

A TIME LIKE NO OTHER

Covid-19 in Women's Voices



Compiled and edited by Nontando Hadebe,
Daniela Gennrich, Susan Rakoczy and Nobesuthu Tom

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The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians – South Africa

www.circle.org

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**From
the People of Japan**



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Karen Pryke Poltera and Aubrey Bango:

- Most of the artwork featured in this book is from Poltera’s calendar produced in July 2020, which she describes as “Japanese prints, copied in some way and transposed into African relevance.”
- Aubrey Bango’s artwork, commissioned by Dr. Nontando Hadebe, consists of two pieces: “A Woman in Mourning” and “Women Rejoicing”.

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c. Visionaries

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians – South Africa who started the conversation that gave birth to this book.

Finally, we thank God for inspiration, guidance and sustenance throughout the journey from vision to publication in the context of multiple challenges from Covid-19 and the lockdown.

This book is a tribute to all women contributors to this book, and in memory of two phenomenal women whose deaths inspired this book project – Alease Brown, the chair of *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians – South Africa*, and Tamsyn Allison, an activist for justice. Although their deaths were not directly related to Covid-19, we remember them in this context because the lockdown restrictions prevented us from grieving and celebrating their lives in ways that we would have loved to.

Foreword

It has been said that the Corona Virus Pandemic has been a light bearer that continues to shine light on the latent pandemics of the world. It has shown the world that the pandemic of racism and white supremacy continues unabated in the world. During “lockdowns” the “Black Lives Matter” Movement had to remind the world that black lives do matter. In South Africa, the bright light was shone on the pandemic of Sexual and Gender Based Violence, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, unequal access to basic needs like shelter, water, health facilities etc. issues of food security, corrupt government officials... the list goes on.

The stories told in this book touch on this wide range of issues as experienced by women of South Africa. The stories carry audible voices of women’s pains and trauma of living in fear of violence in their homes – for themselves and for their children, fear of illness and death by the virus, and loss of loved ones. The truth is that poor women have suffered the effects of the pandemic the worst. Their stories are hardly told by the mainstream media. Who wants to hear the pain of a woman front line worker whose daughter was raped by her father or brother while she had to work during lockdown? Women’s realities do not make it to the news! Some of these stories reveal women’s resilience and “stubborn faith” in God. Others are thought provoking reflections of gender activists and women theologians who wrote to encourage faith and hope in God who is ever present with the world and suffers with it. I commend each and every girl and woman who has either taken time to write or has been courageous enough to put her feelings into words. Your acts of courage will unlock and enable more girls and women to give words to their feelings and experiences!

I commend these stories to all especially those in leadership. Take time to listen to each one of them! Listening carefully, a community or government leader who is committed to gender justice and service delivery- would find out what s/he needs to do. A religious leader who is committed to the transformation of society would

learn how to walk alongside women as they seek full human dignity. Let this “time like no other” open all human eyes and strengthen the resolve of leaders of all sectors of South African society, to promote equality and gender justice, not just in words but in clear actions.

*Rev Purity Malinga (Presiding Bishop),
The Methodist Church of Southern Africa,
09 March 2021*

Introduction

“Stories Behind the Stories”

COVID-19 is a tragic and overwhelming story of a global health crisis that shook the world leaving a trail of suffering and death. According to the WorldOMeter the global rates of infection and deaths continue to rise and as of 24 March 2021 the number of infections were 125, 134, 855 and 2,750,958 deaths.¹ In South Africa the numbers were 1, 538, 961 infections, 1, 465,204 recoveries and 52, 251 deaths.² Behind these numbers are stories of heartbreak, loss, survival and trauma.

The measures taken to curb the pandemic such as social distancing, sanitizing, lockdown, closure of educational institutions and workplaces exposed the deep-seated inequalities in our society making COVID-19 a pandemic of inequality. The pandemic has had a differential impact and nowhere is this most evident than in its impact on women in general, and poor women in particular. COVID-19 is also a gendered pandemic that demands gender mainstreaming in all responses and interventions. It is in response to this context that *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle)* in South Africa started a conversation on how best to respond to the multiple crises COVID-19 has caused for women.

Isabel Phiri, former continental coordinator of *The Circle*, described the source of African women’s theology as stories and experiences of women. She further explains the nature of theology as inclusive of all women within and outside of academia. The following quotation states this clearly:

African women’s theologies take women’s experiences as its starting point, focusing on the oppressive areas of life caused by injustices such as patriarchy, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, capitalism, globalisation and sexism. It sees a need to

1 <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> accessed 24 March 2021

2 <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/> accessed 24 March 2021.

*include the voices of all women, not just theologians, because it acknowledges that the majority of African women are engaging in oral theology.*³

This book embodies the vision of *The Circle* described by Phiri as it contains stories, poems, artwork, songs and theological reflections by women of all ages ranging from 12 years to over 60! The structure was inspired by *Catholic Women Speak: Bringing our gifts to the Table*.⁴ One of the unique features is the different writing styles and forms the stories have taken. The unique choice of expressions has been retained as the aim is to let the stories be heard as told by women – with no demand for adherence to formal literary styles. It was felt that the demand for particular types of writing would exclude rather than include all.

The book was also inspired by the deaths of two phenomenal women during this time. The first, Alease Brown, was the chair of *The Circle* chapter in South Africa and had within her tenure transformed and improved all aspects of the organisation. The second woman was Tamsyn Allison, a powerful activist for justice who died after childbirth complications, having given birth at home because of the lockdown. So, we remember them in a special way as we add their stories to those of other women to create an anthology that uplifts the voices of women during COVID-19 in South Africa.

There are six themes with many stories that could easily fit into more than one theme. These stories are woven together through cross cutting themes such as trauma, grief, violence, loss, faith, and hope.

The theme of the first section ‘**Tribute and Trauma**’ sets the context for the rest of the book. The traumatic experiences of women violated and lost during COVID-19 must be remembered and preserved as a tribute to all women. This section begins with a theological reflection by Daniela Gennrich entitled *COVID-19, Gender-Based Violence and the Church: A Church Gender Activist's Reflections*. Gennrich weaves the stories of women survivors of violence with theological themes and questions that challenge churches to intervene and act. The stories elaborate further on the themes of tribute and trauma. The three tributes to the loss of women's lives are: *Death*

3 Isabel A. Phiri, “Southern Africa,” in *Introduction to Third World Theologies*, ed. John Parratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 156.

4 Catholic Women Speak Network. *Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2015).

and Mourning During a Pandemic: *The Passing of Alease Brown* by Nobesuthu Tom; *Tamsyn Allison: Loving Revolutionary* by Emma Kennedy and Friends; and *Letter to Mahlamba Ndlopfu* by Bhekisisa Mncube, which is a tribute to victims of femicide. In *Lockdown, Fighting Memories* is Tshegofatso Mekgwe's story about her experiences of lockdown in China that brought back memories of her experience of sexual violence. Eighteen-year-old Tari Nyamayaro's powerful and haunting poem 'from the grave' *Auditioning for my Funeral* concludes this section.

The theme of the second section is '**Lament**' and begins with an introduction to lament by Merrishia Singh-Naicker who focusses primarily on biblical sources but draws from other traditions and disciplines as well. The other articles in this section are personal experiences of lament beginning with three deeply moving contributions from our youngest authors: Luwelle James (12), who wrote *The Day My Mom Took Her Last Breath*; Mahalia Khanya Naicker's (13) *Rollercoaster of Corona: Life that includes art and song*; and Tiara's (19) poem *Groundhog Year*. The last two stories are from women navigating difficult experiences. In *A Blocked Journey* by Martha Mapasure, a Zimbabwean mother studying in Belgium, shares her pain of being separated from her child due to lockdown. Esperande Bigirimana's *Physically Distanced and Socially Close* is her story as a migrant woman who had to face the injustice of the death of her husband, her own infection with COVID-19 and that of her nephew's in the midst of challenges of looking after her family as a single parent. The section ends with a poem *Ashamed, Unearthed, Restored* by Mpho Ashley Motene.

The theme of the third section is '**Ministry Challenges**'. This section reflects the stories, challenges and experiences faced by women clergy and laity in the context of Covid-19. Dianne Willman sets the context with her article *Feed my Sheep: A Reflection on the Online Celebration of the Eucharist in Lockdown* that tackles one of the most contested discussions during lockdown: access to the Eucharist in the context of online services. Drawing from her theology of the Eucharist and experiences of her members, she presents a renewed theology of inclusion. This is followed by two stories from women in ministry facing their own unique challenges: Rev Nokuthula Dhladhla confronts her own vulnerability as she wrestled with her experiences of COVID-19 in her article *Breathing Anew*; similarly, yet differently, Rev Seipati Ngcobo in *A Story of a Woman's Lockdown: Personal Reflections* shares her discernment process that led her to start an innovative online ministry for women. The last two

articles are from practitioners in the fields of spiritual direction and narrative therapy. Dr Annemarie Paulin-Campbell reflects on issues emerging for women from her experiences of spiritual direction in *Spiritual Accompaniment in a Time of Pandemic* while Nicky Dickson, a narrative therapist, describes her experiences of 'birthing new stories' in *The Midwife*. The section ends with a poem from Ebbah Dube entitled *Amidst the Chaos*.

The fourth section consists of stories of hope collated under the theme '**Trials and Faith**' and begins with the classic biblical story of Job. Professor Madipoane Maseanya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) reflects theologically on the experiences of Job in *Reading the (Christian) Bible in a COVID-19 Infected Context: Learning from Job?* The theme continues with four stories, a song and a poem. Zanele Makombe describes trials that led to rethinking and re-imagining her life and faith in *Life Redefined, Order Reordered and Faith Still the Constant – Am I Safe?*; Virginia Mafaralala navigates her faith through multiple trials at work, church and the trauma of losing both her father and grandfather in *Journey with Me through My Unknown Winter*; Manazi Mncube tells her story of resilience and faith through her experiences of abuse as a child and wife in *New Beginnings*; Nobesuthu Tom wrestles with her relationship with her daughter in the midst of multiple challenges surrounding COVID-19 and finds renewed hope in *Gratitude in the Midst of the Pandemic*; Najma Khota describes the new COVID-19 related challenges faced by counsellors in hospitals who take on new roles as mediators between patients and their relations in *The Power of Connection During a Pandemic*. *A Raped Girl* is a protest song of defiance and hope written by Healing in Harmony, a Project of Phephisa Survivors' Network. The section concludes with a poem by Rev Bulelwa Woolly entitled *I Will Speak*.

The fifth section '**Our Multiple Experiences**' brings together a collection of stories, poetry and reflective meditation. These contributions attest to the extraordinary range of women's experiences during COVID-19 that confirm the saying that 'each woman has her own story.' The stories are *The Dark Night of the Soul* by Rooks Moodley; *My Story of Gratitude* by Christine Assy known as Chubby; *The COVID-19 Effects on my Mental Health and Ministry* by Ntusi; *Reflections Of My Experience With A Corona Virus Infected Family Member* by M G Ngoepe; and *COVID-19, the Face of Real Pain* by Busisiwe Gasa. The poems are *Letter 01* by Duduzile Pila and *Passion of Our Lord – Passion of Our People* by Adri Sutherland. The section

ends with a reflective meditation from Frances Correia entitled *COVID-19 – Into the Wilderness with Jesus*.

The book concludes with a section called **Hoping** – as a verb of action, not a noun of possession. We live into hope guided by Selina Palm's *Stones of Death or Stories of Hope? Sustaining Hope in Times of Despair and Anxiety*, a closing liturgy with a meditation from Rev Tracy Bell, *Meditations: Lockdown Rose Blessings*, and *Lament and Assurance* by Rev Janet Trisk.

COVID-19 has totally disrupted our world. The stories and reflections in this book powerfully demonstrate the resilience and courage of women who have met the challenges and moved with courage and strength into the new world we are creating together.

Coordinating Editor: Nontando Hadebe

Editors: Daniela Gennrich, Susan Rakoczy and Nobesuthu Tom



PART 1:
Tribute and Trauma

Part 1: Tribute and Trauma

COVID-19, Gender-Based Violence, and the Church: A Church
Gender Activist's Reflections

Daniela Gennrich

Death and Mourning During a Pandemic – the Passing of
Alease Brown

Nobesuthu Tom

Tamsyn Allison – A Loving Revolutionary

Emma Kennedy and Friends

OPINION – Letter to Mahlamba Ndlopfu

Bhekisisa Mncube

In Lockdown, Fighting Memories

Tshegofatso Mekgwe

Auditioning for my Funeral

Tari Nyamayaro

COVID-19, Gender-Based Violence, and the Church: A Church Gender Activist's Reflections

Daniela Gennrich

Daniela Gennrich is a feminist gender activist and consultant. She is Gender Ministry Coordinator in the Anglican Diocese of Natal and Coordinator of We Will Speak Out South Africa.

*"When you are abused, your spirit is attacked.
That is why we need to go to our faith leaders."¹*

– Nompilo Gcwensa, Chairperson, Phephisa Survivors Network

Ever since President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that he considers Gender-Based Violence (GBV) to be a parallel pandemic alongside COVID-19,² it has been on everybody's lips. While the President speaks of the high GBV statistics, the Minister of Police insists that GBV statistics are down since lockdown.³ The debate continues. Finally, we have a National Strategic Plan to end GBV and femicide, although civil society and government do not always agree on the best ways forward. Social media continues to be awash with media reports of ever more sensational stories of GBV with men representing the majority of the perpetrators. Almost every

1 *Asikhulume, Sizwane! Open Faith-Based Conversations about Sexual and Gender-Based Violence* (Durban: We Will Speak Out South Africa and Phephisa Survivors Network, et al. 2017). Durban, 3.

2 Estelle Ellis, "Gender-based Violence is South Africa's Second pandemic, says Ramaphosa," 18 June 2020, *Daily Maverick*, accessed October 31, 2020, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-06-18-gender-based-violence-is-south-africas-second-pandemic-says-ramaphosa/>

3 Estelle Ellis, "Gender-based Violence is South Africa's Second pandemic, says Ramaphosa," 18 June 2020, *Daily Maverick*, accessed October 31, 2020, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-04-09-is-gender-based-violence-not-a-serious-and-violent-crime-minister-cele/>

organisation – both governmental and otherwise – has purportedly addressed GBV, either as a marketing opportunity or through webinars or workshops.

It is disturbing that, once again, some churches have been in the media for alleged clergy misconduct.⁴ Despite this negative publicity, there is evidence that more churches are breaking the silence on GBV and taking positive action.

Meanwhile, Women's Month has gone, the economy is opening up, and most South Africans are once again going about their business.

While I am excited about these developments, there is something missing. We have heard precious little from survivors themselves about the human and communal cost of COVID-19 and

GBV, and the impacts on the everyday lives of ordinary women and children in particular.⁵ So, in this chapter I will first review women's experiences of GBV during the different stages of lockdown by listening to women's perspectives and survivor perspectives in particular. I will draw extensively on conversations I have had with survivors, community activists and other diverse women from whom I have been privileged to learn.

Reflecting on all this suffering, confusion and pain, has caused me to ask: "Where is God in all of this?" I am discomfited, and sink into despair as I wonder whether we have read the signs of the times correctly, because it seems that we are losing the battle against the evils of GBV. But before I slip into total despair, I share some glimpses of God at work that I have been privileged to witness. It is with the help of the prophetic voices of some young women, I am moved to ask, "What is required of the church at this time?" Then I proceed to listen to some voices of senior church leaders who are willing to question some of the fundamental assumptions the church has been built upon for centuries. The chapter closes with some practical ways forward to begin to imagine what it might mean to be church in the context of GBV and COVID-19 in one of the world's most unequal and violent societies.

4 For example, the Enlightened Christian Gathering and Kwasizabantu Mission.

5 While GBV affects both women and men, and violence certainly affects all genders, research in all parts of the world agrees that in most cases, violence is perpetrated by men against other men, women and children. So, the focus of this chapter is largely on women and children.

