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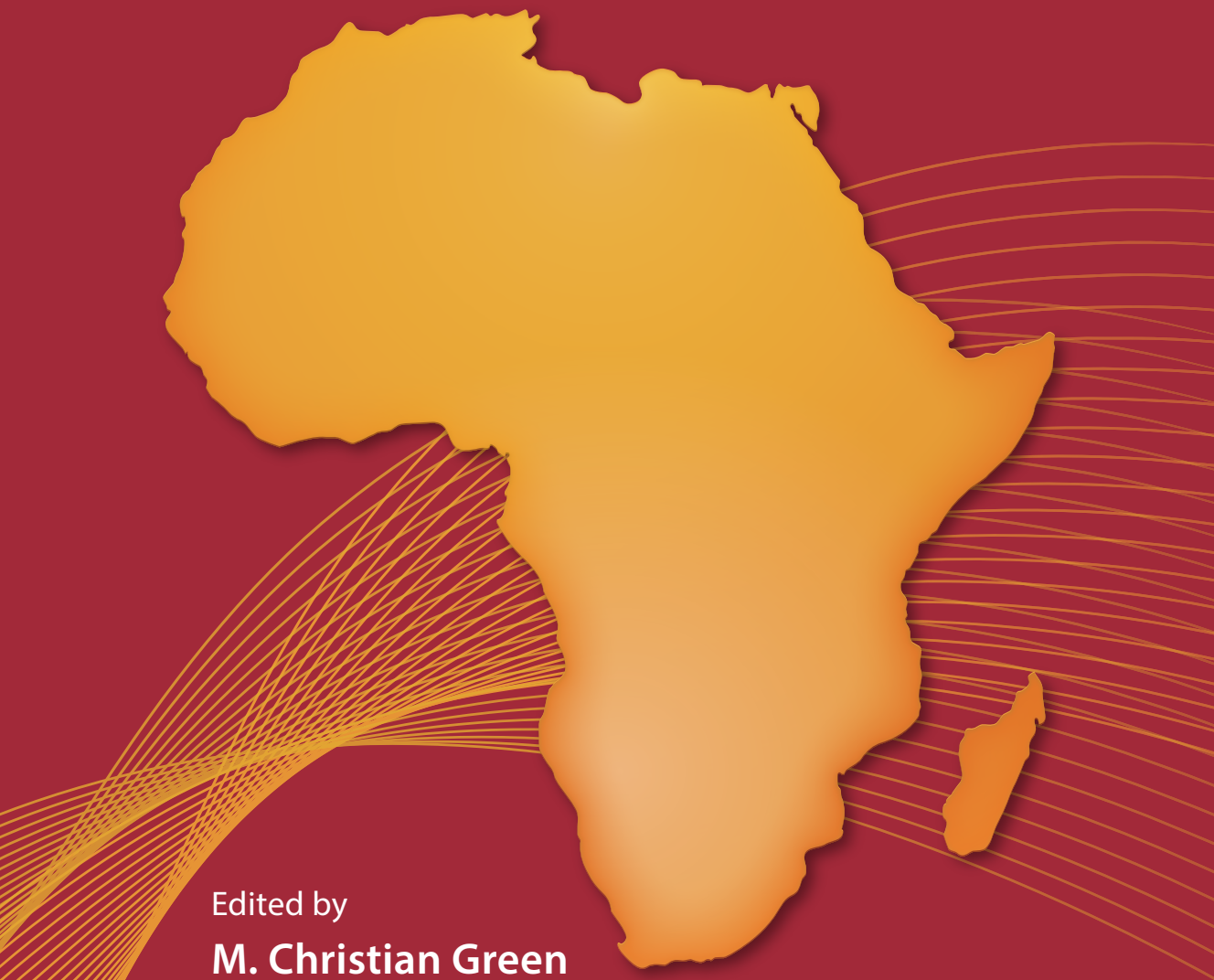

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3 Religious freedom and responses to Covid-19 management in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe

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INTRODUCTION

In a bid to enhance the prevention, containment, and treatment of Covid-19, and hence promote public health and well-being, the government of Zimbabwe put in place measures in the form of statutory instruments. The instruments show the government's commitment to fulfil its constitutional mandate to take preventive measures against the spread of disease.[2] Measures put in place in Zimbabwe included the following statutory instruments, among others. These are the decrees most relevant to the study in terms of content and time frame.

Table 3.1: Statutory instruments put in place in Zimbabwe due to Covid-19

Decree no.	Content	Impact on religious activities
SI 76/2020 of 23 March	The President declares a State of Disaster due to an infectious disease and declared a pandemic by the WHO on 11 March 2020.	The alertness of religious organisations on disaster preparedness.
SI 77/2020 of 23 March	The Minister of Health and Child Care declares Covid-19 a Formidable Epidemic Disease.	The instrument allows for the implementation of lockdown regulations including the suspension of religious gatherings.
SI 83/2020 (the principal order) of 28 March	Establishes measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the State of Disaster is in force.	Suspension of religious gatherings for an initial 21 days from 30 March 2020 to 19 April 2020. The stay-at-home policy takes effect.
SI 93/2020 of 19 April	Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the State of Disaster continues.	Extension of the national lockdown and continued suspension of social, including religious gatherings, by two weeks, from 19 April to 3 May 2020.

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2 Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013, s 29.3.

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Decree no.	Content	Impact on religious activities
SI 136/2020 of 12 June	Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the State of Disaster continues.	Extension of the national lockdown. Religious gatherings are permitted on condition that no more than 50 adult individuals are gathered at a place of worship. Those gathered are to wear face masks, observe the social distancing rule, have their hands sanitised and their temperatures taken upon admission to the space. Buildings for worship to be disinfected.
SI 234/2021 of 17 September	Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the State of Disaster continues.	Only fully vaccinated individuals or those with negative PCR tests taken not more than 48 hours, are to be admitted at places of worship. The number of worshippers must not exceed 50% of the maximum capacity of each place.

However, some of the measures promulgated in these instruments, particularly SI 83 of 2020, which entailed curtailing mobility and a temporary ban on social gatherings, were considered drastic, as they infringed on human rights.[3] These rights, enshrined in the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013, include freedoms of assembly and association, freedom of religion or belief, and freedom to practise and propagate and give expression to one's religion, whether in public or in private and whether alone or together with others.[4] This chapter analyses the effects of these measures from the perspective of three churches in Zimbabwe.

