


'Justice be with you': Transcending the peace talk rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church

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The Zion Christian Church is one of the largest, most powerful and influential African Independent Churches (AICs). Its membership of about 6 million makes up about 50% of the total membership of AICs. The church has been preaching peace from its inception which became one of the cores of its theology and practice. Thus, the church is known for its peace talk rhetoric expressed in Northern Sotho, '*Kgotso ebe le lena*' which means 'Peace be with you' or even '*kgotso ebe le batho*' which means 'peace be with the people'. This peace talk rhetoric is usually used by the church's leaders and the church's ordinary members. Through this rhetoric, the church played a meaningful role in moving South Africa towards peace and reconciliation in 1994. This article argues that the theology of peace and reconciliation should be constructed by transcending the peace talk rhetoric to meaningful works of justice. The wrongs of the past should be corrected rather than just a mere talk about peace. The theology of peace and reconciliation should not only be a 'peace be with you' rhetoric but also a 'justice be with you'. The reviewed literature in this article focussed on peace and reconciliation in the Zion Christian Church, peace talks and peace theology. A case study method was used for the selection of the Zion Christian Church.

Contribution: The theology of peace and reconciliation is discussed by incorporating justice in addition to the peace talk rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church.

Keywords: peace talk; peace theology; reconciliation; Zion Christian Church; justice; Ukraine–Russia conflict; Palestine–Israel conflict.

Introduction

The Zion Christian Church is one of the largest African Independent Churches (AICs) in South Africa and the continent of Africa (Anderson 1999; Kruger & Saayman 2016; Müller 2015). The growth of the Zion Christian Church can be understood in the context of the proliferation of the AICs which happened in the first quarter of the 20th century (Thomas 1995). This came about when the majority of black people sought a Christian church where they would be free to worship God and express Christianity in the African context. In the African context, worshipping God encompasses a holistic and communal approach, integrating spirituality, culture and tradition. This perspective recognises the interconnectedness of faith, community and daily life as noted in the works of Mbiti (1990), Bediako (1995) and Katongole (2011). Bediako (1995) emphasises the importance of African cultural heritage in shaping Christian worship. While Mbiti (1990) highlights the role of community and ancestral ties in African religious practices. Katongole (2011) explores the intersection of faith, culture and social justice in African Christianity. In summary, these authors illustrate the unique characteristics of African worship, including; emphasis on community and collective spirituality, integration of traditional practices and symbols, recognition of ancestral influence and cultural heritage. By considering these perspectives, we can deepen our understanding of what it means to worship God in the African context and have a better understanding of why churches like the Zion Christian Church are powerful and influential.

The AICs were started as a response to this quest for this kind of expression of Christianity which the majority of black people could not find in mainstream Christianity (Meyer 2004). Therefore, the Zion Christian Church should be understood in the light of a liberated form of Christianity as opposed to westernised forms of Christianity. Hence, churches like this are also known as African Independent Christianity (Anderson 2001; Chitando 2015; Öhlmann, Gräb & Frost 2020). The Zion Christian Church was started by Engenas Lekganyane in 1924 who led the church until he died in 1948 when his son Edward Lekganyane took over the leadership of the church until he died in 1967 (Lukhaimane 1980). The church is currently led by Barnabas Lekganyane who took over the leadership of the church after his father Edward. The church has

been known for years as the church of Peace known by its rhetoric such as '*Kgotso ebe le lena*' which means 'Peace be with you'. Hence, whenever one comes across the members of the Zion Christian Church, they greet using the same rhetoric. Similarly, when blessing their members and followers, the leaders of the Zion Christian Church would also utter the same rhetoric 'Peace be with you' or 'peace be with the people'. Or even 'may the peace of God be with you'. In the context of this discussion, peace refers to 'the absence of conflict', 'a state of mutual understanding' or 'a sustainable resolution to disputes'. A literature review of recent studies in the works of Smith (2020), Weinthal and Johnson (2018) and Lee (2020), demonstrates an interest in the discourses on peace. Smith (2020) examines the role of diplomacy in achieving lasting peace. Weinthal and Johnson (2018) analyse the economic benefits of peaceful conflict resolution. Lee (2020) discusses the social implications of peace agreements. In the current article, I seek to demonstrate the importance of justice in the discourses on peace and reconciliation.