COVID-19, Lockdown and Gender-Based Violence: Voices from the Battleground

Phephisa is a community-based network of GBV survivor support groups in Kwa-Zulu Natal Province, South Africa. Phephisa's stated aim is "to give voice to survivors and to advocate for safer environments for survivors of Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV)".⁶ Their work is rooted in the belief that SGBV is an assault on human rights and undermines the equal dignity of all people created in God's image.

Their approach accompanies survivors as they journey from being victims silenced by shame to survivors who are able to reach out to others in solidarity and to speak truth to power. They are able to speak out, because they have let go. This is summed up in their name, *Phephisa* Survivors Network:

*Phephisa has a few layers of meaning. It means Forgiveness, Letting Go (not to excuse others, but to free ourselves from the power of the pain caused us). It also means Shelter, or Safety. So Phephisa offers a safe place for survivors of GBV – a place where they can let go and move on.*⁷

Over the past two years, I have had the privilege of working in partnership with *Phephisa*. This has changed my life. As a white feminist faith-based gender activist for over 30 years, from a privileged background and a childhood abuse survivor, *Phephisa* offered me the safe space I have yearned for. I was able to speak my truth publicly for the first time in 2019. I have found my own *Phephisa*. While I can never assume to understand or speak for their experiences, in my We Will Speak Out South Africa (WWSOSA) work of equipping the faith sector to address gender-based violence, I take my cue from *Phephisa*, and where possible, we undertake activities together.

Many of the stories in this section have been narrated to me by *Phephisa* Support Group Champions, and I will trace the trajectory of the pandemic by sharing some aspects of the stories.

6 *Phephisa Constitution*, Approved 10 December 2019 (Durban: Phephisa, 2019) 1.

7 *Phephisa Annual Report* (Durban: Phephisa, 2019) 1.

Lockdown Level 5: Fear Within, Fear Without, Silence and Hunger

Phephisa members at this stage were mostly quiet. Many had no data; support groups could not meet, and very few had access to the online networking tools readily available to the economically advantaged. Shock, fear, disorientation and silence dominated this period. But we did hear some stories, shared below.

Some spoke of being afraid to stay indoors with abusive partners, fathers, and uncles, yet afraid to leave because of COVID-19. This has proven to be a global issue. As UN Secretary General António Guterres said:

“For many women and girls, the threat looms largest where they should be safest – in their own homes.”⁸

One woman managed to escape one Saturday night when her husband had fallen asleep. As she was running for her life to the nearest police station, some security force members stopped her, and frog-marched her straight back to her abuser. They left with a warning to her husband that sent him into a rage, and then advised her to go to the court in town for a Protection Order.

A migrant woman living in a flat in Durban narrated how she and others like her had to pay with their bodies, for food for their children, as opportunistic men took advantage of their hunger.

The gender activist community was badly-shaken when one of our own, Tamsyn Allison, decided to deliver her baby at home for fear of contracting COVID-19, but died anyway because she was unable to access adequate equipment due to the lockdown.

8 “The Secretary General’s Statement on Gender-Based Violence and COVID19,” *United Nations*, April 5, 2020, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2020/April/the-secretary-generals-statement-on-gender-based-violence-and-covid19.html>

Lockdown Level 4: False Hopes, Lingering Silence and Hunger

More Phephisa members' stories began to emerge:

A *Phephisa* member told of the relief and joy that she and her children felt during level 5, as her husband and their father became 'more like his old self again,' only to return to permanent high alert as he discovered illegal liquor outlets in level 4.

Another told of schoolgirls dropping out of school because the limited internet data packs available to their families was reserved for their brothers' online schooling.

Some food parcel schemes remembered to include sanitary towels for women and teenage girls, but most did not.

The R350 grants, increased children's grants, and Unemployment Insurance Fund, designed to help the materially poor, remained out of the reach for most people, due to bureaucratic obstacles. *Phephisa* and local churches distributed food parcels.

Lockdown Level 3: The Ugly Truth

Two-thirds of the three million people in South Africa who lost their livelihoods during the lockdown were women, but the Solidarity Fund provisions ignored the needs of informal traders, most of whom were women. So, while President Ramaphosa has declared GBV a co-pandemic alongside COVID-19, he and his government have exacerbated women's vulnerability to GBV by instituting structural response mechanisms that have ignored the needs of the majority of materially poor women. Is this not a form of structural GBV?

Media was awash with stories of five women who were murdered in just the first week of lockdown level 3, brutally maimed and tortured, humiliated and strung up in a tree or thrown into the veld.

A nurse who had been working throughout lockdown discovered that both her daughters (aged thirteen and fifteen) were pregnant by their eighteen-year-old brother. He had run away when found out, and she was battling to decide whether to force her daughters to carry these babies or to terminate the pregnancies – or whether to allow them some decision-making over their bodies at an age when they could not possibly know what was best.

A nurse in the maternity ward at a Durban hospital reported that many more women of all ages came in “carrying a yellow card,” signifying that they were there for termination of pregnancy. Some young women came because they knew they would be “chased away from home and no one would understand how it had happened”; others had been forced to take the ‘morning-after’ pill by uncles or other older men who had impregnated them but had their own families to look after. Many married women complained about lack of access to contraceptives during the lockdown, and yet they had to allow their husbands to have sex anytime. Because said husbands were bored and stressed, it helped them relax and reduced the tension in the home.

Various media reported in August 2020 that there had been as many as sixty-five cases of femicide during the three levels of lockdown.

Lockdown Level 2, Level 1: Abnormal Normality?

Even as I write, more news keeps coming in of increasingly brutal and more brazen attacks on women and children. An eighteen-month-old baby boy was so brutally ‘raped’ by his mother’s boyfriend that his spine was severed and his organs destroyed.⁹ A woman’s life was viciously ended by her own husband while she was laying a charge of domestic violence against him in her local police station. And the list goes on ...

9 Aron Hyman, “Justice at last for brutal murder and rape of 18-month-old Jeremiah Ruiters,” 12 Dec 2019, *Sunday Times South Africa*, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-12-12-justice-at-last-for-brutal-murder-and-rape-of-18-month-old-jeremiah-ruiters/>

Reflections: Oh God, Where Are You? God of the Little Ones, the Marginalised and the Oppressed ... This is Where God Is!

*uNkulunkulu, ukuphi?*¹⁰

*uNkulunkulu ukhona!*¹¹

Jesus expressed exasperation that the religious leaders were unable to discern the 'signs of the times,' to see the long-awaited Messiah was right in front of them, even though he had performed an abundance of signs (Matt. 16: 1-4). In the same way, we are challenged now to discern signs of God at work in the midst of the darkest of times.

More recently, it was Leonard Cohen¹² who first alerted me to this way of seeing:

"There's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

In the past 35-odd years as a GBV activist in the Church, I have realised that to look for small signs of God at work is a life-saving strategy for 'keeping on keeping on' against many odds.

So, where is God in these desperate times when cruelty, misogyny and rampant violence threaten to overwhelm us? As I have reflected about this question, in the dark times of COVID-19 lockdown and rampant GBV, I have seen some cracks of light that have given me hope.

God was, and is, in the courage of the *Phephisa Survivor Movement* leadership when they asked for help instead of succumbing to despair during the darkest days of lockdown – in their courage to reach out to those that needed them most despite fear, anxiety, disease, loneliness, and a sense of powerlessness that threatened to engulf us all. God is in the sense of solidarity that resulted in the return of hope and the strength to strategise a way through the wilderness together – through online meetings and finding ways to support each other despite the restrictions of lockdown.

10 God, where are you? (isiZulu)

11 God is here! Or, This is where God is! (isiZulu)

12 Leonard Cohen "Anthem," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wRYjtv1YK0>

God was, and is, in the emergence of a WhatsApp group among community-based and other GBV activists in KZN Province through a C19 Civil Society Coalition. It has grown into a powerful solidarity network, where activists debate issues, share their agony, strategise together towards growing a strong civil society to end GBV and femicide. It is a space of solidarity in action – where activists call for help in dealing with specific cases and others respond as they form circles of support and strong lobbies for justice for survivors.

God was, and is, in the tiny GBV Working Group of the *KZN COVID-19 Joint Churches Respond Initiative*. This working group has, beginning in KZN, found partners to: develop a training and support strategy to equip church leaders, accompany GBV trauma survivors and support other faith leaders to respond effectively.

God was, and is, in the young women and women clergy in the Anglican Diocese of Natal who are taking leadership in opening up spaces for other women to speak out and grapple with the issues of GBV through contextual Bible studies and other online forums. And in the young men in the same Diocese who are running contextual Bible studies through a WhatsApp group, reaching almost 100 other men. It is a safe enough space for some men to open up about their prejudices, fears and anger about their loss of social power, and also a space of gently opening their imaginations to the world of Jesus, who resisted power as domination and modelled new relationships.

God was, and is, in the newly-formed national faith-based collective comprising over 50 faith-based organisations and religious institutions: *Faith Action to End GBV*, hosted by UN Women, and in the new campaign themed *From Awareness to Action and Accountability* that is taking the work of the faith sector to a new level.

The Challenge to Read 'the Signs of Our Times'

Unfortunately, just because churches and communities are finally talking more openly about GBV does not seem to have reduced the numbers and severity of reported incidents, and it has not made women necessarily feel any safer.

Some profoundly simple prophetic voices have pointed me to a troubling sense that we as the Church and as GBV activists may still be failing to really understand what we are dealing with. Some are included in this volume, including some that even

speak beyond the grave.¹³ These young women are challenging us to move beyond our simplistic notions of GBV to a new narrative. Limiting GBV to the discrete, often extreme, acts of violence 'out there' in our country's laws, our headlines and our training workshops may clarify GBV but it may also limit our ability to respond effectively. GBV is pervasive. It is the small acts of violence faced by all women in their everyday lives, just because they are women. In all cultures and societies, challenges to women's sense of dignity, safety and well-being are an everyday occurrence. The miracle, and the tragedy, lies in many women's ability to find the resources to go on, in spite of their brokenness. This means that this violence has been largely invisible – at least until the emergence of mass movements led by young women who are raising their voices across social media, taking over the streets,¹⁴ and if we care to hear them, speak into our own families and social circles.

This shocking reality hit close to home in July 2020, when Tina, an 18-year-old young woman very close to me, told me that she had come to realise that:

"My body, which you have taught me to love and appreciate, is actually a liability."

Here is a bit about how she got there: At age 10, her mother began to abuse her, accusing her of 'sleeping around,' even before she knew what that meant. The violence got so bad that her mother was reported and the child was moved to a place of safety. She was enrolled in a private school, where, before long, she realised that the girls, who longed to be loved by the boys, were being used as 'trophies' in the boys' competitive games. On a school camp, she had dozed off at a social one night, and was rudely awakened by the imposition of a boy's tongue pushed into her mouth. She took weeks to get over the fact that he had "spoiled my dream when he stole my first kiss." From age 13, she experienced regular street harassment – by supermarket employees, passers-by on a busy street, or cars slowing down as she walked, drivers making lewd remarks. At 16, she confessed to me that: "I am scared. I know it is disrespectful, but I no longer greet men, of any age." In July 2020, she went to the local police station to obtain a travel permit during lockdown level 4. As she sat awaiting her turn, the officer in charge came round the desk, and whispered in

13 Tariro Nyamayaro and Bulelwa Woolly. Both of their poems are part of this publication.

14 The #Total Shutdown marches in 2019 mobilised thousands of women across eight South African cities simultaneously – arguably the second largest uprising of women in South Africa's history.

her ear: “I know you are young, but you are so beautiful, you are making me sweat.” She was overcome by fear and disgust, but needed the permit, so she continued to endure further abuse until she achieved her goal and left. It took her a while to speak about it, but that was when the realisation finally hit home, that just being a beautiful young woman in a world dominated by violent masculinities was inherently dangerous. When I asked if I could take this matter up, she simply said:

“And say what? Because it is my word against that of a police officer. And really, nothing happened.”

Researchers Kelly and Radford (1990)¹⁵ noted a similar recurring theme when interviewing multiple women about their experiences of sexual violence as early as 1990. Those who were not actually raped or had physical wounds minimised incidents where they had been the object of street harassment when passing a group of men, or comments about their bodies, unwanted touching or whispers of ‘sweet-nothings’ in their ears. Just like Tina, they did not consider these as violence because ‘nothing happened,’ they identified a disconnect between legal definitions of violence against women and the public narrative, and women’s everyday experiences. The Scottish Episcopal Church picked up on this in 2014, in an attempt to grow in the church “communities of women and men together providing resistance and hope, enlivened by the spirit, wisdom and courage of survivors”.¹⁶

Have we, by narrowing our understanding of GBV as discrete events in survivors’ lives, missed the point – that life as we know it is just not safe for over half of the world’s population, even in their places of worship. Many female ordained clergy have shared that they have not been taken seriously by male clergy, or have been confronted by direct attempts at sexual assault.¹⁷

This continuum of violence has profound psychological consequences. But it is also a means of disempowerment and maintaining patriarchal social order.

15 J. Kelly and L. Radford, “‘Nothing Really Happened’: The Invalidation of Women’s Experiences of Sexual Violence cited in. *Living a Theology that Counters Violence Against Women* (Scotland: Church of Scotland Church and Society Council, 2014), 12-13.

16 Church of Scotland, “Living a Theology,” 5.

17 ACSA Safe and Inclusive Church Commission, Online ‘listening space’. Zoom, September 2020.

*Gender-based violence is any form of violence used to establish, enforce or perpetuate gender inequalities and keep in place gendered orders. In other words, gender-based violence is a policing mechanism. James Lang, United Nations*¹⁸

How we define a problem determines how we try to solve it. As long as we view GBV as discrete aberrant and extreme events, we will repeat the same aimless cycle: we express outrage at every extreme incident; introduce one or two measures to raise awareness that GBV is unacceptable; and then return to our normal ways of living, blind to the everyday nature of socially-sanctioned means of achieving gender-control. We will never break the silence until we are prepared to examine and dismantle these systems of power that require the subordination of those who do not meet the standards of the rule-makers. Jesus already recognised this amongst the religious authorities of his time when he criticised them for “crush[ing] people with unbearable religious demands and never lift[ing] a finger to ease their burden” (Matt. 23: 4).

But there are signs of the narrative beginning to change, even though this is not yet commonly accepted. For example, I was excited to hear an Anglican bishop recently observe in a panel I shared with him:

*We don't have to see blood to recognise gender-based violence. Even the way we are structured is a form of violence. Women are present in their numbers in any of our congregations or assemblies. They literally carry the church. And yet, leadership is largely held by men. Gender-based violence is any form of injustice. Like this one. It is a form of violence.*¹⁹

Signs that God is Doing a New Thing in the Church: Voices of Survivors and Church Leaders

The ripple effects of a senior church leader, like the Anglican bishop quoted above, beginning to question the long-protected patriarchal structures of the church cannot be over-estimated. Although there is also evidence of some strong conservative

18 James Lang, Church of Scotland, “Living a Theology,” 13. <http://sidebysidegender.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Living-a-theology.pdf> [Accessed 01/11/2020]

19 Bishop Allan Kannemeyer, Bishop of Pretoria Diocese. Address at Online Anglicans Ablaze Conference: Panel on Gender Based Violence. 25th September 2020.

push-back,²⁰ those voices are no longer as dominant as even five years ago. In South Africa at least, before and especially during the time of COVID-19, I have noticed some surprising shifts amongst some churches in particular. Some have even established systemic mechanisms to address sexual abuse internally.²¹ At least seven large religious institutions²² have hosted webinars on the subject, not just of GBV but also the underlying theological drivers of GBV that undergird gender inequality. WWSOSA has been invited to address multiple online forums.

