involves partnerships with different churches and international organisations.
- the church and its expression through Para-church organisations; and
- the church as God's people living as the church that speaks for climate justice in their daily lives.

At each of the above levels, there are adaptive conversations, practices, and choices that can be made to sharpen the church's response to the current context. As such these responses should also be shaped by the distinctive elements of methodist theology and practice.

Toward a Southern African Methodist response to the COVID-19 storm

As a point of departure, it is worth noting that the MCSA's response to the impact of the COVID-19 storm, is deep solidarity with the vulnerable, disposed, and the poor. Khuzwayo (2012) states that there are vast interlocking narratives of the Christian churches' involvement in the liberation and shaping of public discourse. It can be argued that the MCSA's history, identity, and dispassion towards the liberation of the vulnerable was shaped by its intertwining journey with the political and economic currents of its constituency. These historical currents have shaped MCSA's public theology and mission imperatives. Notable among these key movements are the *Obedience' 81 statement* (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa 1981), the *Journey to The New Land* (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa 1995), and the two *Mission Congresses* (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2005, 2016). These moments, the vision and mission statement, and mission imperatives of the MCSA (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa 2006) display her authentic historical grounding and capacity to engage with public issues in every historical, political or economic context.

It is also important to recognise that the theological discourse of the Church in Southern Africa (perhaps Africa as a whole) has been largely shaped by liberation theology and black theology (Forster 2016). Mainly, this is because of the continent's colonial history. Liberation theology is rooted in a commitment to the poor (Boesak 2017). The liberation and

emancipation emphasis are a critical posture for the church during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It is our opinion that liberation sensibility is part of the MCSA's history, identity, and witness. Maddox (2001:37–38) isolates three basic premises of liberation theology: 1) that there is something wrong with the way that society is structured, and 2) that unjust institutions cause much suffering among people, 3) that concentrated land ownership lies at the heart of social injustice.

One of the greatest gifts of liberation theology and hermeneutics is its emphasis on reformulating a theology in the interest of the poor and marginalised (Boff & Boff 2001). Such a theology shows more respect and concern for people than for the neatness of the system and scientific theory (Maddox 2007). Rather, it identifies the Christian faith as the implicit worldview that motivates Christians towards faithful commitments of solidarity with the oppressed, not as a set of abstract theological claims. Drawing from liberation theology and Wesleyan emphasises, Maddox (2007:57ff.) identifies the following as key ingredients for critical theological reflection for a new society:

- A theology that interweaves biblical and historical studies integrally with theological reflection – unified.
- A holistic theology – integrating *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy* – doctrinal and ethical reflection fused. Such a theology rejects the dichotomy between spirituality and justice creating a constant dialectical connection between what we believe and what we do.
- A theology that affirms the primacy of praxis and refuses to be consumed with abstract issues and theoretical precision, neglecting the praxis-related tasks that authentic theory is meant to serve.
- A theology that is embedded in a community of faith and is truly practical theological and inherently transformative.
- A theology that is deeply contextual embracing all the social and political dimensions of the Christian life.

Along the MCSA's historical timeline, there are moments when varying degrees of this ethos are evident. It would be prudent for the MCSA (and other denominations) to invoke and translate the above theological concepts and values into practices of listening, leading and re-imagining the post-COVID-19 Church.

In addition to the contextual and liberation sensibilities, the Methodist theological perspective is intrinsically holistic, pragmatic, orthodox, generously ecumenical, and a vital and deeply embodied spirituality (Thompson 2011). Put differently, the roots of Methodist theology and spirituality are committed to dynamic personal and public practices of embodying a contextual spirituality of loving God and your neighbour (Watson 2010). It is also widely argued that Methodists draw their emphasis on social awareness and holiness from John Wesley, one of the movements' founding fathers (Jennings 1990). Reviewing John Wesley's journals, sermons, and writings, and theology, it is evident that his ministry and work was underpinned by a deep concern for the poor and marginalised as well as a several social and

economic justice themes (ed. Marsh 2004; Walton 2020). In Walton's (2020) words, the Wesleyan conviction and commitment to social holiness and social justice can be described as a holy dance:

One way of describing this is as a kind of holy dance in which our feet follow patterns to one place and then another and then repeat the same sequence all over again in another part of the dancefloor. We attend to our needs for prayer, communion and the scriptures, and the needs of individuals and wider society in a recurring rhythm of grace. Acts of mercy are themselves expressions of and encounters with holiness, so that holiness will lead us to justice and justice to holiness. Social holiness and social justice are, thus, part of a divine ecology where one follows the other in the rhythm of discipleship. (p. 34)

Being part of the solution in the current COVID-19 context means that we should invoke the Methodist perspectives social holiness. Such a perspective has a broad horizon that encompasses a vision of the whole world, being healed, restored, transformed, created and recreated (Runyon 1998). In the current crisis, it will be prudent for Methodists to uphold the vision of social holiness along with an attuned sense of justice that is radically aligned and in solidarity with the poor and economically dispossessed (Runyon 1998).

Lastly, central to the Methodist spirituality is the ethic of love and grace (Porter 2004). The task of theological imagination and the resulting Christian action in the current context should be underpinned by a deep commitment to loving God and loving our neighbour (Oord 2012). In a sense, the African values of *ubuntu*, connectedness, community, solidarity, and belonging are an expression of the grace of God. The alternative to the current COVID-19 crisis is a weaving of an economic recovery journey that will be based on the critical values of solidarity, common good and ethics of love.

Conclusion

The article discussed the social and economic effects of COVID-19 pandemic within the MCSA Connexion. It observes how the church struggled to respond to the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. Using personal narratives and formal denominational correspondence, the article highlights the strategies employed by the MCSA in addressing the social and economic impact of COVID-19 at every level of the church. In light of the unfolding nature of the challenges, the article proposes that there is a need for theological reimagination and well-targeted responses to the COVID-19 storm. Notwithstanding the possible limitations of the scope of the discussion, the article makes some practical suggestions that could assist the church to become a dynamic agent in conquering the waves of inequality, assist everyone to find space in the boat of progress, and ensure that all of God's children land on a safe economic harbour.

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