The argument in this article is that the theology of peace in the Zion Christian Church and other AICs should be constructed transcending the peace talk rhetoric to include works of justice particularly for those who have faced injustices during oppression in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. To demonstrate the contribution of justice in the peace and reconciliation discourses, I provide an overview of peace talk rhetoric. I also provide the historical background of the peace talk rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church and its role in bringing peace and reconciliation in the South African context. I will also demonstrate some shortcomings of the peace talk rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church. The fifth section will construct the theology of peace and reconciliation by looking at its rhetoric and the aspect of justice. This article aims to demonstrate that although the peace rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church has laid a good foundation for the theology of peace, the latter should be developed by looking at the aspect of justice. Therefore, I will demonstrate the value of justice in the peace and reconciliation discourses. However, let me first look at the research methods for data collection and data analysis in the article.

Research methods and design

This study employed a literature review approach to collect data. This involved systematically searching, evaluating and synthesising existing research on the peace talk rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church, peace talks during the war and political instability and peace theology. A comprehensive literature search was conducted, focussing on peer-reviewed articles, academic journals and reputable publications. Literature was carefully selected based on relevance, credibility and publication date (2010–2022). However, some works published before 2010 such as the master's dissertation by Lukhaimane (1980) and Moripe's (1996) doctoral thesis became crucial for this study. In addition, the article by Anderson (1999) and his book (2001)

on African reformation also added value to the discussions on peace and reconciliation in the Zion Christian Church. Furthermore, Boesak's (2008) article on reconciliation and justice in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa is also an important source that could not be ignored by this current study. Other works by Boesak (2014a & 2014b) demonstrated the importance of justice in peace and reconciliation.

A case study method was also used to select the Zion Christian Church as a relevant AIC for engaging the intersections of peace, reconciliation and justice. The criteria for choosing this church involved the size of the church and its influence. Most importantly, the Zion Christian Church was chosen given its active participation in the peace and reconciliation that led to the first democratic elections in South Africa. The article worked within the theoretical frameworks of peace, reconciliation and justice, particularly peace talk rhetoric and peace theology. The aim is to demonstrate the important contribution of justice in the discourses of peace and reconciliation not only in the Zion Christian Church but in the nation as a whole.

Framing the peace talk rhetoric

To understand the peace talk rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church, it is important to provide the theoretical underpinnings of this rhetoric in this section. The peace talk rhetoric refers to the initiative that seeks to bring peace between the parties (nations or even individuals) that are in a war or political conflict with each other by negotiating a peace settlement by interested parties including those involved in the conflict rather than further dividing the parties (Oberschall 2007, Kew & John 2008, Lederach & Appleby 2010:47, Özerdem & Mac Ginty 2019). In negotiating the peace settlement, the negotiators will be looking at various factors that led to the conflict. Some of the conflicts or disputes that are common might be territorial such as the one in Ukraine and Russia, or even Palestine and Israel. Other conflicts might be based on ideological differences. Nonetheless, the negotiators will be looking for a ceasefire or treaty as part of a peace settlement. In doing so, peace negotiators may share inspirational stories about previous conflicts that were settled through peace negotiations. It is therefore a process that seeks to make a positive contribution towards peace-making during a conflict. This means that for peace to be established several parties need to sit on the table and agree with each other on the terms and conditions of such settlement. In some cases, it means that these parties have to give up violence through arms and other means of settling through peace. Oberschall (2007) points out that:

Winding down an armed conflict and negotiating for peace bring up additional issues such as disarming the fighters, the status of combatants and prisoners, dealing with a culture of violence, and other security concerns; the return and compensation of refugees and internally displaced persons; justice for perpetrators and

victims of war crimes and crimes against humanity; and physical and economic reconstruction. (p. 33)