In some of these forums,²³ I have heard bishops voicing a challenge to the patriarchal nature of faith institutions and teachings as key drivers of the GBV epidemic – A challenge for which I was almost expelled in 1984. Sometimes it is hard for gender and GBV activists in the faith sector to see that things are changing. But even if it is uneven, I do believe there is progress. We need to celebrate and build on every positive development we see, if we are to create incremental change that is lasting. I firmly believe we are at the cusp of something new, as promised in Isaiah 43:19 (RSV): I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

In the previous section, we looked at evidence of God doing new things. In the rest of this section, I return to listening, this time for signs of things to come. I listen first to survivor voices speaking to church leaders, and then to diverse church leaders who are beginning to realise that their calling is not just about maintaining the institution that they are leading, but also about transforming it so that it more closely models the ministry that Jesus lived.

20 Editorial. "Lost in Revision: Radical Feminism, the Capture of the Anglican Church and the Embrace of Secular Feminism," *Anglican Observer*, October 2020. [Accessed 01/11/2020]

21 It is ironic that a church that has taken such concrete and radical steps to investigate internal abuse has come under very public fire from a GBV survivor and her supporters, who accuse the church of all manner of secondary abuses.

22 South African Council of Churches, South African Catholic Bishops Conference, Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Anglican Church of Southern Africa ('Anglicans Ablaze'); Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, We Will Speak Out South Africa; COVID-19: Joint Churches Respond, and the Global Network on Religion and Children and ARIGATOU.

23 For example: Anglicans Ablaze Online Conference, GBV Panel Discussion. 25 September 2020.

Listening to Survivors: What is Required of the Church?

The church has become sometimes so holy that you can't raise the issues of violence that you experience at home... But we find ways... When we pray in the church as women, the faith leader can sometimes think the Holy Spirit is very high today when we as women – we are just crying for our issues... and we are saying 'Oh God, this husband of mine', we're just crying about what we are experiencing.

– Lihle Cwinya-Ai

When we go through certain things, church is the very first place we go. It's a sacred place and a safe place, and we will continue to come to you. I am pleading with you, please, please, make your places safe places for us survivors. We need more than prayer. We need you to journey with us from being a victim to becoming a survivor.

– Phindile Dlodla

Yes, we tithe, we pray and we sing. But we also need someone who will stand with us. Don't just teach us but also stand with us when we need you. That way we will know that God is alive. God is not only in teaching, worshipping and singing, but God is in our lives.

– Lihle Cwinya-Ai

While none of these quotes contains overt theological teachings, I am hearing a profound 'barefoot theology'.²⁴ I hear pleas for a willingness of the church to minister where the hurting is – for solidarity, compassion and a journeying-with. I am hearing a desire for a witness to a God who is not distant but deeply concerned with the details of each person's life – God incarnate. For church as a place that is sacred because it is safe – not because it teaches of a distant 'holy' god.

²⁴ I first heard this concept in 2009, when Professor Gerald West (University of KwaZulu-Natal) invited me to a theological conference, as he believed that theologians need to connect their academic concepts of God to the grit and grime of real life, which he hoped could be the role of activist theologians.

Listening to Senior Church Leaders: Where Are We Heading?

While true transformation can only be led by those most directly affected by the oppression of unjust societies and institutions, the way senior leaders speak about these matters is critical, as they are the ones with the power to open the way for this transformation to become mainstreamed. Listening carefully to the honest grappling of some senior church leaders in various public forums recently gives me courage that we are moving somewhere new.

How can we begin to change how we do church? Our systems and structures are so deeply entrenched.

– Bishop Tsietsi Seloane, Mthatha Diocese

It is so easy as a man and a senior church leader, to be blinded by my privilege. If less than 10% of all GBV cases are reported to the police; 80% South Africa's population are church members, and 90% of those who actually go to church are women, then my church consists of many, many survivors. But also of perpetrators. How blind am I to the realities of my parishioners? What does that mean for my ministry? We have to change our church culture, even if it becomes something different.

– Bishop Nkosinathi Zondi, Truevine Community Church

We need to grapple with our received theologies that justify male dominance and condone GBV. We need to assist our churches to take practical actions. Our policy engagements have to go beyond talking shop, and ensure our policies are implemented at all levels of the church.

– Bishop Nkosinathi Myaka, Evangelical Lutheran Church

We need to rethink our cultures in radical ways without undermining them. Even in our churches, we allow our cultures to promote domination by men. We need to speak as Jesus did, to evangelise our cultures and our church cultures.

– Rev Julius August, Catholic Priest

We as faith leaders ourselves need to become safe spaces and symbols of safe spaces – by the terminology we use, by our actions, and by the messages we preach...

– Rev Vernon Hammond, Anglican Priest

Nurturing the New Growth

How then, can we intentionally nurture these ‘new things’ that we discern happening not just in academic or activist circles, but in our religious institutions?

Bishop Margaret Vertue, the only woman bishop (after passing of the other woman Bishop was taken by COVID-19) puts it plainly:

We have to first undo, then to build. We need to capture the hearts, souls and minds of the people, this must become the dominant thought, the hegemony of our day: the safe-keeping of women and children. It can never be an issue amidst other issues.

– Bishop Margaret Vertue, Anglican Liaison Bishop for Gender

The Church of Scotland proposes a three-point plan for “living out a theology that counters GBV and promotes gender justice”.²⁵ It calls on all churches to offer:

- an empowering story to live by,
- a safe and welcoming community to belong to, and
- a promise of abundant life [here and now].

I hear in this a call to return to church as it was originally practised in the time of Acts, without the politics of hierarchies, power play and exclusionism that has captured the church since Emperor Constantine first adopted the Christian faith as a State religion – when church was practiced in ordinary homes, and Communion was served by the women of the house.

The Church of Scotland Statement further proposes that a church that truly lives out a theology that counters GBV has to employ a balance of *sanction and sanctuary*.²⁶ It must *sanction* any abuse of power and any form of GBV through disciplinary processes and by declaring proactively that GBV is a sin. Positively, it must

25 Church of Scotland, “Living a Theology,” 19.

26 Church of Scotland, “Living a Theology,” 18.

teach all its members from Sunday School onwards what harmonious respectful relationships look like in family, church and society. Living out that commitment will go a long way to ensuring that the church can provide much-needed *sanctuary* to survivors of violence and those most vulnerable to GBV.

The desire expressed by the survivors quoted above also includes a longing for the church to offer some sort of healing process that recognises that God is in the messiness of their lives. Some Anglican clergy have also talked about the need for a process that allows for an 'offloading' of the pain, the guilt and other emotions associated with their violent histories. One suggestion is for the church to open spaces for a 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the Soul' – for both women and men, in different spaces, and later perhaps, together. It may be possible to do this through carefully designed liturgical worship spaces of 'narrative repair'.²⁷ Through listening to the stories and lament of women and others who do not fit patriarchal gender norms, the men present might begin to understand the damage done through the 'small incidents' that make up the continuum of the lives of women and other 'misfits.' However, these spaces need to be carefully constructed to avoid doing further damage in the context of the multiple webs of oppression at play in South Africa.²⁸

Realising that GBV is not something 'out there' may make all of us more conscious about how we live our lives and exercise our ministry. While putting survivor voices at the centre to guide our actions, we must guard against an 'us and them' approach. In a sense, we are all survivors – either directly or because someone close to us has been affected. We are also all culpable in different ways. For example, many bystanders are haunted by guilt, and there have been times when most of us have misused our relational power that has hurt others.

I believe it is appropriate to give the last word to one of the only women at the highest level of leadership in any church in South Africa, Bishop Purity Malinga,

27 L. Gibson, "Ethics from the Other Side: Postcolonial, Lay, and Feminist Contributions to Anglican Ethics," *Anglican Theological Review*, 92, (2012); 639-664; Daniela Gennrich and Susan Rakoczy, "Liturgy, Faith and Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights: A Study of Liturgical Reframing in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa" in (eds). 2018. *Liturgy and Identity: African Religio-Cultural and Ecumenical Perspectives*. eds. Lilian Siwila and Roderick R Hewitt (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.). 49

28 J. S. Masango, And H. J, C. Pieterse, "Liturgy on the Edge of Community," *Practical Theology in South Africa*, 23, (2008.): 124-139.

Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church, who challenged us “to begin to do church differently” as long ago as 2004.²⁹

She proposes seven actions for churches to undertake to truly transform ourselves to be able to minister to God's people in the midst of the GBV pandemic:

1. *The starting point of re-imagining a different world is to recognise the wrong in the present. Openly condemn GBV in strongest terms and declare it A SIN AGAINST HUMANITY.*
2. *Become an alternative community where the dignity of all people is respected – through education, behaviour change and practising what we preach in all our ministries.*
3. *Invest in clergy training and continuing theological training. There is an urgent need for re-reading scripture in light of the current context of gender-based violence and injustice.*
4. *Men of the church [and perhaps all of us] – be willing to embrace discomfort about Gender Justice and GBV. Avoid defensiveness or silent discomfort. Embracing the discomfort helps in opening one up to growth and transformation.*
5. *Accompany children directly as they grow, as well as supporting parents with parenting skills.*
6. *Partner with other sectors of society. We cannot do everything but we have something unique to contribute.*
7. *“Remember that the project of transforming the world is God's project. As we engage in all these efforts, let us insist on being a praying church. Our strength comes from God.”³⁰*

29 Daniela Gennrich, ed. *The Church in an HIV+ World*. Pietermaritzburg (Pietermaritzburg: PACSA, 2004), Back Cover.

30 Purity Malinga. *Christianity: Patriarchy & GBV – A Time for Re – imagination*. Notes for a SACC Webinar. 6th August 2020, 3.

Conclusion

This chapter has listened to some voices of survivors and vulnerable women and girls to understand the impact of COVID-19 on GBV, as well as some progressive voices amongst senior church leaders. It has asked what we are missing, but has also found some signs of hope, and considered what might be demanded of the church in the face of the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and GBV. The journey has been long, and we have a long way to go. But we can be hopeful, because:

[T]he foundation to build on has been laid. There is a degree of awareness, and alertness in the church and in society. There is also enough anger about this scourge, which gives hope and is a springboard for re-imagining a different world – a world of gender equality.³¹

We have to take seriously this call, because survivors and those most vulnerable to violence continue to look to the church:

We trust you, you can do better than any other institution.

– Esperande Bigirimana, Phephisa Survivors Network

31 Malinga, Christianity: Patriarchy and GBV, 3.

Death and Mourning During a Pandemic – the Passing of Alease Brown³²

Nobesuthu Tom

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In the last stanza of Maya Angelou's poignant poem, "When Great Trees Fall," is the line "And when great souls die, after a period, peace blooms." While the length of the period one has to wait for such peace is uncertain, the hope that the peace will come is ever present. This hope is largely possible through the rituals and customs of mourning, each important in its own way, as a step in the journey of grieving. As we wander through this journey of grief, we are able to accept the reality of the death and are able to call on the memories of the person whom we loved, to inspire us as we who are alive resume our own searching for meaning in life.

With the pandemic of COVID-19, this journey of grief that we should have embarked upon for our dear friend and sister, Alease Brown, was not possible. We were denied mourning. At the time of her death, Alease Brown was coordinator of the Southern African Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians and post-doctoral fellow at the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice, based at the University of the Western Cape. This reflective piece seeks to map out the series of events around her death, and considers the impact of the lockdown on burial and

32 This work is based on research supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa under the auspices of the Desmond Tutu Chair in Religion and Social Justice [Grant Number: 118854]. The opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in the research are those of the author alone; the NRF accepts no liability in this regard.

mourning. We document her narrative as stories are part of the human experience. They not only record a series of events, but capture memories associated with those events. At times such as this, the memories are very painful, yet healing comes in capturing them, and as one keeps visiting and revisiting the story, the pain eases. And so, it is with Alease, that as we try to cope with her death and move on, we wish for her memory never to fade into nothing.

Although Alease did not die of COVID-19, she died a week before the President declared the national lockdown. With borders closing soon after, Alease's body could not be flown back to the United States, her home country. And so, with no body to bury, both her South African family of friends and colleagues, and her biological family in the US, hung in limbo, unable to say, 'Rest in peace' and reach closure to this tragic event.

She was a beautiful mystery, with a naughty smile and a twinkle in her eye. When she spoke, imparting insight and wisdom, her voice sounded like she was perpetually on the verge of a big laugh.

Alease had come to us, the community of the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice (The Centre) through our Director, Professor Sarojini Nadar, to serve her post-doctoral fellowship. The first time we met her was at the postgraduate cohort supervision workshop in April 2019. An American among Africans, she brought a different perspective to our discussions as we tried to find and articulate our research focus areas. As she asked, "Why is that so?" or "What do you mean by that?" it dawned on me that we perhaps take much for granted as Africans on matters relating to Africa and African identity. In the African American she was, she brought a fresh lens to how we look at our continent, our issues, and the way we engage with social justice in academia.

Clearly not one to shy away from a challenge, Alease jumped at the opportunity to represent the Desmond Tutu Centre at a Pan-African Conference of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (The Circle) held in Botswana, in July 2019. Considering her leadership acumen, and her commitment to mentorship, it was not surprising that she was unanimously elected as the regional coordinator for Southern Africa at this meeting.

"Alease has big plans for The Circle." Prof Nadar told me. "It is surprising to note, that while the issue of race is implicit in The Circle's research and writing, with a

few exceptions, race has never featured as a critical feature in our work. Alease and I have both been pondering why this is so. She wants to put race as a variable of analysis, firmly back on The Circle agenda.”

I smiled. I was beginning to like this Alease. Reviewing much of The Circle literature for my Honours and then my Masters, I too was surprised by this strange gap in much of the work of The Circle. It seemed that the work of Musa Dube, Madi-poane Masenya and others from the Southern African Circle who had begun this critical race work needed expansion, and who better than Alease whose PhD had focussed on the intersections of religion and Black protest, to lead the way? I felt Alease couldn't have come at a better time, as discourses of white privilege and normativity were gaining public and scholarly attention. It would only take time and a courageous soul, like Alease, to bring this issue to the table for The Circle to stare it in the eye.

Always tactful to first chat and sense how you are, it was out of character for Prof Nadar to get to the point so quickly on a phone call.

“Nobesuthu, I have some sad news to tell you,” she said.

My guard went up. I thought she was going to tell me that my sponsorship had not been approved for this academic year. It was the beginning of the year, after all.

“I'm listening, Prof.”

“It's Alease.”

“Oh, ok?”

“She has passed on.”

“How? That can't be. She was fine when I last saw her!”

You see, a couple of days before, my daughter and I had gone to Chris Barnard Hospital in the city to fetch Alease's keys to go switch off the stove she had left on when she had suddenly had to go to hospital. Yes, she had been in bed at the hospital but she was not looking sick. She had some discomfort but she was not in pain. My daughter even commented on how beautiful she was. To reconcile the news

of Alease's death in the midst of the mental picture I had of a vibrant and upbeat (albeit a little ill) person at the hospital was a great challenge.

For several days after this announcement, the news of Alease's passing spread across the globe. Facebook was awash with pictures and memories shared by Alease's friends from all over the world. Within The Centre, shock rippled across our WhatsApp groups, as more of our associates heard the news. Messages from the post-graduate cohort of students poured in:

"May her Creator be pleased with her. May she be pleased with her Creator."

– Fatima Seedat

"May her radiant smile light her path to the ancestral realms."

– Prof Nadar

Offers of help and support came in from the two PhD candidates living and working in the US.

It was in the midst of all this pain and shock that the team at The Centre gathered on the Monday after her passing for a communal pause to collectively acknowledge this painful loss, and to plan how we could provide a space to mourn, by way of a memorial service, for Alease's South African colleagues and friends. Her former colleagues at Stellenbosch University and the Methodist Church of Southern Africa church who were in town were also keen on this idea.

Leading the pause, Prof. Nadar read us some text messages she and Alease had exchanged about a project they were working on together.

"I keep asking myself, what did I miss?" she cried as she read the texts.

"There's nothing there, Prof. Everything sounds like she was ok, not that sick." Every one tried to bring reassurance; Sonwabile tried to comfort her.

"Eish, this is a problem. Alease was also on a journey to discern her calling. This is such a loss." Rhine, tutor on Alease and Megan's course, and lay minister in the Anglican Church, mourned.