EFFECTS OF COVID-19 REGULATIONS ON CHURCHES IN ZIMBABWE

In the interest of promoting public health in the face of Covid-19 and in accordance with the Public Health Act, the president of Zimbabwe proclaimed a national lockdown which commenced on 30 March 2020. The lockdown, aimed at containing the Covid-19 pandemic, entailed prohibition or limits of social gatherings, requirements of social distancing and restriction of movement. The measures on restriction of movement included the closure of national borders to restrict immigration. This is because Covid-19 cases were associated with inbound travellers from abroad.[5]

Due to social distancing interventions during phases 4 and 5 of the Covid-19 lockdown in Zimbabwe, people were no longer attending school, no longer left

3 Chirisa I et al. 2021. "The Impact and Implications of Covid-19: Reflections on the Zimbabwean Society", *Social Sciences and Humanities Open* 4(1):100181, 21.

4 These are contained in the Constitution of Zimbabwe, 2013, s 58, s 60.1a, and s 60.1b, respectively.

5 Chirisa et al, "The Impact and Implications of Covid-19", 2.

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their homes to spend time with friends and relatives and no longer attended church, funerals or other social gatherings. Given that social interactions are a basic human need, social distancing is disruptive, as it can lead to social rejection, broken relationships, loneliness, individualism and poor mental health, among other effects.[6] Thus, Covid-19 disrupted the observance of rituals that enhance social solidarity. In the religious sphere, there was a shift from public to private worship, from live face-to-face interactions to online engagement. Although adequate social contact is critical for mental health, social distancing policies disrupted this, thereby compromising freedoms of assembly, association and conscience.[7] In view of the foregoing, the present study sought to find out how these government directives conflicted with the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion and how religious people from three selected churches in Masvingo District, Zimbabwe, responded to the government regulations.

Participating churches

The three churches represent different forms of Christianity, namely mainstream Protestant, Pentecostal, and African Initiated Churches. At this point, a brief description of each of the three churches is in order.

The Protestant church

The Protestant church that participated in the study was the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ). It is a missionary church that was planted by the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa,[8] whose origin is the Netherlands. The mission approach used by the Dutch Reformed Church in the implantation of the church in Zimbabwe combined the proclamation of the gospel with education, medical, agricultural and industrial activities.[9] The Reformed Church in Zimbabwe's approach to disease is biomedical, given its history and missionary thrust, which includes setting up and operating conventional health care centres.

The Pentecostal church

The Pentecostal church that participated in the study is the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFMZ). Lovemore Togarasei, a biblical scholar, says the church is the mother of Pentecostal movements in Zimbabwe.[10] The church was born in South

6 Eddy CM. 2021. "The Social Impact of Covid-19 as Perceived by the Employees of a UK Mental Health Service", *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 30(Suppl. 1): 1366-1375.

7 Eddy, "The Social Impact of Covid-19 as Perceived by the Employees of a UK Mental Health Service", 2.

8 Munikwa C and Hendriks HJ. 2013. "The Binga Outreach: A Critical Reflection on the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe's Cross-cultural Ministry", *Missionalia* 41(3):291.

9 Munikwa and Hendriks, "The Binga Outreach", 291.

10 Togarasei L. 2016. "Historicising Pentecostal Christianity in Zimbabwe", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 42(2):1.

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Africa and came to Zimbabwe through transnational movement of people.[11] Like other Pentecostal churches, the church places emphasis on the centrality of the Holy Spirit as the driving force behind the church and its members, including practices of speaking in tongues, faith healing, miracles (especially those of healing) and the gospel of prosperity. Biomedical and spiritual causes of and remedies for disease are acknowledged, but primacy is given to spiritual explanations, given the place accorded to the Holy Spirit.

The African Initiated Church

The African Initiated Church (AIC) that was involved in the study is the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church (JMAC). The church is the oldest and one of the largest AICs in Zimbabwe.[12] The church incorporates elements of African traditional religion by accommodating polygamy and exorcising evil spirits. Belief in the power of the Holy Spirit to enable the performance of healing miracles, speaking in tongues and exorcising evil spirits is a central feature of the church. So strong is the church's belief in the healing power of the Holy Spirit that it is opposed to the secular biomedical health system, which it labels as evil. The church believes that the Holy Spirit guarantees good health for those who tenaciously follow church teachings and regulations.[13] The church also believes that only God can heal provided there is faith on the part of the healed. Members are therefore barred from seeking modern biomedical health care services.[14] Those who do so are considered as lacking faith and so are penalised. The origin of pandemics is spiritualised – demons or spiritual powers are perceived as the cause.

Rationale for selection and method of the study

The motive for selection was to diversify the sample to get divergent views on the conceptualisation, experiences and responses to both the Covid-19 pandemic and to mitigation measures decreed by the government of Zimbabwe in order to contain the pandemic. The selection of religious people was based on the fact that religious beliefs, as indicated in the literature, influence understanding and responses to public health issues.[15] In the African worldview, religion, disease, healing and

11 Togarasei, "Historicising Pentecostal Christianity in Zimbabwe", 2.

12 Musevenzi J. 2017. "The African Independent Apostolic Church's Doctrine under Threat: The Emerging Power of Faith-based Organisations' Interventions and the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church in Zimbabwe", *Journal for the Study of Religion* 30(2):186.

13 Musevenzi, "The African Independent Apostolic Church's Doctrine under Threat", 184.

14 Masvaure S. 2021. "Liberalising Health-seeking Behaviour of the Johanne Marange Apostolic Sect", *Journal of Health Management*, 7 December.

15 See, for example, Chatters LM. 2000. "Religion and Health: Public Health Research and Practice", *Annual Review of Public Health* 21:335; Sibanda F, Muyambo T and Chitando E (eds). 2022. *Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa.* London and New York: Routledge, 5; Mwale N and Chita J. 2022. "Standing Together in the Time of Covid-19: The Responses of Church Umbrella Bodies in Zambia", in Sibanda et al (eds). *Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*, 155.

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health are closely linked.[16] Given this close link, religious responses have come to the forefront of explanation, analysis and responses to Covid-19, hence the thrust of the study.[17] While several studies have been conducted in Zimbabwe and beyond on the impact of Covid-19 and its associated containment measures,[18] not much has been documented on the interface between the Covid-19 control measures, concern about religious freedom and religious responses of the three churches under consideration. Hence, the current study fills in this geographical and conceptual gap.