Lederach and Appleby (2010:47) explain that for the foregoing to happen, the peacemakers or peace negotiators should aim at addressing the real issues that led to the conflict. Özerdem and Mac Ginty (2019) opine that it is also important to move beyond the past rhetorical roadblocks that hindered peace negotiations. Kew and John (2008) add that all the different parties involved in the conflict become part of the peace talks. This makes peace talk rhetoric a part of the conflict resolution to bring transformation between two or even more parties. Therefore, peace talk rhetoric is used in political science to study different political conflicts around the world. However, because peace is also a theological concept, the peace talk rhetoric is also relevant to assess the peace negotiations from a theological perspective. Hence, in this article, peace talk rhetoric is used to assess the role of the Zion Christian Church in peace and reconciliation in the South African context.

One must reiterate that peace talk rhetoric is important during times of conflict. In addition, as peace talks take time to conclude or finally arrive at a settlement, the parties involved require patience in the process. Walter (2022:19) explains that peace negotiations fail because at times negotiators rush to impose their solutions on the parties involved instead of listening to them. Failure to have patience might result in worsening the conflict situation; hence, some conflicts have worsened over the years instead of resulting in settlement. This means that in peace talks, the negotiators deal with the sophisticated matters that led to conflict which requires a lot of patience in resolving the same. Conflict is a universal and persistent phenomenon, transcending geographical boundaries and affecting all levels of society. Therefore, according to Kriesberg (2007:37), the ability to listen to both parties leads to resolving contentious and difficult conflicts because in the end different groups involved would have been satisfied by the agreement.

In recent conflicts such as the one between Ukraine and Russia, Palestine and Israel and others, the peace talk rhetoric has been one of how negotiators have used to call for peace amid war. Various international organisations, countries and leaders are involved in promoting peace negotiations between conflicting parties. In the Ukraine–Russia Conflict, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Normandy Format (Germany, France, Ukraine, Russia), European Union (EU), United States (US) and United Nations (UN) have been involved in the peace negotiations (Dorosh & Ivasechko 2020). Key leaders in these negotiations include among others Secretary-General António Guterres, OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Zbigniew Rau, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. In the Israel–Palestine Conflict, the US, EU, UN, Arab League and Quartet on the Middle East (US, EU, UN, Russia) have been involved in peace negotiations (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel 2024). Key leaders include US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace

Process Tor Wennesland, EU High Representative Josep Borrell and Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit. These leaders have negotiated ceasefire agreements, diplomatic talks, economic incentives, humanitarian aid and international mediation. Challenges in negotiating peace include ongoing violence and mistrust, complex historical and cultural issues, competing interests and agendas, and civilian casualties, including women and children. Humanitarian initiatives include the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as Doctors Without Borders (Beigbeder 2023). These organisations and leaders work to broker ceasefires and reduce violence, address humanitarian needs, promote dialogue and understanding, and support economic development and cooperation. Despite challenges, negotiation efforts continue, seeking a peaceful resolution to these conflicts. These are relevant examples of how difficult peace negotiation can be as the conflicts have existed for a long time. Therefore, the peace talk rhetoric is not a simple matter of taking sides but listening to both parties for a proper resolution, particularly in the context of war.

In the Zion Christian Church, the peace talk rhetoric is expressed in the Northern Sotho words '*kgotso ebe le lena*' which means 'peace be with you'. It is common that when meeting a Zion Christian church member, the first words they would utter are 'peace be with you'. Lukhaimane (1980:96) explains that the members of the Zion Christian Church can't pass each other without the common greeting '*kgotsong*'. This is common to the extent that even non-members would use the same rhetoric when greeting the members and non-members. When greeted with the peace rhetoric, Wouters (2014:125) explains that fellow church members would respond by saying '*a e ate*' which means 'let it spread'. This implies that the peace rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church is used mainly for spreading the message of peace rather than that of division, strife and conflicts. Sebola (2018) says that the peace rhetoric is:

an indication that the ZCC promotes harmonious living among members and people in general. Members are encouraged to assist one another whenever there is a need. It is therefore evident that members of the ZCC act like members of one big family or community, irrespective of their language and ethnic differences. This phenomenon seems to be strongly related to the African humanistic concept of ubuntu that emphasizes active participation and mutual assistance in a community context, in this case in a ZCC community context. (p. 1233)