"She was not even planning to stay the night in hospital. She had left a pot on the stove. She even had her laptop bag with her," I explained.

We left the meeting with a plan to host a memorial service towards the end of the week. However, that same afternoon, the university closed campus due to fears about COVID-19. Soon after, our President announced the national lockdown. "What can we do? We can't just go on as if nothing has happened," Prof. Nadar cried.

Sadly, there was nothing we could do as a group. And so, during phone calls, in Zoom meetings, via emails, in our activities, we mourned the loss and upheld the work and dignity of our sister:

- The team at the Methodist Church committed to ensuring that her body would be sent home and her apartment handed back to the landlord.
- Prof. Nadar, drawing on help from another postdoc scholar, Megan, continued the work she and Alease had started on a journal edition to commemorate the life and work of Katie Geneva Cannon.
- Megan and Rhine resumed teaching the Honours class, online.
- Nontando Hadebe, The Circle's ex officio coordinator of Southern Africa, stepped back into the role she had handed over to Alease.
- The postgraduate cohort of students, at which most of us had first met Alease, observed a moment of silence at the beginning of our first online meeting this year (2020).

As the days of the lockdown stretched into weeks and now months, with fear of COVID-19 mounting every day, the sense of loss of a dear sister did not ease. Just as we could not help sometimes feeling that the lockdown had taken some of our freedoms away, we also felt keenly that it had taken away our right to acknowledge and mourn Alease as a member of our community. And so, as we tried to reconcile ourselves to the practice of isolation, we also tried to make peace with this unAfrican, non-communal way of mourning. Needless to say, the memories remain unrelenting:

"So, why did you decide to come back for your postdoc? Surely, you could have done it in America?" I asked her during one of the Wednesday lunch meetings we had taken to having at the Gardens Shopping Centre in Cape Town.

"I am not done. I am not done with Africa yet," she said with passion in her eyes.

"What do you mean? Don't you miss your family?" She had just come back from the December holidays in America.

"I do. In fact, my family didn't want me to come back this year but I just had to."

I understood. Africa can do that to you.

Another time: As a Masters student in the company of postdoc fellows, I listened in awe as Alease and Megan discussed their plans for the class they were co-teaching, papers they wanted to publish and projects they wanted to pursue. All this was happening while standing around the office at the Centre in the afternoon of Ash Wednesday. Later Alease and I went to my church, Rosebank Methodist Church, for the service. On the way we started talking about our faith and Christianity, now that we had studied theology as an academic subject.

"I am really struggling to reconcile my African identity to what I know now about Christianity," I confessed.

"I don't," she said.

"Really? Don't you sometimes wonder how life would be if African religion had been given the same recognition as Christianity?"

"I do but I also know I am committed to Christianity. It is a religion I choose now, flaws and all."

"Really?"

"Yes. I love the rituals, the symbols, everything about the Christian faith. It makes me feel grounded."

How I pray for such conviction as I continue to question and doubt!

And so, as we, individually and sometimes communally, went about our daily lives, we thought of Alease. As the government closed off borders and airlines could no longer fly, some days we dared to ask, "Has her body gone home yet?" Not because we wanted her off the African soil, but because we kept thinking of her family, and asking ourselves, "How do you mourn when you have not seen the body? How do you say 'rest in peace' when you have not laid your loved one to rest?" You see, during this sad time, we also got to 'meet' Alease's family. Some of us spoke to her sister, Althea. Alease was not just someone we knew. She was a daughter to her mother, a sister to her siblings and an aunt to her niece. She was as beloved to another family as she was to ours.

And now, as we mourn the deaths of other people we know, taken by COVID-19, and more recently, by gender-based violence, we also cry for the opportunity we lost as the South African family to mourn the loss of a dear sister. *Ukunjula amathambo alele ukuthula* (veneration of the sleeping bones) is a ritual premised on the belief that the bones of the dead don't disappear into nothingness. Instead, they sleep peacefully and should be respected. This can only happen if the body of the departed has been buried. Within an African traditional worldview, these bones only rest when they are buried in the person's ancestral land. As each of us in the Centre pondered daily about when Alease's body would return to the US, we did so because we could not imagine a family reaching closure of the death of a loved one without the opportunity to view and to bury the body. Death is, after all, an embodied experience and event, and burial is a key part of the ritual in this event. When we finally heard that her body landed back home in June, we all breathed a collective sigh of relief.

In their reflections on gendered practices of death and mourning, many writers in The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians have noted how some traditional practices can be fraught with pain and suffering for women. Yet we recognize that there are also some healing aspects to these practices. The moments of coming together, often in prayer, create a safe space to articulate pain and loss and to be comforted by others. In these moments, the departed's value to the community is validated and their human dignity recognised. South Africa's strict COVID-19 regulations allowed only fifty people to attend a funeral, and memorial services and vigils have become a thing of the past. The pain of the loss of these moments is painted right across many social media platforms – being unable to say goodbye to loved ones and unable to complete all the rituals of burial and bereavement. I imagine that once the lockdown is lifted, there will be an exodus to the rural provinces, to the ancestral homes, to complete burial rituals for all the people who have died during the lockdown.

Within many African traditions and religions it is believed that people do not die. Instead, they depart to the land of the ancestors where they continue to serve the people they left behind. It is for this reason that in the Xhosa tradition, many families practice the ritual of 'bringing back' the departed. This is a way of giving dignity to the dead and of strengthening the relationship between the living and the dead.

This is one of the rituals I expect will be performed many times during the exodus to the rural areas.

The return of Alease's physical body to the USA means that the journey of grief has only just begun. As we continue to remember Alease, we hope the story of her life will be told for many generations, and as the strong African woman she was, that she will continue to counsel, protect and guide those of us she left behind.

And so, we live in the hope that, one day, we shall all meet again.

Rest in peace, Alease!

Tamsyn Allison – A Loving Revolutionary

Emma Kennedy and friends

Emma Kennedy, Cookie Edwards and Daniela Gennrich are all members of the KwaZulu-Natal Network on Gender-Based Violence and work together with local community-based activists to end GBV and support survivors

How can one ever truly reflect the multiplicity and multi-faceted nature of another?

How can words on a page give shape and substance to the wonderful ineffability of human life, especially when the particular life in question reflects the greatness and glory and the messiness and realness of family, of community – all in their widest, most inclusive senses. Tamsyn Allison was, and remains, a deeply loved and cherished partner, mother, daughter, friend and ally. Her death, following post-birth complications, occurred in hospital and due to the severe restrictions of the lockdown Tamsyn died with only her medical team around her. Her beloved, Devan, her children and her family were all at a distance, and desperate.

The waves of joy and excitement of the birth of her fifth child was all too quickly replaced by a tsunami of numb, uncomprehending heartbreak.

I first met Tamsyn in 2012 but it wasn't until 2017 and a planning meeting for The Total Shutdown march, set for August of that year, that we had a chance to really connect. It was immediately apparent that this was a woman who was fearless, incisive, and inclusive. I quickly learned that Tamsyn lived her life radically and vibrantly oriented towards justice.



Tamsyn was inspirational and knowing her meant you were simultaneously encouraged to expand your consciousness while also experiencing from her a deep acceptance of who you really truly are.

Others found her similarly inspiring:

An embodiment of a troop of warriors, the passion you have for the emancipation of womxn will continue to linger on in all those you fought beside. Your fire will continue to carry on with us.

– Maungo Matyobeni

She astounded me with her fearlessness and her passion for justice. I loved that she was so defiantly against any form of unkindness, from the tiniest verbal slight, to the worst physical abuse.

– Kim Lithgow

We have marched against gender-based violence together, and she has helped me find shelter for abuse survivors. She's been my go-to person for anything autism-related and when I needed contacts in the LGBTQ+ community I knew that Tamsyn was the person to reach out to. Because that is what she did. She had a way of building a tribe around people. A tribe of lost souls. She wove us together like a silken tapestry, and she, the wounded warrior-weaver at its centre, held space for us all.

– Taryn Turner

Tamsyn's commitment to truth sometimes made her a challenging person. Just ask the people who assumed they could be racist, ableist, sexist or misogynistic in her proximity, whether in real life or online.

Many of us are often reluctant to change our habitual practices and it can be unsettling to consider another perspective. But just because you disagreed with Tam's position or her methods did not necessarily mean you lost her friendship. Tamsyn was relaxed about difference. In fact, she was intentional about opening herself up to difference and she oriented herself to expanding and growing from the richness that diversities offer. Tamsyn embodied the knowledge that real or difficult conversation and intentional sharing of life is essential to building authentic communities.

One shining example of this labour of love is the community she built on Facebook called *Conversations for a Just South Africa*.

Despite her deep wide knowledge and wisdom, she kept herself in a position of learning. This attitude, coupled with her frankness and honesty, which she held in an open uncurled hand, meant that she was able to foster and nurture relationships with an incredibly diverse range of people. Tamsyn counted among her friends, people from all phases of her life as well as people whose politics, spirituality and ethical compasses were set differently from hers.

For Tamsyn, there was always room at the table for everyone. The circle could always expand and the community could always grow and, so be enriched.

Whether over a cocktail or a bowl of popcorn, or in a seminar or executive level meeting, Tamsyn had a singular way of pulling back the curtains and bringing some much-needed light and clarity to long-held assumptions and entrenched norms as much as to new and complex situations.

Tamsyn's way of being helped to birth new understandings and new awareness has been attested to by many. In the days and weeks following her death hundreds of people shared how pivotal Tamsyn had been to their understanding of privilege, whiteness, racism, hetero-sexism, classism and ableism. And even in death the trajectory she set continues to bring life to the fight for a safer, kinder, more inclusive world.

White people were scared when she joined the conversation.

– **Nikita Ramkissoon**

Tamsyn spoke the truth; even when it made people uncomfortable, she would be the voice of the voiceless. I am a better person for having known Tamsyn. She was at first a comrade, a fellow activist, but soon became my sister, my family, when I was separated from my own family and was all alone.

– **Rev June C Major**

I will always remember the times we had together. Even if our lives go on without you it will not be the same. We will have to hide our heartache when someone speaks your name. You did so much for the people who were in your circle and

even those outside of it because your shoulders were broad. We will continue the struggle to end the scourge of gender-based violence in your name.

– Cookie Edwards

I hear your cry, and will always hear your cry for feminist justice, for healing, for wholeness, for a world that we will want to leave our children in one day. You are a living ancestor, your voice will continue to speak to me, to us. You have not died in vain. I will not be silent.

– Daniela Gennrich

But Tamsyn's way of being also taught new ways of seeing motherhood, sisterhood and sharing life:

When I gave birth to my son, Tamsyn and her two oldest children Gabriel and Jasmine lived with us. I could not produce milk till day eight after birth. I really wanted to breastfeed my son. She did it for me for his first week of life till I could do it myself. I can't explain how much we loved each other. I don't understand how I'm supposed to live without her.

– Mandisa Khanyile

A matter of weeks after her death Tamsyn's partner Devan, their children, family and friends marked her birthday with a deep sadness, deprived of the beautiful, joyous occasion it should have been. Her mother, Jane, had this to say:

We were to have continued our last conversation about why you still didn't qualify to be 'nearly 40'. The reminders and triggers of so many memories, of events and other conversations we had, that come from the shared posts are such welcome gifts.

It is still my greatest privilege, having you as my daughter.

I'm bereft that we can't celebrate this birthday with you but I will always celebrate your birth.

Thank you for leaving behind somewhere for my love, for you, to go.

None of us can know the impact our lives will have. But we can draw inspiration and strength from those, like Tamsyn, who have gone before us, to live our lives with our

hearts open and turned to love, ready to use ourselves to help bring to life a more just, more equal and freer world.



OPINION – Letter to Mahlamba Ndlopfu

Bhekisisa Mncube

Bhekisisa Mncube is a South African journalist, author, the Witness (Media24) newspaper columnist, and essayist. His recent books include *The Love Diary of a Zulu Boy* (memoir, 2018) published by Penguin Random House South Africa, *Kumnandi Emakhaya* (Grade 6, Children’s book, 2018) published by Macmillan Education South Africa, and he is a contributor to the best-selling anthology titled *Black Tax: Burden or Ubuntu?* (2019) published by Jonathan Ball Publishers. Currently, he is a Director of political speechwriting and content for the Minister of Basic Education.

*Mr. President, I Can’t Breathe*³³

Mr. President, my name is Tshegofatso Pule. You didn’t know me until news broke that I had been brutally murdered. At the time of my untimely death, I was eight months pregnant. My baby daughter is dead too, just like me. I was found hanging from a tree and stabbed in the upper body. This is hardly a feat to be achieved by someone without deadly premeditation or intoxication. My killing was purposeful and it was carried out with military precision. I was killed by a man. I suffered maximum pain. I cried. I begged. I prayed. Well, I was still killed. Mr. President, I am one of the lucky ones, though. My brutal death caused outrage on social media and the hashtag #JusticeForTshego trended on Twitter as soon as the news broke. I even made headlines internationally including on the BBC. Mr. President, you also mentioned my name and a few of my companions’ last week when you addressed the nation. In dedicating time in your COVID-19 address to include the scourge of

33 This article was first published in *The Witness*, part of Media 24, on 26 June 2020. It subsequently won the Opinion Article category in the 2020 Regional Vodacom Journalist of the Year Awards. Reprinted with permission.

gender-based violence, you showed leadership, assured the nation, and most importantly, you displayed compassion. You were particularly irked by the extent of violence that accompanies the killing, calling it, a ‘brutality that defies comprehension.’ Sorry, Mr. President, I didn’t listen to your address. I never heard your assurances. It is not even a case of, ‘well it was too little too late!’ It is neither because I am tone-deaf nor disrespectful to you as the head of state. Mr. President, the thing is, I can no longer partake in human interactions. I can’t breathe. I am dead. Mr. President, I am dead, therefore, I run the risk of joining the long list of the forgotten ones. Mr. President, this is not my story. I am just a footnote in a much larger play of the virulent twin epidemics of male chauvinism and toxic masculinities sweeping through the country. I am not the only one who can’t breathe anymore. Mr. President, I am Naledi Phangindawo, I was hacked to death with an axe. I leave behind three children aged two, four, and six. I am Altecia Kortjie. I was stabbed multiple times and died in agony. My daughter Raynecia Kortjie (7) was also murdered. I am Nompumelelo Tshaka, my body was found dumped in an open field like some discarded rubbish.

I am Sibongiseni Gabada, my half-naked and semi-decomposed corpse was found ‘neatly packed’ in a bag. I am Nwabisa Mgwandela, I was tied up with a rope, and left hanging in my house. I am Lindelwa Peni, my body was found in a bushy area, laying face up on the ground, alone and discarded.

These dead women, Mr. President, are the lucky ones whose names are still fresh in the minds of many. However, we join an illustrious list of strong women whose dreams were also cut short. They too can no longer breathe. Here are some names in no order of importance: Gomolemo Legae, Leighandre “Baby Lee” Jegels, Precious Ramabulana, Uyinene Mrwetyana, Nthabiseng Rampai, Kgaugelo Tshawane, Aviwe Wellem, Meghan Cremer, Nhlanhla Mphahlele, Jesse Hess, Susan Rohde, Winnie Rust, Karabo Mokoena, Hannah Cornelius, Zolile Khumalo, Ntombizodwa Charlotte Dlamini, Nompumelelo Mthembu, Jabulile Nhlapo, Meisie Maisha, Lethukuthula Ngobese, Popi Qwabe, Bongeka Phungula, Priska Schalk, Anene Booysen, Reeva Steenkamp, Hannah Cornelius, Meghan Cremer, Courtney Pietersen, Naledi Lethoba, Lerato Moloi, Althena Malgas, Shelly Van der Walt, Nadia Strydom, Viwe Dalingozi, Thandiwe Mavanene, Sharon Potgieter, Patiswa Enhli-sombi, Louise de Waal, Dawn Basdeo, Agnes Mzisa, Catherine Krog, Renate Kellerman, Rejoice Mdluli, Aviwe JamJam, Thembisile Yende, Gabriela Alban, Tebogo Ndlovu, Sakina Grimwood, Yolizwa Sibiya, Hope Zinde, Noxolo Xabeka, Helga

Van Wyk, Jodene Pieters, Desiree Murugan, Zanele Khumalo, Versha Kandasmy, Kungawa Mazembi, Nicola Pienaar, Zara Hector, Sharnelle Hough, Marna Engelbrecht, Christel Steenkamp, Marthella Steenkamp, Gwen Wall, Maryka Bezuidenhout Kleinans, June Nefdt, Erika Croeser, Naomi Barkhuizen, Emma Wall, Mymie Fraser, Gio Arendse, Frieda Arendse, Nikita Lewis, Sonja Swartz, Joan Anderson, Baby Jordan, Brenda Fairhead, Kia Fairhead, Erika Enslin, Annette Kennealy, Sandra Malcolm, Marilyn Moses, Lynne Hume, Peddie Dodds, Gwen Rist, Janine Drennen, Baby Kayla Rawson, Hester Rawson, Rene Vermeulen, Rachel Dolly Tshabalala, Tercia Kindo, Liesl Nel, Dorned Paashaus, Isabella Maria Henry, Geraldine Vienna, Vicky McLachlan, Marie Ostbo, Privilege Mabvongwe.