The study was qualitative, as it sought to establish people's perceptions and experiences in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and government-instituted regulations to contain the pandemic. It involved participants from three churches with branches or congregations in both urban and peri-urban Masvingo, Zimbabwe,[19] namely the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe and the Johanne Marange Apostolic Church. The churches represent mainstream Protestant, Pentecostal and African Initiated Church groupings, respectively, within the Christian tradition. Data were collected, by means of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, from a purposefully selected sample of six clergy members (two from each of the three churches) and twelve laypersons (four from each church).[20] There was a balance of urban and peri-urban participation in the study.

Participation was voluntary, as informed consent was sought from prospective participants before they got involved in the study. All participants were above 18 years of age and so gave their own consent as adults. Anonymity and confidentiality were observed by means of using descriptions in lieu of names for participants. Interviews were conducted from 16 January to 4 February 2022. Interview questions related to the participants' conceptualisation of the pandemic, government directives, protection of human rights and their lived experiences.

It should be noted that participants, though belonging to particular churches, were not speaking on behalf of their churches as spokespersons, but rather as members who voluntarily participated in their individual capacities. Thus, their views may

16 Ukah AFK. 2020. "Prosperity, prophecy and the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Healing Economy of African Pentecostalism", *Pneuma* 42(3/4):430-439.

17 Ukah, "Prosperity, prophecy and the Covid-19 Pandemic", 431.

18 See, for example, Sibanda et al (eds). *Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa;* Van Coller H and Akinloye IA. 2022. "Religion, Law and Covid-19 in South Africa", in Sibanda F et al (eds). *Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*, 89-102; Gathogo J. 2022. "Covid-19 Containment Measures and 'Prophecies' in Kenya", in Sibanda et al (eds). *Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*, 126-140; Chukwuma OG. 2021. "The Impact of the Covid-19 Outbreak on Religious Practices of Churches in Nigeria", *HTS/Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(4):6377; Mahiya IT and Murisi R. 2022. "Reconfiguration and Adaptation of a Church in Times of Covid-19 Pandemic: A Focus on Selected Churches in Harare and Marondera", *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 9(1):art 2024338.

19 Peri-urban means around the urban area; on the outskirts.

20 It is worth noting that participants from the same church did not come from the same assembly or congregation.

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not necessarily represent the official positions of the churches with which they are affiliated. What emerged was that participants from the three churches did not respond uniformly to the Covid-19 pandemic, notwithstanding some similarities among them.

CHURCHES CONFRONT COVID-19: PROTESTANT, PENTECOSTAL, AND AFRICAN INITIATED CHURCH VIEWS

The Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ)

Responses by participants from the RCZ exhibited a more cooperative stance with regard to the observance of government-instituted Covid-19 regulations. The two clergy members who were interviewed revealed that, as a church, they were duty-bound to observe government rules, since in Romans 13, God commands Christians to obey authorities. They conceptualised Covid-19 as a pandemic God allowed to happen and for which he had a purpose.

RCZ clergy responses

One of the two RCZ clergymen interviewed said: "Everything that God allows to happen has a purpose and this applies to Covid-19. Those who are meant to die as a result of the pandemic will die, while those who have not been predestined for such will not. However, as human beings, we need to do what is in our capacity to prevent the spread of the virus that causes the disease."[21] Regarding compliance with government-instituted regulations pertaining to Covid-19, the same clergyman said: "The orders given by the Government do not contradict the word of God, so there is no reason why as a church we would go against them. We encourage our members to always put on face masks in public places, sanitise or wash their hands regularly and exercise social distancing as much as possible. To avoid overcrowding in our church buildings, we have phased worship sessions so that all worshippers do not attend church service at the same time but in batches."[22]

Responding to a question on the church's response to the temporary prohibition of religious gatherings, which has since been lifted, the RCZ clergyman had this to say:

> I advised members of my congregation to use online platforms. As a church, we adopted online platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook and the radio to preach and share the word of God. Of course, this application of technology has its challenges, as some congregants did not have the gadgets, data or even network, to fellowship with others online. Others lacked technological competence, that is, they could not apply technology to access sermons or words of encouragement from their pastors or fellow worshippers, especially the elderly. However, notwithstanding these

21 Interview with Rev A by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 16 January 2022. The clergyman led an urban congregation while his counterpart led a peri-urban congregation.

22 Interview with Rev A, 16 January 2022.

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> challenges, online engagements were better than no contact at all. I had a list of the elderly from my congregation. During the time of a complete ban on gatherings, I occasionally contacted these elderly people through phone calls, encouraging them in their faith and assuring them that though distant I had them in prayer.[23]

On the question of possible violations of the constitutional right to assemble and practice religion under these regulations, the reverend indicated that Covid-19 control measures were meant to safeguard people's health, and he considered this as more important than insisting on freedom of assembly at that moment when Covid-19 was a real danger. The clergyman's responses showed the church's support for government initiatives to contain the pandemic.

The church's official Covid-19 response was compliance with government regulations, and its conceptualisation of Covid-19 was in terms of scientific causes and biomedical solutions; hence, the second RCZ clergyman, leading a peri-urban congregation, reiterated many of the same points as the first. On the duty to obey civil authorities, the second RCZ clergyman said: "As a law-abiding church, when the president announced a national lockdown that entailed a temporary ban on social gatherings, we did not try to resist. Our church is 100% behind all health protocols in a bid to contain the spread of Covid-19."[24] On alternative means of worship during the period of a temporary ban on social gatherings, the RCZ reverend had this to say:

> We considered other ways of reaching out to our congregants so that they do not backslide. It was really a trying time, but we had to operate within the confines of government stipulations. I have to point out that the pandemic and the attendant order to stop in-person church gatherings caught us off guard. Rather than lamenting, however, we decided to be proactive by turning to technology to provide pastoral services, although this is by no means a perfect substitute for face-to-face fellowship meetings. There are many challenges associated with the use of technology, but we had to make do with what was there.