Moreover, the sermons of all the church leaders such as Engenas Lekganyane, Edward Lekganyane and Barnabas Lekganyane conveyed the message of peace and reconciliation during their Easter festivals (Anderson 1999:294). These church leaders consistently preached the message of peace, reconciliation, and among themselves. Therefore, it can be concluded here that the peace talk rhetoric goes with the sermons of the church or rather it is emphasised during the sermons so that it stays in the hearts and minds of the church members.

Historising the peace talk rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church

The Zion Christian Church has been the church of peace that served as a unifying factor between different communities in the northern province, now known as Limpopo. Lukhaimane (1980:19) explains that 'The Church has influenced the mode of life of many Blacks and also serves as a unifying factor amongst the different Black communities'. Since its inception, the church has been instrumental in bringing peace between various tribal authorities in the area of Ga-Mamabolo and the nearby villages. Hence, the people and the communities knew the church as the one of peace and unity as pointed out by Lukhaimane (1980). Furthermore, the church was able to solve many issues around tribal administration and leadership which many tribal chiefs acknowledged and appreciated. This became possible because of the church leaders from the time of Engenas until Barnabas, who taught the church members to respect the tribal authorities; hence, the tribal leaders loved the church for teaching their community members respect and obedience to tribal leaders. Lukhaimane (1980:72) goes further to explain that this made the Zion Christian Church to be known as a 'peace-loving church' by many community members. Schoffeleers (1998:47) concurs that generally the 'South African Zion churches, these gentle, peace-loving people are not engaged in a crusade of social reform' Wouters (2014:24) concurs that even the members of the church would be known as the peace-loving people. Therefore, peace talk rhetoric together with divine healing are factors that make the Zion Christian Church very attractive to ordinary community members and leaders. In addition, the peace talk rhetoric was not confined to the local people and communities, but it was spread to other parts of the world. As the church leaders believed that they were a church of peace, they believed that this message of peace could be shared with the rest of the world. Therefore, the peace rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church, although it started in the local area of Ga-Mamabolo, it has the potential to spread to the international level whereby even the international community knows the church as a place of peace.

The headquarters of the church in Zion City, Moriah, Polokwane, Limpopo, was known as the place of peace. According to Mориpe (1996:63), the idea around the Zion City, Moriah was constructed in line with Psalm 122:6 which states 'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee'. In line with the headquarters that is also perceived as the Jerusalem of the Zion Christian Church, the leaders and followers of this church consider Zion City, Moriah as a peaceful place (Anderson 1999; Kruger & Saayman 2016; Schoffeleers 1988). This means that peace is not only something they attain through the rhetoric 'peace be with you' but also by touching the grounds of Zion City. Another biblical text is 2 Chronicles 3:1:

Then Solomon began to build the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to his father David. It was on the threshing floor of Araunah [a] the Jebusite, the place provided by David.

Therefore, in calling the headquarters Moria, the Zion Christian Church once again uses the Old Testament text for advocacy on peace and reconciliation. Therefore, Moria as the headquarters of the Zion Christian Church is not an ordinary place but rather a sacred place where members and followers expect to receive peace and to be in peace with others. Moria is perceived as a holy place that is quite distinct from other places; hence, it can usher the adherents and members to an eternal peace. Therefore, people do not go to Moria for tourism or entertainment purposes but they do so to receive the peace of God as bestowed by the Bishop. This is the same reason that many would gather in Moria during the Easter celebrations not as a tourist endeavour but in search of peace as they perceived Moria as a place of peace. It is for the same reason that Moria has not only attracted followers and ordinary members but also political leaders and other business and influential leaders in South Africa and elsewhere in the continent.

Lastly, the Zion Christian Church associates a life of prayer with a life of peace. The church believes that those who want to engage in prayer should first be at peace with others. This is taken from Mark 11:25–26 and illustrates the importance of being at peace when making the prayers. The text states:

When you are praying, if you are angry with someone, forgive him so that your Father in heaven will also forgive your sins. But if you don't forgive other people, then your Father in heaven will not forgive your sins.