Mr. President, thanks for your concern and leadership, but one hopes that you and the legions of SA men aren't due for a regular visit by the Charles Dickens's character, *The Ghost of Christmas Past*, to nudge you towards concomitant action, not just words to end the scourge of wanton killings of women by men. We would never find out – each day is the same in heaven. Mr. President, I can't breathe.

In Lockdown, Fighting Memories

Tshegofatso Mekgwe

Tshegofatso Mekgwe is a Social Science Graduate,
ESL Teacher, lover and student of life.

I arrived in China on the November 27, 2019 to start my job as an English teacher in Jiaxing city, which is about a one-hour train ride from the economic capital, Shanghai. The city's proximity to Shanghai was why I chose it in particular. Plus, I could save a lot more if I came here instead of Shanghai, because the cost of living in Jiaxing is much lower than in Shanghai. But the traveler in me wanted to be close to Shanghai.

I had only been working for seven weeks when the Chinese celebrated their New Year, the year of the Rat, on January 25, 2020. I was on leave from January 20 to February 5, 2020. In fact, when I heard the news about a virus spreading in China, I was planning to go on vacation to the coastal city of Dalian with my colleague, Kim* a fellow South African. I was excited and looking forward to my first beach experience, despite the oh-so-cold winter temperatures! Kim and I were planning to leave for Dalian on the morning of the January 25 and return on January 27, 2020. Our plane and bus tickets were booked, our AirBnB was booked, thick winter jackets were bought, and we were ready for our vacation.

We heard the news about the virus outbreak around the January 20, 2020. We were both clueless about the virus and this made us fearful and apprehensive about going on the trip. When we heard it was a 'new' virus, we were fearful, and made a lot of assumptions. We thought, 'doctors and scientists have not seen anything like this before, and people are dying like flies in Wuhan, so we definitely cannot risk dying so far away from home.'

We heard from our employer that the virus was not that serious; we could go on our trip. So, we were back on track with our plans. Our relief was short-lived. On



February 22, 2020, our employer confirmed that the situation was actually serious. We then decided not to go on vacation anymore. We didn't know much about the virus and assumed it was airborne. We had heard that people were being discouraged from being in crowds because that is how it spread. We figured it wouldn't be smart to be crowded in transportation so we begrudgingly cancelled our plan. Kim and I didn't see each other often after that because we were socially distancing, but we kept checking on each other over the phone. It was the middle of winter; most businesses were closed and there was not much to do because most people had gone to their respective homes away from the city to enjoy the New Year festivities with family. The city was mostly empty, but people were also socially isolating. We were due to reopen schools on February 5, 2020, but the date was postponed by two weeks initially. The reopening dates were extended many times thereafter, and we eventually got back to work on May 10, 2020.

A few days into the lockdown, I was living on South African time. I would sleep at 4 am, which is 10pm South African time, and wake up at 4 pm which is 10 am South African time. I'd stay up watching a TV series or talking to my friends and family back home. My family kept checking on me, an expression of their worry over the virus. It was upon me to assure them that I was actually okay. Which I was. We got paid on the February 10, 2020, (for the month of January) and immediately Kim booked a one-way ticket to South Africa. Now I was seeing many expats choosing to go home and wait out the virus at home. At the same time, I was getting subtle pressure from my family back home that I must also come back and return to China when things got okay. I didn't want to go home. I had subscribed to a news page on WeChat, a social media site, and I was getting regular updates on the virus and how it was spreading, and how it was contracted. So, I was less anxious about the virus because I was a bit clued up on it. Everyone at home told me to come home the minute I wanted to, and I assured them I would. When news broke of people being repatriated back home, everyone kept asking me if I was amongst them. My family were disappointed but they didn't put pressure on me to come back home. This was despite news of expats being stranded with no food and no money in China.

Socially isolating alone was taking its toll on me. I was anxious; it felt like I was in solitary confinement, in jail. We couldn't go out of the city, and couldn't move around in the city because it was locked down and most places had been closed since the New Year celebration, so there was nowhere to go anyway. I was my only

company for a long time. I anticipated the boredom and the messed-up sleep cycle. What I didn't anticipate was how painful buried memories would creep into my consciousness during this period, as my only company was my thoughts. Many women in South Africa fall victim to sexual assault/abuse in their lifetime. I am sadly a victim. For some reason, the memories of incidents where I was sexually assaulted surfaced. I started dreaming of the different incidents when I was sexually assaulted. This was the hardest thing to deal with by myself, so far away from home. I felt really alone and I didn't want to fall into depression here, in a foreign country. I would drink alcohol a few hours before bed, just to ensure that I pass out right in time for bed, and not wrestle with my thoughts and memories. But when has alcohol ever been an answer in the face of trying times? Or even at all? Obviously, this didn't work and it wasn't sustainable anyway. But I was now at a point where I was afraid to sleep because I dreaded having to dream about those particular incidents. I have since written a poem about these incidents in an attempt to face it 'head on.' A letter to the perpetrators, if you will. The writing of this poem helped me come to terms with what had happened and I have not had such dreams in a long while now.

You are in my dreams

You are in my dreams,

But I don't want you here.

The same way I didn't want your hands on my body,

Just like I didn't want your lips on mine,

Just like I didn't want any part of you inside me.

You are in my memories and thoughts,

And I don't want you here

I see you in every faded haircut,

I see you in every tall dark handsome man,

I smell you on every cigarette smell

Your presence in my thoughts, in my dreams, and in my memories is

Exactly like your genitals in mine.

*You break and enter in my thoughts the same way you forced your body onto mine,
I didn't want you on my body then,
And I don't want you in my thoughts now.
Go away! I don't want you.
Not only did you force yourself onto me, you have also forced
Horrible memories into my consciousness forever.
I see you in every red t-shirt and I get chills
I see you in every faded haircut and I gasp for air,
I see you in every tall dark and handsome man and I blame myself for
Finding men attractive.
I smell you in every cigarette smoke and my chest closes up on me.
You paralyzed me one time physically,
Now the memory of you continues to paralyze me mentally.
The thought of you renders me too anxious to hold even a cup,
I dream of you and I wake up sweating and kicking, from fighting you off me.
My mind doesn't want you, the same way my body didn't want you that time,
Yet, here you are.*

Auditioning for my Funeral³⁴

Tari Nyamayaro

Tari Nyamayaro is an 18 year old slam poet and activist working to bring light to critical social issues across the globe.

I woke up today and realized I was 18 years old. Like the sun came up and I realized that I have existed on this earth for about 6,570 days.

See, being a woman in this country, my life expectancy has been significantly shortened and I realize that by the time I'm 19 I'll probably be dead or on the way to dying, so I thought it would be important for me to prepare for my funeral, to audition for the role of corpse.

Aww, my funeral won't be like those other funerals. No, it will be the greatest funeral there ever was. It'll be so great that they'll broadcast it across countries.

I mean, the story of my death will be so Twitter-worthy that they'll create hashtags that trend for three days; my face will be plastered across your statuses, you will call me angel and tell me to Rest in Peace.

I bet even the President himself will be there.

Grace us with his presence – he will hold my mother's hand while she recites my eulogy, while her eyes fill with tears, while she chokes.

And afterwards he will get up on that podium and give the best speech he has ever given, so perfectly written with every word turning my life into a story to be remembered. He will tell you to remember my name – beg you to not forget me and you will add me to the list of names we have had to remember, since basically forever.

And my body..

34 Youtube Link to This Poem: <https://youtu.be/wZIHOhUo2hY>

My body will lie in its casket, bruises covering every inch of me, stab wounds made so expertly that you could call it art.

I will become the latest backdrop for the “gents let’s do better” campaign.

They will promise to do better, change their DPs to purple, sing “protect our women” till the cows come home and I will smile from my grave,

My dead lips forming a thank you

Cause that’s what you want, right, gents?

A thank you for trying, thank you for sharing

Thank you thank you thank you

My ghost will clap for you

A thank you for finally caring about my life, now that I’m dead or whatever.

The way you cared about Reeva, or Naledi or Evelyn or Tshgegofatso or the 100s of other women. You care and we die, right?

I will form a thank you, while I wait for the next body to fall,

To come lie next to me

To come keep me company because I know it won’t end with me.

When my soul leaves this earth,

The first person I will see is Nene and she will smile at me, that soft kind of smile and Kwasa,

Kwasa, she will take my hand and squeeze it just a little bit

Just enough to remind me that I can still feel.

I will be the latest addition to heaven’s special welcome committee, practice my smile, practice my hug

Ready to welcome the next girl

Ready to tell her that it wasn’t her fault

That I wore pants too, that I didn’t make eye contact, I promise

That I did everything they have ever told us to do since I was like six but still

He raped me

Still he beat me

Still he killed me

So, I will tell her it wasn't her – even if it feels like it.

No, my funeral will be the best to ever be done, one for the history books, I swear.

There's 294 days left before I turn 19, 294 more days of waking up with the sun, of breathing in air before a man claims his right to my life or his right to my body.

294 more days of being terrified to walk outside, of hugging my mother tight so when I'm gone she remembers the feel of my arms around her,

Of pausing at the door to wave goodbye to my dad, half a see you later and half a goodbye, in case this is the last goodbye that I have.

The last hug

The last kiss

The last time I get on the bus

The last time they see me as I am now ...

Alive.

I'm not sure if I'll make it to this time next year or even if I'll make it to the end of this day.

See, like every other woman in this country,

I'm living on borrowed time

Waiting.

Waiting for my turn, for my big debut as victim number 1000 and something.

So here it is,

The surround tape for my funeral,

Was that good enough?

Did I get the part, sir?

Did I break the little mother in you?

Did I look victim enough?

See, I was going for this murdered school girl, type of vibe

A closed casket type of silence, cold like the autopsy of a dead body

Cause of death:

Being woman and alive.



PART 2:
Lament

Part 2: Lament

Lamenting in the Time of Corona

Merrishia Singh-Naicker

The Day My Mom Took Her Last Breath

Luwelle James

Rollercoaster of Corona: LIFE

Mahalia Khanya Naicker

Groundhog Year

Tiara

A Blocked Journey

Martha Mapasure

Physically Distanced but Socially Close

Esperande Bigirimana

Ashamed, Unearthed, Restored

Mpho Ashley Motene

Lamenting in the Time of Corona

Merrishia Singh-Naicker

Merrishia Singh-Naicker is a Pastor, Relationship Therapist/Circle keeper and CEO of indi-Afrique. She is a life partner to Seth and mum to four vibrant children MK, SJ, TK & KJ.

*I have forgotten what health and peace and happiness are.
I do not have much longer to live; my hope in the Lord is gone.
The thought of my pain, my homelessness, is bitter poison.
I think of it constantly, and my spirit is depressed.*

(Lamentations 3:17-20)

This lament echoes our cries, mirroring our sadness, loneliness, fear, pain and anger in this time of the coronavirus. We have confronted death, dying, illness and trauma in a more isolating and tragic way. Being sick, in isolation and not knowing if we will see our loved ones again is a frightening reality. In my community families have had to face the unbearable: laying to rest a loved one while in isolation, not being able to attend the funeral. COVID-19 regulations and the nature of the illness have forced us to mourn in a new way. Warm embraces, a shoulder to lean on and weeping together was once common practice, but it is no more. People in mourning describe their grief coupled with the isolating effects of COVID-19 as a double grief. Suffering is compounded, multi-layered and experienced intensely.

All are affected by COVID-19, but its impact is not the same. For people living with their backs against the wall COVID-19 exacerbated the struggles of inequality, oppression, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, and the violence they were already facing. Inequalities were brought to the forefront, magnified and worsened by COVID-19. South Africa's public health care system, already overburdened and under resourced, faced a greater strain attending to those infected with COVID-19.

The disparities in our schools and education system were further exposed. When schools had to close, continued learning could only be conducted for those that had access to resources and online technology. Many children were left behind and further disadvantaged.

During lockdown we experienced an exponential rise in what the United Nations termed the “shadow pandemic”: sexual, gender-based violence, and femicide. We recognised cries of help from women throughout the globe who now had to face lockdown with their abusers. Internationally, on social media we witnessed the horrific and brutal murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests that spread throughout the world. In South Africa we also witnessed police brutality with the unjust enforcement of lockdown rules resulting in loss of lives – investigations into these untimely deaths continue. More recently the tragic killing of Nathaniel Julius a child, differently abled, gunned down in the streets of Eldorado Park left us shocked and dismayed.

These piercing experiences have brought not only protesting but lamenting – an aching for all that we have lost, loved ones, good health, our livelihoods and so much more. Lamenting is more than just venting how we feel but a multi-faceted human response.¹ It has been part of our lives through the ages where, through it, we bear the unbearable. COVID19 has brought excruciating challenges and exacerbated pre-existing ones. We therefore need a lament that not only helps us through our pain and rage but also one that leads a way to actively transform us and our world. How do we lament in a way that leads the way for liberation, justice, and healing in our lives and relationships?

To answer this question, I will start by defining lamenting, its purpose and importance. Then I explore lamenting in religion with a special emphasis of women's rituals and songs of lament from the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the *Black Lives Matter* movement, and the movement of women against gender-based violence. I will conclude with a reflection on lamenting with Jesus, and particularly the role of women.

1 Frances Klopper, “Lament, the Language for Our Times,” *Old Testament Essays*, 21(1), (2008): 124-135, accessed August 24, 202, 0http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1010-99192008000100008&lng=en&tlng=en

What is Lamenting?

A simplified definition of lamenting is: expressing deep sorrow, regret, or unhappiness about tragic events expressed in loud wailing or crying out in grief. Emmanuel Katangole² reflecting on the conflict in Democratic Republic of Congo that has killed millions, describes lamenting as arguing, fighting, and wrestling with God in the midst of this tragic situation. Lament is the language of pain in a context when it seems like God is absent. An example of such a lament is a dear elder friend from my community, Gairoon Moodley, sharing her experience of lamenting the tragic death of all three of her precious sons, in different fatal motor vehicle accidents.

This is her lament:

Losing one child was crippling, who can bounce back after losing all three in the prime of their lives, so soon after each other? It leaves you with an insurmountable burden of dragging yourself into each new day, through a never disappearing cloud of grief... no reasons or words of comfort would console my aching heart.

Why me? Why us? Was my constant cry!