On vaccination, the second RCZ clergyman said:

> We encouraged, and still encourage, our members to get vaccinated to protect themselves and others. Vaccines, especially those preventing child-killer diseases like polio and measles, have been effective, and so there is no reason for one to doubt the effectiveness of the Covid-19 vaccine. On the issue of conspiracy theories suggesting that vaccines are a programme meant to wipe out Africans by some from the West and East, I do not believe that God would allow such a thing to happen. If those people wanted to destroy us (Africans) they would have done so long back, as we have been using vaccines from the international community. God is in control.[25]

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23 Interview with Rev A, 16 January 2022.

24 Interview with Rev B by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 24 January 2022.

25 Interview with Rev B, 24 January 2022.

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Pertaining to the period when Covid-19 control measures were eased to allow people to gather in restricted numbers, the second RCZ clergyman said:

> When the ban on social gatherings was lifted, but still with restrictions on numbers, we ensured that there is no overcrowding in our churches by controlling the number of attendees per Sunday service session. At the entrance of the church building, there is someone who sanitises people and checks their temperature on entering the building. All worshippers are required to put on face masks. We explained to our members that the Covid-19 control measures were meant to protect all of us and therefore there was no need to resist them.[26]

What was clear from the two Protestant clergymen was that the church's official position was to support government initiatives aimed at containing Covid-19, notwithstanding their belief in the power of God as the controller of everything. Throughout the interviews, the religious leaders were wearing face masks. They indicated that they were fully vaccinated, which was an indication that they practised what they preached with regard to the observance of Covid-19 control measures decreed by the Zimbabwean government. The church's support for government initiatives can be explained in terms of its biomedical orientation when it comes to sickness and health-seeking. The church combines gospel proclamation with medical activities. including establishing hospitals and clinics.[27] This suggests that religion and science are not contradictory in its worldview.

RCZ laity responses

*I*nterviews with RCZ congregants showed consistency between the official position of the church and the practices of members, although it did emerge that in some cases there was laxity, especially pertaining to the proper wearing of face masks, social distancing and sanitisation. On Covid-19 control measures in general, including the temporary ban on social gatherings, the first RCZ layman interviewed said: "Our church supports Government initiatives to halt the spread of the pandemic. The Covid-19 control measures put in place are for the protection of all. When a temporary ban on church gatherings was announced, we readily stopped meeting face-to-face for services and resorted to online means. Although this has its challenges, it was a practical substitute for in-person gatherings."[28] Regarding wearing face masks, sanitisation and social distancing, the first RCZ laywoman said: "As for safety measures, such as wearing face masks and sanitisation, we observe as we meet for worship. The challenge I see in our church is that of social distancing. Sometimes it is not strictly observed, although the church at the policy level has tried to group members and stagger services so that we don't attend church service

26 Interview with Rev B, 24 January 2022.

27 Munikwa and Hendriks, "The Binga Outreach: A Critical Reflection on the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe's Cross-cultural Ministry", 292.

28 Interview with RCZ layman no. 1 by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 19 January 2022.

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at the same time."[29] Still, of Covid-19 the control measures generally, the second RCZ layman had this to say:

> I personally try to observe Covid-19 rules, but sometimes I fail to do so when some members do not observe the same, especially social distancing during worship, temperature checks and sanitisation at gatherings. I move around with my bottle of sanitiser for my safety. I should, however, point out that if God does not protect a city, those who watch over it are doing so in vain. In the same way, observance of safety measures alone is not enough unless God protects you. So, while as human beings we need to do what we can, it is ultimately God who provides the protection.[30]

What is clear from the responses of the RCZ laypersons is that their leaders encouraged them to follow Covid-19 regulations, but they did not always do so. It appears that apart from getting Covid-19 information from their ministers of religion, they also got it from other sources, including the communities in which they lived, and some of these other sources of information may have caused laxity. The preached word is not always the lived word, and in some cases the laity may move in a different direction from that of their ordained leaders, as revealed by the interviews with RCZ participants.

Concerning vaccination, the second of two RCZ male laypersons said, "Our leaders encouraged us to get vaccinated for our safety, and some of us are fully vaccinated."[31] Further to the issue of vaccination, echoing the words of her male counterpart said, the second RCZ female layperson said: "When vaccines became available, our reverend encouraged us to get vaccinated. When it was announced that only vaccinated congregants should be allowed to attend church service, many members in our church, including myself, got vaccinated."[32] Responses by both RCZ clergy and laity thus showed vaccine acceptance. Vaccine acceptance could have been influenced by the theology and ideology of the church, which sees no contradiction between the medical and the spiritual.

Regarding the constitutional provisions on freedom of religion and worship in relation to the government restrictions, the second of two RCZ laywomen said: "Although freedom of religion is contained in the constitution, to me the temporary ban on gatherings and therefore the suspension of the right to association, as well as the right to express one's religiosity, was necessary. There is no use observing rights while grossly undermining other rights, such as the right to health."[33] It can be inferred that the participant understood Covid-19 as a biomedical health challenge that required biomedical solutions, hence the support for measures contained in

29 Interview with RCZ laywoman no. 1 by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 27 January 2022.

30 Interview with RCZ layman no. 2 by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 22 January 2022.

31 Interview with RCZ layman no. 2, 22 January 2022.

32 Interview with RCZ laywoman no. 2 by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 1 February 2022.

33 Interview with RCZ laywoman no. 2, 1 February 2022.

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statutory instruments on Covid-19 prevention, containment and treatment. In her estimation:

> Covid-19 is a pandemic that came to us unprepared. When I first heard about it, little did I know that it shall alter our lives, including church life. When the president announced the national lockdown on 30 March 2020, and the ban on social gatherings, as well as the stay-at-home decree, I felt uneasy, but these measures had to be taken to contain the spread of the pandemic and to ensure public safety. Although the temporary ban on gatherings was disruptive, it was necessary for the health benefit of society.[34]

Likewise, responding to the question of whether the government-instituted measures to control Covid-19, violated religious freedom, as provided for in the Zimbabwe Constitution, the second RCZ layman also replied, "Although the ban constituted an infringement of the right to religious expression, it was justifiable on health grounds. Our reverend advised us to adhere to government orders and at the same time continue to worship, though in new ways. We used technology to continue to fellowship."[35] Worth noting from the responses by members of the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe is that they supported government initiatives to control the pandemic, although there were some challenges in implementing this. The sentiment that emerged was that it was better to forego religious freedom in order to safeguard human health. This also shows subscription to the scientific causation and control of Covid-19, which is an antithesis of the spiritualisation of the pandemic.

The Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe (AFMZ)

AFMZ clergy responses

Responses from participants belonging to the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe exhibited a somewhat different perspective of the pandemic, that is a spiritual one alongside a biomedical one, as compared to the largely biomedical one that the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe reflected. As presented above, the church places importance on the Holy Spirit as a healing agent. The two AFMZ pastors who participated in the study, one leading an urban assembly and the other a peri-urban one, shared similar sentiments on the genesis, impact and control of the pandemic. The spiritualisation of the pandemic is evident from the responses given to questions posed.

Concerning the government's ban on social gatherings, the first AFMZ pastor, leading an urban assembly, had this to say:

> Coming together physically to worship is an expectation of God as expressed in Hebrews 10:25 where believers are exhorted not to abandon the custom of congregating for worship. This was temporarily undermined

34 Interview with RCZ laywoman no. 2, 1 February 2022.

35 Interview with RCZ layman no. 2, 22 January 2022.

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> when a ban on social gatherings was pronounced in order to curtail the spread of Covid-19. The ban not only offset normal church practices, but also seriously undermined the freedom of religion provided for in the Constitution of the country. We acknowledge the presence of Covid-19 as a threat to human health, but we believe that God provides the cure. While we don't believe that the banning of church gatherings is the solution, we had no choice but to refrain from meeting physically to avoid clashes with authorities. We had to obey the government directive on the ban on religious gatherings when this was announced, but we believe that prayer is the key to fighting the pandemic. We believe that the blood of Jesus can heal those infected and immunise those not yet infected. Banning church gatherings is not the solution.[36]

On alternative means of worship during the lockdown, the AFMZ pastor said: "To continue ministering to our members amidst the suspension of face-to-face meetings, we have been using online engagements with our members. We used platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, the radio, phone calls, especially when communicating with the sick and elderly, as well as text messages, although the use of this mode was minimal."[37] Thus the church, like the RCZ, continued to have fellowship but in a non-physical form.

On the question of vaccination against Covid-19, the AFMZ pastor (A) said:

> We accept vaccination, being fully aware that the real solution to the pandemic lies with God. When the government announced that church gatherings would be permitted, but only on the condition that only the fully vaccinated are supposed to attend physically, we laughed at the idea. It is not our duty as the church or religious leaders to screen people who have come to church in terms of their vaccination status. We knew the believers well before Covid-19 and the vaccination programme. We will not bar anyone who has come to worship with us. We are glad the government has lifted the ban on church gatherings. This is a cause of joy for us. They have opened the church and that is good news for us. Let those who want to fellowship with others do so, without being asked questions about vaccination. On limits to numbers, this is not feasible. How can one ask someone to go back home because the church has reached the prescribed limit in terms of numbers?[38]

A number of issues emerge from the pastor's responses. The pastor was opposed to the ban on church services as a Covid-19 control measure, believing that God is the controller and healer of Covid-19 and that the blood of Jesus is both a cure and a vaccine. There was vaccine acceptance, but also resistance to coercive measures instituted by the government. Compliance with the ban on church gatherings was meant to ensure peace with authorities and not as a conviction that the cessation of gatherings was helpful. Defiance of government directives was notable on

36 Interview with AFM Pastor A by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 20 January 2022.

37 Interview with AFM Pastor A, 20 January 2022.

38 Interview with AFM Pastor A, 20 January 2022.

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some points. However, the official position of the church was one of compliance with government regulations. The church has been actively involved in educating members on Covid-19 regulations and safety precautions.[39]

The second AFMZ pastor, from a different assembly, a peri-urban one, shared similar sentiments in observing:

> Covid-19 came as a challenge, but not one that is beyond God's control. The emergence of the pandemic and the subsequent suspension of church gatherings has seriously undermined the right to freely express religion. We understand where the government is coming from but we believe that church service is an essential service that should not have been banned because it is through our relationship with Covid-19 pandemic in this case.[40]

On the subject of vaccination, the second AFMZ pastor further observed:

> While as a church we are not against vaccination, we are against the idea of forced vaccination as when the government said those who have not been fully vaccinated should not attend church services. As a church, we cannot bar people from attending church because they are not vaccinated. We resolved to allow everyone who wanted to attend church to do so. Fortunately, no law-enforcement agents came to our church demanding the presentation of vaccination certificates by worshippers.[41]

Finally, on social distancing and wearing of face masks, the second AFMZ pastor said: "Social distancing is not practical during communal worship. We encourage the wearing of masks, as is mandated by government, but we find that some of our members do not take this seriously as they do not cover the mouth and nose. We only encourage but do not enforce, bearing in mind that the ultimate healer and protector against any form of disease is God."[42]

The second pastor's responses thus indicate some compliance with government rules in some respects, such as acceptance of vaccination and encouraging the wearing of masks, though without enforcement within the congregation. The second pastor did see the ban on religious gatherings as an unnecessary violation of freedom of worship, given the necessity of access to God in dealing with the pandemic. The second pastor also showed noncompliance with anti-Covid regulations in failing to bar the unvaccinated and limit the number of church attendees.

AFMZ congregants' responses

The sentiments of the pastors were reiterated by congregants, who expressed the belief that to get sick or die of Covid-19 is in accordance with God's master plan for everyone and that Covid-19 protocol observance was not the real solution, but

39 Pavari N. 2020. "The Role of Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe in the Fight Against Coronavirus", *Journal of Public Administration and Governance* 10(3):306-320.

40 Interview with AFM Pastor B by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 26 January 2022.

41 Interview with AFM Pastor B, 26 January 2022.

42 Interview with AFM Pastor B, 26 January 2022.

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rather that the solution lies in the blood of Jesus. For the pastors and congregants, spirituality was the ultimate mitigation against Covid-19. The first AFMZ layman interviewed on the ban on church gatherings said: "Yes, the Covid-19 disease is there but the solution lies in God. Whether one survives or dies as a result of Covid-19 is all up to God. Initially, when the president announced a ban on social gatherings, including church gatherings, we tried to resist by secretly meeting in our houses, but we later realised that we might be in trouble with authorities, so we stopped."[43] This suggests opposition to the ban on church gatherings and belief in spiritual solutions to the pandemic.