According to Mориpe (1996:99), the bishops of the church preached that for the prayers of their followers to be effective, they should be accompanied by a life of peace. The church also believed in praying for peace on behalf of everyone regardless of their church denomination or even the tribe. This makes a connection between the life of peace and unity of the people. To this effect, according to Mориpe (1996), Bishop Barnabas announced to the people that:

We are a peace-loving church, and we wish to hurt nobody, in word or deed. We offer our prayerful assistance to anyone who needs it, irrespective of denominational affiliation and precondition. We are the children of one Father – the Almighty God, and the Creator of the universe. (p. 119)

Again, it can be reiterated that this made the church very popular as they wanted to appeal to everyone through the peace rhetoric. Mориpe (1996) continues to say that Bishop Barnabas further said:

For the policy of the Zion Christian Church does not divide and differentiate members according to their affiliations to certain organisations, rather it is always current practice that the Zion Christian Church is for the reconciliation through the medium of prayer of people who are fighting. (p. 120)

This means that the church has been advocating for peace both internally within their members and also in the rest of the communities with other people. In the next section, I look at the role of the Zion Christian Church in negotiating for peace and reconciliation in South Africa.

The role of the Zion Christian Church in bringing peace and reconciliation

The Zion Christian Church played an important role in the peace and reconciliation process in the South African context particularly during the negotiations between the different political parties. One must also point out that this happened particularly during the leadership of Barnabas Lekganyane. In the first instance, the political leaders visited the headquarters of the church including during the apartheid era. This also necessitated the visitation of the then-Bantu minister 'Piet Koornhof' and later P.W. Botha who visited the church as per the invitation of the church leaders in this case, and as above-mentioned, it was Barnabas Lekganyane. Anderson (1999) explains that:

Like his father before him, Barnabas initiated invitations to the regime, beginning with the visit of 'Bantu Affairs Minister Piet Koornhof to Moria in 1980. In the much-publicised event at the 75th anniversary celebration at Easter 1985, State President P.W. Botha was given the 'freedom of Moria'. (p. 294)

Although some members of the church and society saw this as an endorsement of the church towards the apartheid regime, the church was showing a sign of a quest for peace and reconciliation. At a later stage, Barnabas Lekganyane was able to speak out against the regime. According to Anderson (1999:294), Barnabas Lekganyane was able to clarify the matter; it was reported in the church magazine that 'The Zion Christian Church and [he], as a leader, detest apartheid together with all its discriminatory laws. We also abhor killings and allowing people to starve especially black people'. Therefore, the church's quest for peace in the land should never be interpreted as an endorsement of the oppression of black people at least during the leadership of Barnabas Lekganyane.

In the second instance, the Zion Christian Church invited political leaders including Nelson Mandela, F.W. De Klerk, and Mangosutu Buthelezi to pray for peace in the land of South Africa in 1992 (Anderson 1999:295). The main reason of calling these three leaders was to pray for peace concerning the elections that were to be held in 1994 (Moripe 1996:43). This was an important move as all three leaders were influential and powerful at that time for peace and reconciliation in the South African context. According to Anderson (1999), the invitation of the political leaders:

[W]as a sincere and pragmatic effort on the part of the ZCC bishop to play a constructive role in the negotiations that were currently being conducted and thereby to help promote peace during a time of violent nation-wide strife. (p. 294)

Barnabas during his sermon that he presented in the presence of the three political leaders was very clear that the church was known as the church of peace, hence their call for peace in the land. Therefore, even if the church was not aligned with a specific political party at that time, the church was not necessarily apolitical. On the contrary, this allowed the church to adopt a neutral gesture when it came to the political atmosphere at that time. It can be pointed out that the

bishop's position as a neutral leader when it comes to issues of politics gave him the ability to be able to speak prophetically to the nation without fear or favour (Anderson 1999:294). This was transferred to the members as they were taught to adopt a neutral role when it came to the political issues at that time. This resulted in the church not taking part in political activism where they would be more critical of the political status quo (Anderson 1999). However, the church was happy to support anyone who advocated for peace and reconciliation in the country.