– Gairoon Moodley³

When her second son passed away on Christmas Day she cried out,

Oh God, Oh God, how can this happen again? Today we celebrate your birth how can we mourn a death, why have you forsaken me? Even my tears did not justify the intense pain. My heart was ripping apart. Oh, my Lord, this pain this agony, please help me. Even with my anger towards God at the time, I cried to him for help⁴

At the death of her third son, she felt like,

our life had ended or so it felt. Our only hope was all gone. We were doomed, our child out of sixty-nine passengers. No way... Oh God where are you, are you even out there? Are you listening to us? Are you seeing that all our children are gone now, taken away from us? Why do you allow this to happen to us?⁵

2 Emmanuel Katangole, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017)

3 Gairoon Moodley, *Legacy of Love* (Johannesburg: Plow Publishing House, 2018) 10.

4 Moodley, *Legacy of Love*, 89,90.

5 Moodley, *Legacy of Love*, 118.

Her laments reveal the depth of her pain and anguish in response to heart-wrenching events that raise questions about God, faith, and life. To lament is to allow emotions and questions to be expressed in any way.

What is the Purpose and Importance of Lament?

Lament is a powerful means of dealing with grief and injustice. Klopper explains that “modern psychotherapy has long recognised the healing power of lament and mourning; that openly expressing the pain of suffering can alleviate its impact on the sufferer. We need to cry, tears to flow, bodies to rock. We need to express our anger. The nature of lament is profoundly spiritual and profoundly political.”⁶

In many cultures the responsibility of lament often fell on women and even to this day. Lila Abu-Lughod⁷ gives the example of the ritual wailings in the Muslim Bedouin community. It is a lamenting ritual of significance for the women who practice it when experiencing the death of a loved one. The lament usually starts with a ritual wailing, a high-pitched scream and is seen in juxtaposition to the ululating expressing joy, happiness, and praise usually at weddings. Similarly, in our African context both ululating and wailing have special significance. The women who lament after the funeral find something growing, something green- a branch, a twig with leaves to take back with them signifying the growth that comes from the experience. The act of picking something growing symbolising growth and transformation provides an understanding that even with this pain, growth will come. In this way lamenting is cathartic and can be a catalyst for transformation.

This is evident in the Bible where there is a tradition of wailing women who are called keeners. Jesus was accompanied by women wailers (keeners) on his way to the cross (Luke 23:27-28). Juliana Claassens suggests that the image of the wailing women calling upon people to weep and wail in times of tragedy offers us resources to face trauma⁸. Claassens explains that lament allows us to overcome the “dignity

6 Frances Klopper, “Lament, the Language for Our Times,” *Old Testament Essays*, 21(1), (2008): 132, accessed August 24, 202, 0http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1010-99192008000100008&lng=en&tlng=en

7 Lila Abu-Lughod, “Islam and the Gendered Discourses of Death,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no.2 (1993): 187-205

8 Julian Claassens, “Calling the Keeners: The Image of the Wailing Women as Symbol of Survival in the Traumatized World,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26 (2010): 63-77, 10.1353/jfs.0.0098

destroying effects of violence”⁹ Lament is an act of resisting even though it may not change the victim's situation. Women's cries voice their frustrations, and their tears of defiance gives agency in a powerless situation.

Rebecca Saunders reports of women's lament thus:

*Tearing their hair and clothing, sway hypnotically and sometimes dance wildly, as if possessed. They scream out questions without answers, repeat themselves, call for vengeance. At times, their sobs, moans, and sighs compose themselves into song, into a searing melody or a mournful antiphony. They summon us to witness, but they seem mad. Unwashed and unadorned, they rub grime on their faces; they are alternately despondent and angry; they breathe unnaturally. They seem caught up in something both intensely sacred and dreadfully pagan, in an obscene exposure of women, their bodies, emotion: of the private in a public place. One is tempted to recoil, as if from contamination; one senses that the anguish will spread.*¹⁰

The lamenting process is important because it allows us to consider our passions, our wounds and shame, to wrestle with it, to have the critical and courageous conversations with God and others, to acknowledge our brokenness and to face our sufferings with a future hope and a call to action. It rejects the idea that all suffering is caused by sin, it juxtaposes trust and doubt, lament and praise, protest and hope, in sometimes extreme tension. There is evidence that God laments and mourns with us and God allows criticism of the Godself to be recorded for future generations¹¹.

Three songs of lament shared below reflects these tensions. The first is ‘Senzenina?’¹² from the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

9 Juilan Classens, *Claiming Her Dignity: Female Resistance in the Old Testament*. (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2016)

10 Rebecca Saunders, *Lamentation and Modernity in Literature, Philosophy, and Culture*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) 45. 10.1057/9780230607057.

11 J.J.S Harrichand, “Recovering the Language of Lament for the Western Evangelical Church: A Survey of the Psalms of Lament and Their Appropriation with Pastoral Theology,” *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 16, (2014-2015): 101-130.

12 <https://youtu.be/99bfGyQzdT8>

Senzenina?*(Zulu/Xhosa)*

Senzenina?
 Sono sethu bubumnyama
 Sono sethu yinyaniso
 Sibulawayo
 Mayibuye i Africa.

What Have We Done?*(English Translation)*

What have we done?
 Our sin is that we are Black
 Our sin is the truth
 They are killing us
 Let Africa return

This lament expressed the deep sorrow, pain and struggle; it asked hard and honest questions about the brutal realities faced. Sifiso Ntuli explains that “at the height of the South African madness others were engaging apartheid with the guns. Others were engaging them through discussion. Others were engaging them through song. That is how we managed to turn the tide of the world.”¹³ The songs of lament challenged, resisted and spurred revolutions that dismantled apartheid. Similarly, the Black/African American Spirituals in the midst of slavery in the United States combined lament and hope.¹⁴

The second song is from Keedron Bryant, a young Black man who challenged the status quo lamenting about his experience in a racialised America with his song: ‘*I just wanna live*’¹⁵ which became an anthem for the *Black Lives Matter* movement in the aftermath of the George Floyd protests. He asks for God’s help and protection but also asks questions whether he will live or die because he is a young Black man.

*I just wanna live**God protect me**I'm a young Black man**Doing all that I can (Can)**To stand**Oh, but when I look around**And I see what's being done**To my kind (Kind)*

13 Sifiso Ntuli, *Amandla!: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*. (Dir. Lee Hirsch. Artisan Entertainment, 2003)

14 James H. Cone, “Black Spirituals; A Theological Interpretation,” *Theology Today* 29, no.1 (1972): 54-69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057367202900107>

15 <https://youtu.be/pEaV6lbpIw>

*Every day (Day)
 I'm being hunted as prey
 My people don't want no trouble
 We've had enough struggle.*

The last song subversively disrupts the dominant narrative of gender-based violence is from Belgian artist Angele,¹⁶ Balance Ton Quoi which is the French equivalent of the #metoo movement. Singing in an upbeat way she denounces men who sexually harass women. The song calls out the unjust actions and says 'f*** off!' to the offensive men. The rawness of her emotions expressed in a unique way challenges the dominant understanding of what lament is.

*[Verse 1]
 They're all talking like animals, about all pussies there's shit talking
 2018, I don't know what you need but I'm more than an animal
 I saw that rap is trending and it works better when it's dirty
 keeps it open, that would be normal
 [Pre-Chorus]
 Denounce your what
 Even if you're talking shit about girls
 I know that deep down, you understood
 Denounce your what
 One day maybe it will change [Chorus]
 So let me sing to you
 To go f...humhumhumhum yourself
 Yeah, radios won't play my song
 Because my words are not very pretty*

According to Brueggemann, lamenting is 'dangerous, restless speech', because tears become ideas and emotions become political. It challenges power structures; it calls for justice; it pushes the boundaries of our relationships with each other and God to the limits. It refuses to settle for the status quo, reminding God and the

16 <https://youtu.be/Hi7Rx3En7-k>

powers that be that the human situation is unacceptable, and that God and these powers must act.¹⁷

Lamenting in this way challenges dominant narratives that we are to be silent in our pain and settle for things as they are. This is especially meaningful when often women are expected to submit to the abuse they face and accept the trauma. This lamenting is bold and courageous; it speaks, sings, and shouts truth to power. When we are lamenting about our abuse and rape, it cannot protect the abuser, and blame the survivor, and not challenge the words “you asked for it, you were dressed like that.”

When our protest of lament reveals our sufferings in oppression it should also reveal the evil creating the suffering and not minimise or downplay it. Furthermore, our songs and sacred texts of lament should no longer be censored to comfort the oppressive dominant narrative and power structures. Censoring lament can create damaging effects which needs deeper consideration especially in this time of the coronavirus.

Cautions Within Lamenting

The practice of lamenting described above can be extremely helpful and life-giving. Therefore, creating safe spaces for lament is crucial. However, lament can become chronic, continuing indefinitely leading to stress, reduced well-being and physical health, greater anxiety and depression.¹⁸ Being stuck in lament leads to the danger of aimless wandering, to chronic cynicism where the lamenter feels truly alone, abandoned, in total despair, and lacking hope and therefore conversation of complaint is completely suspended. They risk that danger of totally believing that God is not listening, and internalise that there is no help for their struggle and therefore no use in engaging with God or those causing problems, because God does not care or does not exist. It is in these moments that suicide is most likely to occur.

17 Bruegemann as cited in Frances Klopper, “Lament, the Language for Our Times,” 111.

18 F. LerRon Shultz, and Steven J. Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality: Integrating Theology and Psychology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006) 227.

It is critical to recognise the isolating effects of COVID19 that leaves laments alone in their journey. Henri J. M. Nouwen offers insight here¹⁹. When there is concern that one might become stuck in lament and a need to 'monitor' laments arises, lamenting should not be an individualistic process; it calls for entering in to suffering with others, – “that shared pain is no longer paralyzing but mobilizing, when understood as a way to liberation”²⁰ It is key for communities to come alongside the hurting, show our concern and care. Although this has been particularly harder to achieve in lockdown, our efforts should continue in more creative and intentional ways.

Transforming how we lament is our call to action and mobilization. Lamenting should not become an opium of oppression, where our stories of lament are abused, commercialised, and commodified. Noticing this warning is important especially during this time of COVID19 where people are looking for new ways to deal with their anguish.

Conclusion: Learning to Lament as Jesus Did – Passive and Active Lament

In John 11:17-35 we see Jesus acknowledging Mary's lament over the death of her brother Lazarus:

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the other mourners as well, he was troubled in spirit, moved by the deepest emotions. 34 “Where have you laid him?” Jesus asked. “Come and see,” they said. 35 And Jesus wept.

What is compelling in this story is that Jesus Christ himself is moved to tears, troubled in spirit, moved deeply and he also laments.

Another example of Jesus lamenting is when he is experiencing the brutality and violence leading to his murder. Before he dies, he cries out on the cross:

19 Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith*. (San Francisco: Harper Collin, 2006)

20 James H. Cone, “Black Spirituals; A Theological Interpretation,” 95.

46 At that hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" 47

(*The Inclusive Bible: 2007*)

These texts show Jesus in two unique situations. In the narrative of lament with Mary and Martha he is accused; in their lament they say to Jesus that had he been present the great suffering would not have occurred; Jesus could have prevented their sufferings. Jesus may be seen as one who allowed the suffering to take place, the oppressor. Jesus' response is most interesting. He says to Martha that her brother will live; he knows he must make it right; he has to act but not before entering into the suffering and lamenting. As Jesus steps into the suffering, cries and laments, his posture changes to being a GOD-human who suffers and laments with us. As Hyun-Kyung points out we are discovering with much passion and compassion that Jesus takes sides in his solidarity with all oppressed people.²¹

The other situation is the broken Jesus in anguish, on the cross, and abandoned. His lament here is that of one being oppressed, humiliated and dehumanized – the broken suffering servant. Lascano in Chung presents that Jesus' suffering has two moments 'passive and active.'²² These passive and active moments are present in both stories of Jesus' lament, but these moments are never complacent nor neutral. When Jesus stepped in to join Mary and Martha's lament he laid his power aside and suspended it, to take a passive stance in an active way to identify with Mary and Martha. However, he did not remain there indefinitely. Moved by the suffering, with love and compassion, he uses his power to transform and change the situation, the status quo – he raises Lazarus from the dead!

At the cross, Jesus actively remains passive; he takes on the violence. Isaiah 53:7 describes his experience:

Though treated harshly, you bore it humbly, and never opened your mouth. Like a lamb being led to slaughter, or a sheep before shearers, you were silent and never opened your mouth.

21 Hyun Kyung, Chung, "Who is Jesus for Asian women?" in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993) 223-246.

22 Hyun Kyung, Chung "Who is Jesus for Asian women?" p. 226.

Jesus willingly gives his life. Our redemptive reading of this means we no longer must be silent about our sufferings and the violence we experience or even the ones we may cause. We lament about it; we wail and scream about it actively because of what the suffering servant Jesus has done. He became the justice of God lamenting in different ways through his birth, life, death and resurrection. We are invited and called into this way of lamenting.

We have seen that lament involves wrestling and arguing with God, our neighbours and our world. It expresses our deepest pains and groanings. It is a truth-telling process as we uncover our sufferings and try to find reasons for them. It asks the hard questions, provoking us to move from a place of inaction to action. Lamenting with justice calls us to leave behind dominant narratives that use pain, suffering and lament as an opium of oppression. We are challenged to reform and revolutionise lament and how we think, feel and act on it. The active and passive ways of Jesus' suffering and lamenting, being present, stepping in, laying down power, and then rising to active solidarity, empowers us. In transforming the way we lament we transform our relationships, our lives and our world especially in this time of the coronavirus.

Yet hope returns when we remember this one thing:

God's unfailing love and mercy still continue,

Fresh as the morning, as sure as the sunrise.

God is all we have, and so in the Lord we put our hope.

(Lamentations 3: 22-23)

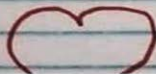
The Day My Mom Took Her Last Breath

Luwelle James

Luwelle James (12 years) is a child who loved her mother dearly.

The day my mom took her last breath, was the day my life changed forever. Everything felt and still does feel so broken, so empty, so meaningless. We all aware of death, we all know that at some point each and every one of us are going to die but when it will happen or who is next in line. Never in my wildest dreams, did I think that my ~~mate~~ mother would be taken away from me so soon. I miss her so much everyday because we did everything together. The pain in my heart is heavy and I still have flashbacks to the morning (7 April 2020), when my mom got sick. It was ~~very~~ heartbreaking to watch my mom go through, I tried to help her, I prayed for her too but she closed her eyes that day, God called her to her heaven. Being so close to my mother meant that she shared a lot with me. I saw many people that hurt my mother during her time on Earth, she would cry and cry on some days but she never held a grudge, she always forgave ~~with~~ with a loving heart. Now that my is gone, I find it hard to forgive the people who made her cry. It's difficult for me to concentrate control my anger sometimes but I ~~know~~ know god is always with me I continue to walk with him, I will find healing and ~~re~~ peace. I will always remember my ~~mom~~ mom for her giving, loving, joyful and kind spirit and her light will always shine down on me. We miss you and love you dearly mom.

Love Luwelle



Rollercoaster of Corona: LIFE

Mahalia Khanya Naicker

Mahalia Khanya Naicker (13 years) is a musician and creative artist, a tender powerful shining light.



Hi, I'm Mahalia Naicker (12 years old) and during this time of Covid-19 our lives have been just like a roller coaster because sometimes we are sad, sometimes happy, as well as mad and also scared. This picture is a graffiti mural spray painted by my brothers and I. We did it to express our thoughts about what we want to happen and change in the world e.g: No more Coronavirus; Black Lives Matter; No more abuse and we want peace. The song that I made is simply saying that we can experience different feelings but life is like that and even though we might feel sad, mad or scared we should be grateful for our lives and know that God is with us on this roller coaster. Please view the video and listen to the song connected to this mural. Please see link, I hope you enjoy it.



Mahalia **BHANYA** Naicker

Groundhog Year

Tiara

Tiara (19 years) is described as a little brown girl who loves poetry.

Wake, eat, cry, sleep.
a repetitive cycle every single day.
I felt it creeping back in, what I tried to push away for months.
what I worked so hard to overcome.
seeping through the cracks of my tiredness.
Like water seeping through the cracks in the ground.
slowly but powerfully. “it’s time to drown again” it whispered in my ear
and I felt its power.
it’s strength and everything I worked to push it out collapsed.
it came tumbling down on me, the debris filled my chest as I tried to claw my
way out.
each time I tried the lower I sunk.
until I was pushed into nothingness.
It was there where I started to rebuild what had been destroyed, slowly
but carefully.
until I emerged on the surface again, more than ready to handle another
collapse.