The second of two AFMZ laywomen interviewed echoed similar sentiments, suggesting that Covid-19 is spiritual in origin and therefore demands spiritual solutions. She expressed this in remarks which suggested a certain trivialisation of the government's Covid-19 measures, replying: "We have been healed by his [Jesus's] wounds and therefore we need not live in fear of the pandemic. God is in control. No amount of sanitisation and degree of wearing face masks can prevent the pandemic from attacking us if God has not protected us. I do wear face masks and sanitise as regularly as I can. In addition, I have been vaccinated as a matter of choice, without considering the vaccination as the ultimate protector."[44] The first AFMZ laywoman interviewed in the study said that she believed the pandemic was a real threat to health and a cause of death. However, she said that the focus should not be on the dreadful nature of the pandemic, but rather on the healer Jesus Christ.

When it came to specific, government-recommended measures against Covid-19, the second AFMZ laywoman said of vaccination, "When it was announced that people can now gather for worship services but that they should be vaccinated, some of us were glad that we were going back to our normal way of worship. We did not consider vaccination important as no one monitored this at the assembly. However, our pastor encouraged us to get vaccinated but indicated that it was up to an individual to decide to get vaccinated or not."[45] The picture that emerges from the female congregant's response is that everything happens according to God's plan, and so there is no need to fear the pandemic. She combined spirituality with science by getting vaccinated and observing Covid-19 protocols, yet also believed in God as protector and healer. The response shows some trivialisation, but not opposition, to vaccination.

On sanitisation measures, the response was mixed, but it indicated a general laxity in implementation. The first AFMZ layman said:

> As for sanitisation and temperature checks, there was and still is no consistency on this at our assembly. We wear face masks so that we are not in trouble with authorities, but often when we are worshipping inside, we normally don't put on face masks as directed, but we will be having them

43 Interview with AFMZ layman no. 1 by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 18 January 2022.

44 Interview with AFMZ laywoman no. 2 by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 30 January 2022.

45 Interview with AFMZ laywoman no. 2, 30 January 2022.

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> by the neck, so that when the police happen to pass by, we will not be in trouble. However, there are some of our members who take face masks seriously and would always put them on during service. As for our pastor, he does not explicitly insist on Covid-19 protocols, but he has not told us not to adhere to them.[46]

There were, thus, mixed reactions to Covid-19 control measures. What is clear is that the Covid-19 control protocols were not strictly observed, which could suggest more reliance on spirituality than on biomedical measures.

What can be noted from responses from members of the Pentecostal-charismatic church is that Covid-19 has been spiritualised. It is conceived in terms of a force that God can overcome when invoked to do so through prayers. The members generally exhibited an attitude of laxity when it comes to observance of Covid-19 prevention, containment and treatment measures, especially social distancing, sanitisation and proper wearing of masks. While accepting modern medication as a remedy for Covid-19-related sickness, including the vaccine and other preventive measures, members of the church insisted that God was the divine healer, who can completely put Covid-19 under control. As such, spirituality took precedence over seeking biomedical remedies when it came to Covid-19. Thus, while the church officially supported WHO and government-instituted Covid-19 control measures, the implementation of the measures by members was compromised.[47]

The Johanne Marange Apostolic Church (JMAC)

As already indicated, the church believes in the Holy Spirit and faith healing and considers the biomedical health system as evil.[48] Pandemics are understood as the results of demonic or spiritual forces. As such, the church undermines the role of modern medical services, which could be detrimental in the context of Covid-19. Participants from JMAC revealed that although they were aware of Covid-19, they were not afraid of it, as they believed they were protected by God because of their faith. They did not believe in biomedical remedies to the pandemic, as they have a negative attitude towards Western medication and hospitalisation. There was also a sense in which they insinuated that Covid-19 did not exist among them, as they were protected by God. So, in terms of conceptualisation of Covid-19, there appears to be both an affirmation of the existence of the pandemic as well as denial – it was a threat elsewhere and not among them.

JMAC clergy responses

For the purpose of present analysis, the leader of a church assembly or congregation is referred to as an "apostle". However, in conventional usage in African Initiated Churches, the term "apostle" (*mupositori* in Shona language) refers to a member of

46 Interview with AFMZ layman no. 1, 18 January 2022.

47 Pavari, "The Role of the Apostolic Faith Mission in Zimbabwe", 306.

48 Musevenzi, "The African Independent Apostolic Church's Doctrine under Threat", 184.

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the church, whether in leadership or not. There is no formal training for leaders in the church, since leadership is based on a special calling by God, evidenced by "signs", such as miracle performances: to prove the calling.

The following quotation from the first church apostle interviewed for the study reflects some of the perceptions and attitudes of the church in relation to Covid-19. Regarding the conceptualisation of Covid-19, the ban on church gatherings and vaccination, the apostle had this to say:

> I have heard about Covid-19, but this is not a danger to us who are protected by God. When the government banned church gatherings, we were disturbed, because we did not see a good reason for that. Covid-19 does not do anything to us. We survive by faith in God, so no one can tell us to get vaccinated in order to be safe. We are safe already. Even if we were to die of the disease, it will be part of God's plan, so we discourage our members from taking the vaccine against Covid-19.[49]

On measures like social distancing, wearing face masks, sanitisation and temperature checks, the apostle said: "We respect the government leaders and understand that we have to observe them as instructed by God, but we do not believe the Covid-19 control measures will help us. How can someone I used to be close to make me sick? Masks are not important. We wear them in public to avoid clashing with the police, but often we do not put them on. We don't use sanitisers and thermometers at our assembly."[50] What is evident is that the apostle downplayed the threat of Covid-19 and believed in spiritual protection against the pandemic. The second apostle interviewed had similar views. He said: "As children of Johanne, we are not afraid of Covid-19. We are protected. We don't believe in those preventive measures like face masks, social distancing and sanitisation and vaccination. We are protected by the Holy Spirit. I will not get vaccinated, in spite of the government's pressure to get everyone vaccinated."[51] Like apostle A, apostle B also trivialised Covid-19, based on the belief in the protective power of God. The responses confirm what is documented about the church in relation to diseas or illness and health care seeking.[52]

JMAC laypersons' responses

Members of the JMAC affirmed what their leaders said in relation to Covid-19 control measures. They did not believe Covid-19 posed a threat to them, as their relationship with God was enough protection. They were not vaccinated and affirmed that members of their church were not vaccinated against Covid-19 or

49 Interview with apostle A by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 21 January 2022.

50 Interview with apostle A, 21 January 2022.

51 Interview with apostle B by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 4 February 2022.

52 See Musevenzi, "The African Independent Apostolic Church's Doctrine under Threat", 184; Masvaure, "Liberalising Health-seeking Behaviour of the Johanne Marange Apostolic Sect", 1; UNICEF. 2011. *Apostolic Religion, Health and Utilization of Maternal and Child health Services in Zimbabwe.* Collaborating Centre for Operational Research and Education.