In the third instance, Nelson Mandela visited the Zion Christian Church again on the 3rd of April in 1994 to request prayers again just before the elections. One must point out that even in this period, the visitation to the church was still necessary because of the tension that existed between political parties and the negotiations that were ongoing just before the first democratic elections in South Africa. During this visit, Mandela himself offered prayers for peace while at the headquarters of the Zion Christian Church as shared by South African History Online (2024):

We pray with you for the blessings of human solidarity, because there are so many who wish to divide us! We pray with you for the blessings of reconciliation among all the people of South Africa! We pray with you so that the blessings of peace may descend upon South Africa like a torrent! We pray with you that the blessings of love may flow like a mighty stream! (p. 1)

This prayer by Nelson Mandela also demonstrates that the statesman himself also believed that the Zion Christian Church's headquarters was a place of peace and harmony. This prayer was also important given the nature of violence that was happening in South Africa, especially in Natal between the African National Congress led by Nelson Mandela and the Inkatha Freedom Party led by Mangosutu Buthelezi. The prayer for peace as initiated in the headquarters of the Zion Christian Church was helpful as the country hosted successful elections and the government of national unity was formed in the first administration under Nelson Mandela. Other than Mandela's visit, other prominent political leaders continued to visit the headquarters of the Zion Christian Church. In 2012, President Jacob Zuma together with Julius Malema also visited Moria. The current president, Cyril Ramaphosa also visited the church in the quest to pray for peace, stability and unity for the land. Therefore, it can be concluded that the church has always played a meaningful role in negotiating peace and reconciliation in the country.

Some challenges with the peace talk rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church

The literature review on the peace rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church illustrates some challenges that are worth reflecting on. Firstly, the church encouraged its members not to take part in political activities but only pray or call for peace (Anderson 1999). Those who took part in political activism, particularly in townships like Soweto were considered as rebelling against the church. Prayer in this

context is used as an excuse not to take part in the political activities of the day and remain conservative when it comes to political action. This is what Schoffeleers (1991) calls political acquiescence which existed for a long time in the Zion Christian Church because of a restraint placed on members in the name of peace. Or what Nel (2018) calls the pacifist approach which although he applied it to Pentecostalism is relevant to AICs like the Zion Christian Church. Pacifism is embraced by the Zion Christian Church as an approach not to engage in any violence to settle conflicts or even wars. It simply refers to a withdrawal from engaging in political activism in the name of peace or non-violence. This is problematic as it creates a lack of political awareness or consciousness among the members of the church. This can result in making uninformed political decisions because of the lack of political knowledge among the members. Anderson (1999:296) mentioned that some members of the church voted for the National Party in 1994 not because they wanted to but because of ignorance. Or some might have interpreted the visits of political leaders like P.W. Botha as an endorsement of his party by the church leaders. And because nothing was said to show disagreements with the apartheid regime, some members took it as support for the national party.

Secondly, I wish to raise here is the non-confrontational status of the church leaders in the name of peace particularly during apartheid under the leadership of Edward Lekganyane. According to Anderson (1999:292) during P.W. Botha's visits to Moria, Edward Lekganyane 'thanked the government for their "kindness" and "goodness" to the black people'. Anderson (1999:292) says Edward Lekganyane went on to say, 'I thank the Whites for leading us out of darkness', and 'Our church has no room for people who subvert the security of the state and break the laws of the land'. Because the church was calling for peace, it did not confront the system head-on rather appeared to be endorsing the system. Again, this might have been interpreted by the followers as an endorsement of the apartheid regime. If we judge by Edward Lekganyane's statements, it appears that he was more on the side of the oppressors and not the oppressed as they were the ones breaking the laws of the land in resistance to the apartheid regime. This kind of gesture by Edward Lekganyane caused the National Party to love the Zion Christian Church and many other AICs.