My poem describes how I felt during the beginning of the lockdown. I worked so hard to get my mental health in order and it just felt like all the progress I made was useless. I was constantly putting myself down and just letting the depression roll all over me. And I came to a realisation that it’s always going to happen. There are



always going to be times where I fall down and can't make it out again but I don't need to try to climb out. I need to start rebuilding myself from where everything collapsed on me and only then I'll be able to get out. I named it groundhog year because every day is just repetitive but you can do a million things different from the previous day. And that's the key to continue working and helping yourself heal.

A Blocked Journey

Martha Mapasure

Martha Mapasure is a Zimbabwean female theologian, cultural anthropologist and gender activist whose area of research is within religion, gender and sexuality.

I had started counting down days to visit my family in South Africa, having spent about seven months in Leuven, Belgium, where I was on a one-year scholarship to study. I had planned to do fieldwork in South Africa at a university where I was tutoring before I left for Europe. I had booked a flight for 9th June 2020. Little did I know that the dreadful COVID-19 pandemic was to block all my plans and the excitement of reuniting with my family again, especially with my three-year-old son.

We had just begun a new semester, and early in March everything just changed in a flash. No more campus classes, no more hanging out in the restaurants, no more visiting each other – some of the things that keep a person in the diaspora who has left her family, and not only her family, but also her three-year-old boy in Africa, sane. From day one of isolation and physical distancing and the whole mask-wearing thing, I found myself reflecting upon the cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo's observation: "Life is what happens when you are planning other things." Here I had been planning, packing, preparing, and counting down the days – and yet the journey was not going to be possible, it was to be blocked.

Had I known, I could have prepared myself for it emotionally and psychologically, but I had not seen it coming

I write on behalf of all the women – daughters, wives, sisters-in-law, grandmothers and mothers – who sacrifice for their families, especially their children, to leave the comfort zones of their nations, countries and travel far to better their lives and their families' lives. I salute you all and I say keep doing what you are doing. We will pass through the COVID-19 struggles together, and soon it will be possible to travel and



reunite with our families, our children. Let's stay strong; women are always strong; it is in our nature to be strong. I am inspired by all the work I witness by women all over and that gives me hope for a better future.

Physically Distanced but Socially Close

Esperande Bigirimana

Esperande Bigirimana is an activist against sexual violence, member of the Executive of Phephisa Survivors Network and Program Officer of We Will Speak Out South Africa.

She is also a counsellor for the Lifeboat Ministry for homeless people in Pietermaritzburg.

My nightmare started in the morning of April 23, 2019, when my husband Ernest, who had recently been diagnosed diabetic, was referred to hospital by our GP with a blood glucose reading of HI and 1+ ketones. At the hospital at about 10:00 AM, his blood glucose and ketones were tested again. We were told that his glucose was still a bit high but there were no ketones. I was not worried. At this point he was given an insulin injection. Around midday he was put on a drip while seated on a chair in the Emergency Room. His two nephews who live with us and I subsequently joined him there. We were busy talking to him, laughing at his usual jokes; he was not very sick. An intern came up to him and said she was going to give him an injection, which she proceeded to do in his stomach. Immediately my husband started sweating and then slumped in his chair. When I asked the Doctor what injection she had given him she told me it was insulin. I queried this as he had not eaten since before 08:00 that morning and no further blood glucose test had been performed before the insulin was administered. I rushed out to try to buy him some food while his nephews stayed with him and begged the Doctor for Ernest to be taken to a bed, but they were told that there wasn't one available.

Realising that Ernest had by that stage passed away, his nephews called me to return, as it was too late to save him. It was just a few minutes since the injection had been given. The Doctor then asked his nephew to carry Ernest to a bed – of which many were in fact available – following which many other doctors appeared on the scene and attempted to resuscitate Ernest for 25 minutes without success. We prayed to

God to give him a chance to live, but it was too late. They had already taken his life, but God welcomed him and brought his soul into His rest.

I stayed at the hospital for two more hours, waiting for information regarding the cause of death, but none was provided. It was frustrating and I questioned God where He is in this situation. I went home without any information about what had killed my husband. I went back to the hospital the next morning and was simply told that Ernest had died of natural causes, with “no complicity.” The unabridged Death Certificate which we subsequently received from Home Affairs listed the immediate cause of death as ‘cardiovascular arrest’ following ‘diabetic ketoacidosis.’ However, the urine sample at the hospital that morning had measured no ketones, and no blood tests had been taken to prove ketoacidosis. What appeared to be the cause of death was instead insulin shock due to an overdose of insulin, administered to a patient who had already been given insulin two hours previously and had had nothing to eat during the previous five hours. Or perhaps they had just given the wrong injection?

My husband’s passing left me and his nephews who were present on the scene deeply traumatized and battling to sleep at night. I decided to request a meeting with everyone who was present at or involved with the treatment of my husband on the morning of April 23, 2019, to provide me with a full explanation of what had happened, so that we might at least have some closure. I was not permitted to take any other person into the meeting with me and had to leave my cell phone outside. I complied, as I was desperate to understand what had happened. In the two meetings I had with hospital management, I did not get what I needed. Instead, surprisingly, I was bullied and insulted, accused of just wanting money from the hospital. I was traumatized all over again. My friends advised me to seek legal help. But I am a foreign woman alone, and although in South Africa legally, I knew it would make things even harder. I decided to let go since I was getting more depressed.

I prayed to God to give me His peace in the midst of injustice so that I could heal and be able to take care of the kids, as they were my priority. Even in depression and bereavement, I had to be there for my children. I also needed to be working with my organisation, the *Phephisa Survivors Network*, and in my job as the *We Will Speak Out SA* Project Officer. Yet I was so deeply broken inside. I could not concentrate. I could not sleep. But I couldn’t just wallow in my pain. Most of the time I questioned where God was in all of this. But I knew in my heart that, despite everything,

God knows what is best for me. God provided me with friends and colleagues who prayed for me and supported me in many ways, and understood my sadness.

Just when I was starting to heal the COVID-19 disaster struck, and I was confined at home. I went through the first anniversary of my husband's passing alone, in isolation with my children and far away from my wider family. But on the day, we decided to celebrate his life in prayer, recognizing that God was there in our depression and fears. It was a special celebration. I bought a cake, lit a candle and the children shared beautiful memories of their father. It was a healing moment; it was like he was there with us again. I was grateful for the support I received.

Then COVID-19 struck home. In June while I was trying to get a job in order to feed my kids, I came into contact with a COVID-19 positive person. I started to isolate myself in our busy home. It was hard to tell my kids that I was in contact with a C19 positive person. The death of their father was still fresh in their hearts. They were going to be scared that I would also die. I became ill and my senses of smell and taste disappeared. I did not need to test. I knew I had it. I was full of fears and confused. I called the WWSOSA Coordinator and asked her what to do to manage my symptoms. She supported me with the information I needed and checked on me every day until I got better. Her emotional and spiritual support, and my faith in God, were enough to help reduce my fears. Thankfully, my kids never got any symptoms. But one of Ernest's nephews who was going out a lot developed severe symptoms. As he was getting very sick, everyone ran away from him. As a single mother who was also in isolation, I supported him to go through his sickness. No one in the house wanted anything to do with him, so I worked hard to remove the stigma against him in my family. God came to our help again, and he was able to get healed. For me it was very important during isolation to keep my C19 symptoms secret from others, because there is lot of stigma and conspiracy theories that are not helpful. I disclosed only to the one person that I trusted and knew would be helpful, and I told others only when I was getting better. Lockdown with C19 symptoms was a nightmare. I was lonelier than ever.

I learned that it is truer now in this new season, more than ever, that we must create a new understanding of life and how to better support each other. For a better future, we must act with integrity now. Rather than being socially distant, we should remain *physically* distant and socially *close*. We have no choice but to build real solidarity. That idea of connection and togetherness is not only about staying

connected to our own family and friends, but we also need to stay connected – all of us, as survivors of this pandemic.

After I started getting better, we as the colleagues within *Phephisa* and WWSOSA began to spend regular time sharing how we were feeling, and together tried to make meaning of it all. We built very strong solidarity during this pandemic and began again to be able to respond to the needs of our members and wider communities using God's principles of love and compassion to support everyone in our community without discrimination, and I witnessed that. I was physically distant from my colleagues but I was socially close.

Ashamed, Unearthed, Restored

Mpho Ashley Motene

Mpho Ashley Motene ke mosadi wa Motswana
who has been saved by Jesus, work psychologist,
wellbeing activist and career mentor
with a poetic approach to lifework.

“Lord I believe, help my unbelief.”

Is that what it says?!

See we want to believe, but if we dig deep enough, we are afraid
that we would find that it's our own shame that buries us deep inside our disbelief.
Although there is no hole deep enough for you and I to dig for ourselves,
yet shovel in hand, we sometimes spend the whole night filling up the hole of shame
in our hearts perhaps with anger, grief, guilt, tears, distractions tangled up in fears.

Afraid to sit down and rest, too scared to look around in the dark
to assess the surroundings of our hearts.

And even after we walk away from our sleepless toil,
we wake up in the morning and update our statuses with #JoyComesInTheMorn-
ing, right?!

As we all put on our masks to walk away from what locks us down yet masking our
feelings and
not seeing that joy cannot be found when shame secretly covers up the scene of our
souls with embarrassment.



We turn down the volume on the subtle lies we quietly tell to ourselves,
loudly tell to each other perhaps.
Yet the sun sets again on our efforts;
lonesome days of self-care that we spend on our own trying to find ourselves.
Indeed, we find ourselves afraid of our own shadows on the darkest of nights.
We find ourselves hearing unfamiliar voices that do not calm us down.
So we go searching for ourselves in the dark again
And I cannot remember where we buried the value that You have given us, Lord.
We find ourselves walking around in circles, beside ourselves, confused,
not knowing where to look anymore.
With eyes of the heart so damaged by trying to see in the dark,
we see You drawing near, and recognize that it is You helping us to see better.

For You are the Light that reveals what is hidden beneath the surface.
Your love has the power to unearth those broken pieces of ourselves.
Crumbling under pressure in miry places, are we the ones that you call precious?
Perplexed we still wonder what value empty clay jar can still have once unearthed,
especially one that is in pieces.

Yet You gather these unrecognizable lost pieces of ourselves as we slowly walk with
You to the cross;
to where it all began for us,
Where You told us who You are Lord and who we are in you.
Here we are in the darkest of nights, feeling so exposed and vulnerable in the cold-
ness of this world.
Yet Your presence warmly ushers us into a peace so surreal
that we don't know if we are woke in our own nightmares or dreaming while shel-
tered by You.

Then day breaks and Your Son shines; we can truly believe that joy comes in the morning and

Your joy is our strength as we walk with You because

You are the unfathomably mighty and profoundly amazing God,

Whose power pieces together the brokenness of our souls.

For You restore our emptiness with Your perfect wholeness.

Though broken in suffering, may the genuineness of the faith that You strengthen these jars with,

prove to be more precious than gold.

Whatever these jars are repurposed for in Your house,
may the restored sum of these pieces speak of its Maker

whose love is whole and cannot be broken;

whose grace unearths and does not leave us exposed;

whose forgiveness is full and does not leave us empty;

whose Hand has the power to crush and wipe out nations yet gently restores us,
piece by piece, back to Himself, back to Your fullness.

“Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.”



PART 3:
Ministry Challenges

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Feed My Sheep: A Reflection on the Online Celebration
of the Eucharist in Lockdown

Dianne Willman

Breathing Anew

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A Story of a Woman's Lockdown: Personal Reflections

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Ebbah Dube

Feed My Sheep: A Reflection on the Online Celebration of the Eucharist in Lockdown

Dianne Willman

Dianne Willman is an admitted advocate of the High Court of South Africa; Deputy Director in the Asset Forfeiture Unit of the National Prosecuting Authority and Head of Training and Development. She is also a trained spiritual Director and a Catholic priest.

The onslaught of the pandemic has impacted many physically, emotionally and financially. Some have lost family members; some lost jobs through lockdown; others became trapped in homes that are violent, and many struggled with depression and anxiety which has been identified as the hidden pandemic. Some may have been impacted spiritually, asking God what is the meaning of this suffering, or even blaming God for such suffering. As both individuals and humankind as a whole, we need help to survive this time in our history. Our faith in God is one such key support, a faith that needs to be nurtured through God's Holy word and the bread and wine, or body and blood of Christ.

At the start of lockdown in South Africa (and indeed elsewhere in the world), Catholics were encouraged to participate in the celebration of Mass by way of spiritual communion.¹ Attendance at Mass was either through watching a recorded Mass, or attendance at a live online one but which was a one-way celebration with the celebrant saying the parts meant for the priest and the faithful. There was and is little, if any, active participation in the service by attendees. In respect of receiving Holy Communion, believers were to participate through exercising their spiritual imaginations of receiving the body and blood of Christ, or be satisfied in receiving

1 The act of desiring union with Christ in circumstances where Communion cannot be physically received.

Christ in the form of the spoken Word, or find value in their sudden enforced fast from actual bread and wine, that is, the body and blood of Christ.²

As a Roman Catholic Womanpriest (RCWP),³ these approaches to receiving Holy Communion were deeply disturbing. Something jarred within me: was I to eat and drink the consecrated bread and wine while my community watched me? Were they really to go without it in a time of such suffering? In my calling to priesthood, I was asked by God to “feed my sheep,” following the words Jesus spoke to Peter.⁴ How was I to fulfil this calling in the celebration of the Eucharist especially at a time of deep need for God and God’s consolation and feeding?

Catholic journalist, Robert Mickens,⁵ captured my concerns eloquently. He described this situation as parents⁶ who prepared and provided a meal for themselves and their children, and then proceeded to eat and drink while the children watched their parents. It just does not sit well. Somehow this was sanctioned behaviour of parents. And in the context of spiritual communion, there was to be spiritual value for the children in observing their parents feeding themselves while they went without food; or that the words of their parents were sufficiently fulfilling.

There is something innately and instinctually wrong with this picture. It cuts to the core of what it means to be a parent or simply a loving person. I asked myself questions like: does it not do more harm than good? It certainly does not lead to the actual feeding of hungry children. It goes against basic human decency of eating in front of others and not sharing food with them. The problem is worse than simple courtesy, however. It raises questions about parenting. Is it right that parents invite their children and then forbid them to eat while they themselves meet their own needs? Is this not a distorted notion of parenting, and a twisted understanding that leads to thinking of children as lesser beings, a deprivation that raises at the very least questions around the humane treatment of children? At root, this is abuse and

2 Such value may be fasting as an act of solidarity with those who cannot access communion for example those in the Amazon region.

3 I was ordained through the movement called Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP). See www.roman-catholicwomenpriests.org for further information.

4 John 21:17

5 Mickens, R. 2020. “The Mass has ended ... but”. Available at <https://cathnews.co.nz/2020/04/06/the-mass-has-ended-but/>

6 He accepted that it wasn't the best analogy since priests are not parents per se. The overall point however is well made.

reflects the problematic theology around the Eucharist that is resident in the Catholic Church. We are not passive beings. Could something be done, even if not done before?

How can we respond to the needs of this time which prevents physical gatherings, consecration within a community that is not present and real sharing in the body and blood of Christ? How then can the request by Jesus to Peter to “feed my sheep” and “feed my lambs” be fulfilled? Is it a case of there being one font that is now closed to the faithful (but open to clergy), and God in Christ being limited? Or are we invited to explore a new way of being church and being fed by Christ not only in the words of scripture but also in the body and blood of Christ?

Can live online services in which the community participates in consecration be a valid and valuable option? If the faithful are invited to bring their gifts of bread and wine to a table they have prepared at home to participate in the service, can this satisfy their hunger? Can these gifts be consecrated through the gathering of a virtual community who gather intentionally in deep faith, and through the operation of the Spirit in and through each person, so that they eat the body and drink the blood of Christ, in real terms right here right now?