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any other diseases for which people have historically been vaccinated. They did not deem Covid-19 safety measures ordered by government to have the capacity to protect them. What is notable from the JMAC responses is that the church was not supportive of government initiatives to prevent, contain and treat Covid-19. The church has alternative ways of dealing with diseases including pandemics. Examples of responses given are provided below. The following statements illustrate the views and experiences of congregants:

> I know that Covid-19 is there and some people are dying as a result of infection. However, I believe that God is the only one with power to protect and heal. This is what I have been taught since childhood. So, I don't see the need for taking measures like sanitisation, wearing face masks, social distancing or vaccination. Our church has taught us against taking medicines. Since birth, I have not visited a clinic or hospital for treatment. Prayers and holy water are important for treatment of any type of disease. I am not vaccinated and will not get vaccinated. Even if I am to die of Covid-19, it will be God's will.[53]

The above response shows the negation of modern health systems and belief in faith healing. Death is interpreted as God's will. Similar beliefs were expressed by a female congregant who said: "Covid-19 is a disease like others. It is a flu that requires to be treated in the manner other flus are treated – that is, the use of holy water and prayer. We don't go to the hospital for treatment. Our church does not allow that. When we fall sick, prophets in our church pray for us. We believe in God as the true healer, so faith in him, in the face of Covid-19, is important. Government requirements like sanitisation, wearing of face masks and vaccination are not important. Our church does not allow us to get vaccinated." On the ban on church gatherings, the second JMAC layman indicated that this should not have been done, since worshipping together is necessary for physical and spiritual health.

The JMAC church responses seem to show that some beliefs and practices of the church in relation to Covid-19 do not help in containing the pandemic. The negation of biomedical explanations and solutions shows that some religious doctrinal responses may be counterproductive and therefore promote the spread of the virus that causes Covid-19.

CHURCH RESPONSES IN CONTEXT

The responses from the three churches reflect their (churches) histories and contexts. As Bernard Pindukai Humbe has stated, religion influences all areas of life including the way individuals and groups conduct themselves and interpret certain phenomena, Covid-19 in this case.[54]

53 Interview with JMAC layman no.1 by E Chireshe. Masvingo, Zimbabwe, 17 January 2022.

54 Humbe BP. 2022. "Living with Covid-19 in Zimbabwe: A Religious and Scientific Healing Response", in Sibanda et al (eds). *Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*, 73.

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The Protestant church

The mainline Protestant church represented in this study, the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe (RCZ), is a product of missionary activity, having been set up as a Western-oriented church in terms of the conceptualisation of the relationship between religion, health and healing. When missionaries brought the church, they built churches to cater to spiritual needs and hospitals to physiological needs.[55] For the Western missionary, the church was the sphere of the spiritual and moral, hence the setting up of hospitals to cater for physical ailments. Disease and healing were conceived of in biomedical terms. This seems to explain why the RCZ in the present study was supportive of biomedical and scientific control measures announced by the government against Covid-19. It should, however, be noted that they saw God as ultimately responsible for all that happens, including the emergency of Covid-19, who gets infected and sick, and who recovers and who dies. They saw science and spirituality as harmonious. Thus, the belief was that although God is ultimately in charge, human beings have been given the capacity to take action to make things happen or prevent them, hence the support for initiatives to put Covid-19 under control. The RCZ responses in this study confirm the findings of other scholars of religion, such as Fortune Sibanda, Tenson Muyambo and Ezra Chitando, that most mainstream Christian leaders were forthcoming in promoting public health measures aimed at containing Covid-19.[56] They encouraged members to pray as they observed Covid-19 regulations.

The Pentecostal church

Pentecostalism represents a shift from mainline Protestant theology in its emphasis on the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as an agent of healing. It emerged in the present study of the Apostolic Faith Mission of Zimbabwe (AFMZ) that some Pentecostal Christians believed that the Holy Spirit was protecting them, a finding that confirms Bernard Pindukai Humbe's similar observations.[57] This seems to explain the appeal to spiritual interventions to control Covid-19, the centring of God in the healing narratives and laxity in implementation of government-instituted Covid-19 regulations. As religion scholar Asonzeh Ukah notes, "African Pentecostalism, especially the prosperity variant, has been at the forefront of promising to make its members healthy and wealthy through divine means."[58] The promise of healing is one of the attractions of Pentecostal churches. Healing is, therefore, one of "the most important sacred goods on sale in the African Pentecostal marketplace".[59] Although Pentecostals subscribe to the doctrine of faith healing, they also accept biomedical

55 See Munikwa and Hendriks, "The Binga Outreach", 292.

56 See Sibanda et al (eds). 2022. *Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa;* see, specifically, Van Coller and Akinloye, "Religion, Law and Covid-19 in South Africa", in Sibanda et al (eds), *Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*, 90.

57 Humbe, "Living with Covid-19 in Zimbabwe", 76.

58 Ukah, "Prosperity, prophecy and the Covid-19 Pandemic", 430.

59 Ukah, "Prosperity, prophecy and the Covid-19 Pandemic", 446.

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solutions to the pandemic, hence their acceptance of vaccination, although they believe that true healing is the work of God through the Holy Spirit.