According to Anderson (1999:293) the AICs did not confront the regime but rather were seen as relevant for apartheid because they were churches for blacks and not whites. The two challenges highlighted here call for the theology of peace and reconciliation in the Zion Christian Church to move beyond a rhetoric of 'peace be with you' towards political activism among members and the confrontation of the evil system such as the apartheid regime.

In the next section, I propose that such a theology should be juxtaposed with the justice talk rhetoric to include corrections on the injustices of the past.

Juxtaposing peace with justice in the construction of peace theology

As discussed previously, the peace talk rhetoric in the Zion Christian Church has been instrumental in bringing peace among communities and the nation at large through prayer for peace. However, the literature review also demonstrates some weaknesses of this approach given the political acquiescence and the lack of confrontation with the political system (Anderson 1999; Nel 2018; Schoffeleers 1991). Therefore, the theology of peace as argued here needs to move beyond the peace talk rhetoric and address past injustices. This means that as much as churches like the Zion Christian Church would want to be neutral, this should not lead to a lack of engagement in addressing past injustices. The theology of peace and justice challenges churches to move beyond rhetoric and engage in tangible actions addressing past injustices.

Zion Christian Church and similar faith communities are called to embody a proactive theology of peace, tackling systemic injustices and promoting restorative justice.

A theology of peace and justice necessitates churches' active involvement in addressing historical wrongs and fostering a culture of reconciliation and equality. Key implications are as follows: churches should prioritise social justice and advocacy, and addressing past injustices is essential for lasting peace. Faith communities must engage in restorative justice initiatives. Indeed, Matthew 5:9 states that 'blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God'. However, this should be read with other biblical texts such as Isaiah 1:17 which calls for the juxtaposition of peace with justice. The text says Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow. Micah 6:8 equally states, 'He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?'

This also calls for political awareness among the members and the followers of the Zion Christian Church. This means that as much as the theology of peace finds its solid foundation in prayer, it should also find a solid foundation in calling for justice for people who have been oppressed. Wolterstorff (2018:57) argues that 'The theology of the Peace is articulated through its practice as an enacted, and not only verbal, piece of the liturgy'. This means that the theology of peace cannot only be a peace talk but also an action on peace. The argument here is that justice is one such action that can help in moving a nation towards the fullest realisation of peace. Hence, James 2:14–18 calls us not only to talk faith without actions:

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed', but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds'. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

This implies that we cannot talk about peace without the actions of justice.

Truthful reconciliation is not only expressed by gestures such as it happened during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission but should also involve addressing the injustices. This cannot happen by merely forgetting the past but by ensuring that all those actions of the past are corrected. Wouters (2014) explains that:

Reconciliation between the trespasser(s) and the offended person(s) or supernatural being(s) has to transpire for healing to take place. Truthful reconciliation that usually includes negotiations, the appropriate rites, and medicines will inevitably restore the equilibrium of life and free a person or person(s) from its effects in the hereafter. (p. 93)

This means that the efforts to call for peace and reconciliation are not instant but rather continuous as the quest to bring justice to those who faced injustices cannot be a once-off thing. This means that it cannot be a momentous issue with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission appointed for a limited time and scope but should rather be a continuous thing. Theology of peace is a call for inclusive reconciliation. Drawing from peace scholars like Oberschall (2007), Kew and John (2008), Lederach and Appleby (2010), and Özerdem and Mac Ginty (2019), a genuine theology of peace necessitates acknowledging and engaging all parties involved in conflict. To achieve true peace and reconciliation in the South African context, it's crucial to listen to victims of apartheid, acknowledge their experiences and suffering, engage perpetrators and encourage accountability and remorse. Rhetoric alone is insufficient; meaningful justice and peace require: moving beyond celebratory democracy commemorations, amplifying oppressed voices and addressing historical injustices. In the global context and conflicts worldwide, lasting peace demands: inclusive dialogue, involving both victims and perpetrators, active listening, fostering empathy and understanding, and concrete actions towards justice, reconciliation, and healing. The key principles include acknowledging and validating all parties' experiences, fostering accountability and remorse, and prioritising justice and reconciliation. The Biblical Foundations are Matthew 5:23–24 (reconciliation and forgiveness), Isaiah 58:6–7 (seeking justice and righteousness), and 2 Corinthians 5:18–20 (ministry of reconciliation). By embracing this comprehensive approach, we can move towards authentic peace, justice and reconciliation in South Africa and globally.