The AFMZ responses in this study suggest mixed reactions concerning the virus and the pandemic. While they believed in spiritual healing, they saw no harm in observing some of the Covid-19 control protocols. While they saw no harm in vaccination, they were against the idea of mandatory vaccination and barring entry into the place of worship on the ground that one has not been fully vaccinated. The adherence to stipulated gathering sizes emerged as particularly difficult for the Pentecostal church under consideration. In this regard, the believers conflicted with government regulations. This finding confirms medical communications scholar Olivia Kowalczyk and her fellow researchers' findings pertaining to believers' conflict with authorities warning that gatherings must be limited to combat the spread of the coronavirus.[60]

The African Initiated Church (JMAC)

The Johanne Marange Apostolic Church's responses suggest counterproductive attitudes. The responses generally showed that the church was not cooperative with the state when it came to measures to control the pandemic. However, the magnitude of infection and deaths among members as a result of noncompliance, in comparison with churches that were more compliant, has not yet been empirically established, to my knowledge. The church has historically not supported government initiatives when it comes to health matters, because it insists on faith healing and the demonisation of biomedical or scientific remedies. As has already been highlighted, the church does not allow its members to seek treatment from public health institutions.[61] However, in defiance of the rule, some members clandestinely get medical treatment from conventional medical health institutions.[62]

The church was against the immunisation programme, hence infant mortality rate is high in JMAC communities because of preventable child-killer diseases, such as polio, measles, and whooping cough, among others. There have been clashes between members of the church and government authorities due to the former's evasion of child immunisation.[63] The resistance to the Covid-19 vaccine needs to be understood against this background. As the government insisted on following science-based solutions,[64] JMAC church leaders discouraged members from getting vaccinated. The spiritualisation of the pandemic, as well as the doctrine of repelling biomedical interventions, explains why the church was not supportive of

60 Kowalczyk O et al. 2020. "Religion and Faith Perception in a Pandemic of Covid-19", *Journal of Religion and Health* 59:2671-2677.

61 Musevenzi, "The African Independent Apostolic Church's Doctrine under Threat", 184.

62 Sibanda F and Marevesa T. 2013. "March or Die?: Theological Reflections on the Violation of Children's Rights in African Initiated Churches, Zimbabwe", *Asian Academic Research Journal of Multidisciplinary* 1(7):170.

63 Sibanda and Marevesa, "March or Die?", 175.

64 Humbe, "Living with Covid-19 in Zimbabwe", 77.

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government initiatives to combat Covid-19. While members put on face masks and sanitised when they had no option, such as when it was required to enter shops, they did not consider this important as protection against the virus, since their "vaccine" and healer is God through the Holy Spirit.

A note on technology

It emerged from both the Protestant church and the Pentecostal church in this study that technology was used to share the word of God. This helped to break the distance between congregants, thereby maintaining contact. However, not all people had access to technology, suggesting that the digital have-nots were left out of the communication network. They were isolated, a scenario that could have compromised their faith. Social distancing was not so easy for congregants, as the study indicates. The natural inclination to stay in close contact clashed with public health officials' advice to stay away from each other by social distancing. As Kowalczyk and colleagues note, pandemics are a challenging test, as they demand people to act in unusual ways, violating social norms.[65]

COVID-19 REGULATIONS, FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Participants acknowledged that the emergence of the pandemic and the attendant promulgation of statutory instruments to keep the pandemic in check resulted in violation of human rights, particularly the right to religious expression; "the right to manifest one's belief in community with others."[66] However, for some Christians, particularly from the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe, the violation was a necessary one, as it was propelled by the need to safeguard public health. The violation was justifiable under certain emergency circumstances. Section 86.2 of the Zimbabwe Constitution states that fundamental human rights set out in the constitution may be limited to the extent that the limitation is fair, reasonable, necessary and justifiable in a democratic society, taking into consideration whether it is necessary in the interests of public safety, public health or the general public interest.

It appears that the Zimbabwe government put in place measures that violated some fundamental human rights after weighing the costs and benefits of protecting those rights in the face of the pandemic. The Public Health Act, in particular, demanded that every person must do what is in their capacity to control a public health risk.[67] The Act authorised the minister of health to respond to a formidable epidemic by making regulations relating to, among other things, the regulation and restriction of public traffic and of the movements of persons, the closing of churches and Sunday schools and the restriction of gatherings or meetings for the purpose of public worship.

65 Kowalczyk et al, "Religion and Faith Perception in a Pandemic of Covid-19", 2671-2677.

66 See also Van Coller and Akinloye, "Religion, Law and Covid-19 in South Africa", 91.

67 Public Health Act (Chapter 15:17), No. 11, s 68 a, c.

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In view of this, it can be noted that the statutory instruments containing various measures to prevent, contain and treat Covid-19, were reasonable under the Zimbabwe Constitution, given that the purpose was public health protection. The limiting of human rights for the public good is in line with the principle of *Salus Populi Suprema Lex* ("Let the welfare of the people be the supreme law").[68] In cases of extreme emergency, such as Covid-19, it was justifiable to consider what is in the best interest of society as a whole, and this appears to have inspired Zimbabwe authorities to come up with Covid-19 control measures that might otherwise be deemed to be violative of human rights set forth in the Constitution.

While it is beyond doubt that some human rights were infringed upon by measures contained in statutory instruments on Covid-19 prevention, containment and treatment, the infringement was, arguably, for a good cause – namely public health. At the time of this writing, the lockdown rules in Zimbabwe have been relaxed and worshippers are allowed to congregate while observing Covid-19 health protocols. It can be extrapolated that religion can inhibit or accelerate the transmission of coronavirus, depending on the religious grouping one is considering. However, no systematic study, to my knowledge, has been conducted to determine whether non-compliance to the Covid-19 regulations harmed some religious communities more than others.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that religion is ambivalent when it came to the control of Covid-19. It contains both attitudes that are health-promoting and others that are health-endangering when it comes to dealing with a public health crisis such as Covid-19. Sometimes what congregants did was at variance with the official positions of the churches to which they belonged. It is apparent from this study that the official positions of the RCZ and the AFMZ were supporting the government-initiated Covid-19 control measures, yet members sometimes behaved on the contrary, for example, by trivialising vaccination, not putting on masks in public spaces, not practising social distancing and not sanitising.

It also emerged that Covid-19 was conceived of in spiritual terms by some participants in terms of causation and treatment. This spiritualisation of Covid-19 seemed to engender attitudes of laxity when it came to observance of Covid-19 safety protocols. Although this study did not explore the extent to which laxity in Covid-19 management influenced infection and death, one could conclude that failure to take precautionary measures has the potential to spread the virus, based on studies conducted elsewhere. If the Zimbabwe government could set up organisations to work with churches with a view to soliciting their cooperation in its programmes, this could go a long way towards fostering a cooperative spirit and a reconsideration of some of the beliefs and practices, so that there is a blending of spiritual and biomedical solutions to dealing with pandemics now and in the future.

68 Chirisa, "The Impact and Implications of Covid-19", 2.

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