Lastly, the theology of peace should be constructed with the knowledge that the same God of peace is also the God of justice. Labobar (2020:122) argues that a life of harmony and peace within the context of peace theology is achieved through the juxtaposition of peace and justice. To arrive at such juxtaposition, there is a need to know that the God of peace is also the God of justice. Isaiah 30:18 states, 'Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; How blessed are all those who long for Him'. The talk

about the God of peace should be balanced by the talk about the God of justice. Therefore, the peace rhetoric should be followed by justice rhetoric 'Justice be with you'. As the victim of injustices should not only be wished peace but also justice. The prayer for the peace of God to reign in the land should be accompanied by the prayer for justice in the land of South Africa.

Boesak (2014a) is adamant that God shall not rest until His people receive justice. Therefore, the struggle for peace for Boesak (2014b) is also a struggle for justice. However, Boesak (2008) also cautioned us not to fold our hands in the hope that God will bring justice. Rather, we should play an active role with the help of the God of justice to deal with the past injustices. This means that churches such as Zion Christian Church and other AICs cannot continue to embrace political acquiescence, political conservative approach and pacifism. Peace theology is not only about praying and announcing peace but also engages the unjust system in calling for the justice of those who are in the margins including women and children. When this is done there will be peace and reconciliation in the true sense of the words.

Peace and reconciliation: The justice factor

Peace and reconciliation are important values for the building of the nation particularly in a polarised society with an ugly past of apartheid like ours. Moreover, peace and reconciliation are important for ending wars such as the one between Russia and Ukraine, and Israel and Palestine. As demonstrated in the Introduction, previous studies have indeed demonstrated the importance of peace such as the role of diplomacy in achieving lasting peace (Smith 2020), the economic benefits of peaceful conflict resolution (Weinthal & Johnson 2018) and the social implications of peace agreements (Lee 2020). The contribution of the current study is that there can never be peace and reconciliation without concrete acts of justice. This makes justice an important factor in the equation of peace and reconciliation. This contribution is important in countries such as South Africa where the discourses on peace and reconciliation can be made more meaningful through acts of justice particularly in the correction of the injustices of the past. In addition, justice is pivotal in resolving conflicts during wars and political instability as peace and reconciliation cannot be achieved only by seeking peaceful settlements without acts of justice. Indeed, the ceasefire efforts to end the conflict between Israel and Palestine are important; however, it is also important that the families of women and children and other civilians who were killed receive justice in the quest to call for peace and reconciliation.

Conclusion

This article worked within the contextual framework of the Zion Christian Church, one of the largest churches in South Africa and the continent. This church is influential given the size of its membership and the followers which are in millions. The church is known for the peace talk rhetoric

expressed in Northern Sotho such as 'kgotso ebe le lena' which means 'peace be with you'. It is also known by the peace rhetoric expressed in Northern Sotho by its leaders 'kgotso ebe le batho' which means 'peace be with the people'. This article argued that the theology of peace in the Zion Christian Church and other AICs should transcend the peace talk rhetoric to include works of justice. In countries like South Africa where the majority of people faced injustices during oppression, we mustn't only speak about peace but combine it with the works of justice. Therefore, the theology of peace should be constructed by also including the justice discourses on how to undo the injustices of the past. This means that the theology of peace is not only made by pronouncements on peace as done in the Zion Christian Church but should also include the correction of the injustices of the past. This would ensure that peace and reconciliation is not just a theory but also involves tangible works of justice. This changes how scholars interested in AICs have studied the theology of peace in the past; it should be constructed through three important aspects of peace, reconciliation and justice. The rhetoric should not only be 'peace be with you' but also 'justice be with you'.

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Author's contributions

M.S.K. the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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