RCWP priests believe so and offer such celebrations of the Eucharist. For me, the answer lies in scripture, theology and lived experiences of faith.

In the first, we are invited to reflect on a particular scripture in which Jesus heals the centurion's servant by a word that he speaks some distance away from the beloved servant (Matt. 8:5-13). Jesus applauds the faith of the centurion who recognizes his authority in this regard. The centurion does not doubt the possibility of such a remote healing. He recognizes the power of Jesus and his words. In this account alone we are assured of the power of God to act even in the so-called absence of Jesus – healing at a far physical distance, that is, without the physical presence of Jesus. When the priest says the words of consecration, when the Spirit is called upon to transform the gifts of bread and wine, does our Lord not act remotely through each gathered believer in her or his home? Is our faith like that of the centurion, or do we lag far behind?

The story of this remote healing actually tells us that God is everywhere. Faith is needed to hold this reality. In other words, in the context of the celebration of the Eucharist online, God is in the home and in the person of each believer who

participates intentionally and in faith in the act of consecration. Do we believe God is really real, and really everywhere? Or is our belief that God is constrained?

This leads to the next critical reflection: do we believe that God can act through a lay person? Can the faithful be trusted with so great an honour as consecration? In the Catholic faith tradition, and perhaps in others too, the divide between the clergy and laity is a sad reality which has led to the laity being perceived as second class, and disempowered in their faith. Can this all-powerful God really act through a lay person who is made in the image and likeness of God just like the priest? Are we not all to become transformed into the person of Christ and be Christ in the world?⁷ Are we not all part of the royal priesthood of Christ? One member shared that she is beginning to believe that perhaps God can make things holy through her – even just a little bit. The communal act of online consecration returns to the lay faithful their dignity. Perhaps our theology and priests need conversion.

These are the questions I wrestled with. I simply could not refuse the call of God to feed the faithful. I simply could not eat and drink in front of my community, who too were faced with severe challenges in this time of lockdown, and who, through an act of faith, could be nourished and sustained in actually consuming the body and blood of Christ.

The wisdom of liberation theology also played in the background of my mind. The invitation to “see, judge, act” strengthened my desire. And so, trusting that theology follows from lived actions of faith, I invited and continue to invite my community to bring their gifts of bread and wine, and consecrate these together with me.

Finally, what gives real credence to such new and bold steps in faith is if fruits of the Spirit have been borne. To put it another way, what have individual believers in online celebrations of Mass experienced? What is the sense of the faithful?

I share with you a few reflections on this topic from those in my community:⁸

7 See theologian Elizabeth Johnson's consideration of this topic in her book *She Who Is*.

8 Permission was obtained from the writers to share these reflections.

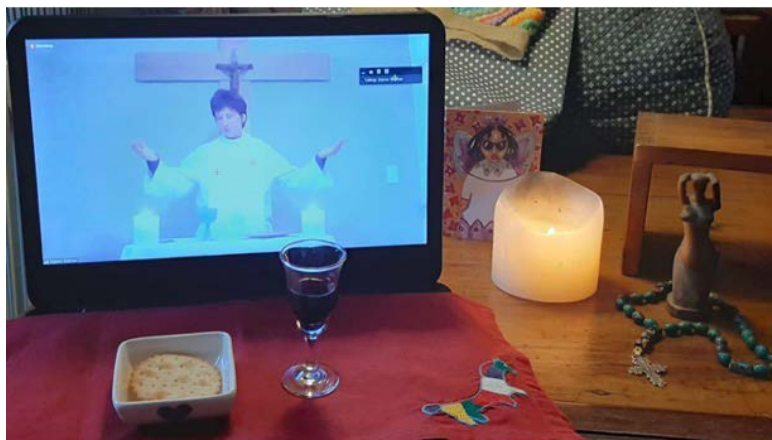


Photo credit: Louise Beghin

"I am convinced that there is the possibility for a new way to celebrate the memory of Jesus' last supper in post COVID times."

– Bonnie

"During the very first week of lockdown, I watched the Mass that was streamed by a local Catholic organisation in Johannesburg. It was a perfectly good Mass, but it was just like watching TV. I was a spectator, I kept quiet, I didn't feel moved to say prayers out loud, and Communion wasn't a real experience at all. The next week, I joined the Mass offered by Dianne Willman on Zoom, and right from the start that experience was so different. We were invited to prepare our own tables with bread and wine, and the invitation was there to consecrate together. Ever since that first Zoom Mass, I have had a deeply meaningful experience of Mass every week, with a real communion that has brought me closer to God, that has nourished my soul and my spiritual life, and that has helped me to face the peculiar circumstances of lockdown with equanimity and strength and hope."

– Penny

“Sharing the Eucharist with you, my sister and community has been a huge resource during this time of COVID. I feel you embody a community model of church, less hierarchical...it is a circle. Your welcome and relatedness to each person models what Eucharist is about. Exercising my own priestly calling in celebrating Eucharist together has been profoundly moving. It is a model of church that I “find a home in.” It has been a profoundly renewing experience of living faith.”

- Sybil



Photo Credit: Sue Wilson

“My experience of this time has been of a very significant time in my “pilgrim’s progress.” Attendance at a crowded Mass is often anything but prayerful as there are so many distractions. Being able to have a quiet and special place in one’s home where one can pray with one or two family members enables one to pray the Mass in a very deep and meaningful way. I have found the masses in our community very inspiring and motivating, prayerful and challenging to become more eucharistic to others. We have been able to pray with each other from all over the globe at the same time as sharing prayer with our own family members.”

- Frances

When I reflect on Eucharist and what it means and brings to my life, I am filled with a myriad of thoughts and feelings. Personally, Mass is about hearing the word of God gathered together with the community. This community is instructed in God's will for us; it develops our discernment and it gives us hope, all the while nourishing us. Eucharist on the other hand represents something much more personal. It begins with the people gathered together with one purpose of meeting Jesus at His table. Each individual plays a vital role in supporting one another on their physical, emotional and spiritual journey. Whether it is a kind word, a cooked dinner, an inspiring conversation or a sharing of the scriptures, the community becomes an invaluable support structure for individuals.

The blessing of being able to celebrate the Eucharist at home, in community, becomes even more important in our present pandemic times. Isolated lonely people are connecting, caring and celebrating together. Community become Eucharist to one another.

With the inclusion of Communion in our new online Mass an internal mental dialogue occurred. How could we celebrate communion if the bread and wine we had brought to the table had not been consecrated by the priest? However, I settled into acceptance as faith spans time and distance, so my bread and wine were being consecrated from a distance. Matthew 18:20 says "Where two or more are gathered in my name I am in the midst of them." The importance of participating in the Eucharist in our present time is a visible sign that we are partaking of the body and blood of Jesus, reminding us of Christ's eternal love and sacrifice. The phrase ... 'with God anything is possible,' rings in my ears.

When I celebrate the Eucharist, I bring all the joys and hardships of the week, giving thanks for the many small miracles that have been showered on me and my loved ones. I also give thanks for the fortitude to weather the blows and hardships the week might have brought my way. The comfort of knowing that I can lean into God's Love, enables me to cope. I share some more reflections of those attending Mass online who have found this to be true for themselves:

I am exceedingly thankful for the opportunity of being part of this new online community and with God's grace it will grow touching many lives and situations.

- Judy

Another member has written of her experience in great detail:

“All who followed Jesus and shared his life as he travelled far and wide through barriers closed to any change in cultures and laws, experienced the mystery of brokenness; the shattering of truths held sacred for centuries. Those who accepted in faith their limitations of understanding the Word, the One sent to Speak, The One sent to show the fullness of Life, to heal and to bring back to Love, did not only survive staying close to Jesus but became an integral part of him. They experienced and learned to live in the Wisdom of the Spirit, the death of Jesus, and its meaning in Resurrection. They, with Jesus and in him, became living Eucharist. Jesus broke the Bread of Life for them and with them. He gave himself unconditionally and welcomed all to live eternally in him. There is no greater joy. They received it and carried on doing as Jesus did, with limited insight but with great faith. This they did, as community, in their homes, and later in places that could accommodate greater numbers. In times of persecution they celebrated Eucharist in secret; men and women together. There were no hierarchical structures to distinguish greater or lesser power, greater or lesser importance. The Church was not structured around a particular set of social norms but around how Jesus was and behaved: anywhere at any time and in any place. Jesus gave himself to all, in all, and by all. He established a kinship with all, and with, and in all creation. His kinship has reigned though the centuries because it is an eternal and developing or evolving relationship. It is also evolving into deeper or greater consciousness of all peoples and in some way in creation. The one is all and the all is one

It is this living sacramental and life-giving joy I experience when I am in communion virtually, in the celebration of Eucharist with my online community, ... we are welcomed by name, to the group. We are asked about our well-being, our week that has been, our health etc., Our sharing results in being in real conversation and communion. The Eucharist begins or rather, continues from who we are and where, and how we have been.

I find it especially and profoundly uplifting to know that all present are welcome to full participation in the celebration of Eucharist. This is not a ‘Catholics only’ club. I don’t have to feel ashamed that ‘all are invited’ to Mass but with canonically precluding conditions: divorced, living in a faithful gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, or as yet undetermined partnership, or being a person of a

different expression of faith, being a woman called to priesthood. All are welcome to pray and observe but have to watch the real Catholics participate fully in the eucharistic meal while they are excluded – are starved of life; the purpose for which they come to the table. Who invites guests to dinner and makes them watch while the hosting family eat their fill? No offered theological, canonical or traditional answers relieve my shame. The Eucharist is a celebratory meal that should feed all who are hungry for the assurance of total love....

Eucharist for me is the tangible life of Jesus in us no matter time, space, or method of transmission. We are and live Eucharist, not sit and watch it! Online or not, does not change the fact that Jesus came to show us and tell us and give us and live within us. The theology isn't new, just the way we have distorted it through the patriarchal centuries. Eucharist, that is, the life presence, cannot be defined in terms of space or time. The simple theology for me is that online diminishes and changes nothing of this. We live in the resurrection, in the cosmic Christ, so there are no physical boundaries.

Then as we move on in the Mass... there is the lightness of heart as the meal begins. We are reverently invited to full participation as community. We are conscious of our dignity and humbly we express our inter-dependence; we look at ourselves and our failings with love and dignity and draw near with confidence, to reconciling love. We ask for mercy for our sins. There is no need to beat up ourselves for our grievous faults or sin that deserves some punitive humiliation. Instead, there is the joy of confidence in forgiveness and openness to healing.

The readings are reverently shared and there is time to reflect on them before rushing on to the next text. I am drawn more deeply into awareness in the sacred presence of the community in Jesus.

The homilies are profoundly and prayerfully delivered. The theological substance is sustaining and generates hope, prayerful reflection and a sense of deeply belonging in love and life. The Word becomes living sacrament.

The liturgical language of this online Mass is inclusive and I don't have to listen to an all-male imagery where God is only father, disciples are always brothers and brethren and even the Holy Spirit is referred to as 'Him.' I am always overjoyed by the knowledge that as a woman, I am fully alive and allowed to be such. I am reassured that God –the universal oneness – is the source of all that is birthing,

mothering, and fathering, and the life-breath. I share equally in this breathing within us and within all that is. There is no separation of anyone or anything. This for me is truly evidenced in the eucharistic meal I am privileged to be present in. I am in the sharing, giving and receiving of the body and blood of the cosmic Christ through death and resurrection and through rebirth. It is the ultimate gift of showing how saving-love behaves even on the Cross of injustice and blindness. It is the sign of eternal God-with-us in greatest joy.

In our evolving Roman Catholic Church, the raging tide of cataclysmic change is in full reign. Yet, the sustaining ancient walls of mothering and fathering and birthing Wisdom remain unmoved. It is the rage, the fear, the patriarchal power and clericalism and the great growth of abuse that has resulted from it that will reach full utterance and that will continue to violently thrash at change. However, our sisters and brothers who hunger for God are assured that Wisdom will draw all that is wrong and mistaken back into the simplicity of Jesus. All will be left broken and exposed to the light and healing warmth of the Sun/Son and nourished by the darkness of real and simple faith. The struggle will one day be spent and dissipate and leave upon our rebirthed Catholic shore, the broken shells of blindness and some open, emptied shells awaiting new life and love to move in. Jesus died to save us from ourselves. Jesus said "Be not afraid, I am with you always, come, follow me ..."

- Bernie Mullen

Bernie has also captured her reflections in the form of a poem:

With the Sea at Church Today

*I am with the sea today
Trying to be Eucharist
The tide in fully raucous reign
Shouts crescendos
Of unrelenting confrontation
Smashing violence against
Long withstanding walls
That meet its raging thrash
With resolute resistance*

*Ancient Wisdom's Peace
Receives the onslaughts
That forecast fragmentation
Of mistaken might
Dissipation
Of what was so fervently
So infallibly
Established as eternal
Truth
Retribution to the Father
For our sin
The Lamb of Sacrifice*

*In deepest Heart of Mother-Father Prayer
Ocean's silent currents
Expand and free our need
For the baking and breaking
Of The Holy Bread
Commemoration of
Sacred Sharing Meal
The celebration:
Receiving and of giving
Forgiving and of healing
Becoming Sacramental breathing
In the Cosmic Life of Christ*

*Sea-Sophia
Lures back the broken
Rage of power spent
Into her deep evolving
Currents of quiet
Transformation*

*Upon her eternal shores
Of cataclysmic aftermath
Lies the evidence of struggle
Sometimes shattered
And sometimes emptied
Shells
Exposed to sun of day
And dark of night
Waiting for recurring tides
To birth again
Fully undefended men
And fully open women
Made bounteous
In Beloved Oneness
To serve and share
In equal Union
Living Eucharistic Joy
In all Creation's tides
Of Universal Life*

- Bernie Mullen

To be fair, in contrast to all the positive reflections on participating in the Eucharist online, one person, Beryl, simply stated "It doesn't do it for me."

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jesus fed and is able to continue to feed his sheep. There is an abundant source of feeding that is real food. It seems that we need the faith of the centurion not only to survive this pandemic but perhaps to thrive in it.

I am left wondering whether Mary has not said to Jesus once again as she did at the wedding in Cana (Jn 2:12): "They have no wine"? Has Jesus not responded? For me, the best wine has been saved for last as it was in the wedding at Cana: a wine born of deep faith, intentional participation in the meal, and an unfathomable trust in the dignity of all God's people to be conduits of divine grace and restored images of Christ.

Breathing Anew

Rev Nokuthula Dhladhla

Nokuthula Dhladhla is a woman theologian, a spiritual coach and activist in the areas of gender, sexuality and faith.

Breathe in and Out

Breathe in and Out

This is how I helped those who came to me for help – to breathe in and breathe out! These were people struggling to breathe in their moments of anxiety, depression, hurt, and pain. I guided them to relearn to breathe again and witnessed them finding their breathing after a long time. For some I did not say much when they came for pastoral care and guidance, just sitting together and breathing in and out was their healing moment.

A similar moment came to me; I did not remember how to breathe when anxiety came over my life like a flood. I did not know what hit me, I could not breathe, pray, sing. I wanted to run away from myself, be out of my body and was so scared, fearful. This was me – a person who stood for 21 years preaching messages of hope when people were scared, a person who comforted many, and now, I Rev Nokuthula was scared. Anxiety became my daily bread since the news of COVID-19 and lockdown. I was so overwhelmed that I was not sure what to do and why I felt this way!

How did I get there? How did we get here? COVID-19, lockdown happened! None of us knew what this moment would look like and how it would make us feel. None of us have ever experienced COVID-19 and the lockdown. For me, this experience was similar to my sickness in 2006 when I was diagnosed with a tumour in my spine that left me paralyzed and unable to walk. I was stuck in a wheelchair for two years. Lockdown brought back those memories and feelings, resulting in the worst form of anxiety that I have ever experienced. I have ministered to people who came to



me for help struggling through COVID-19, but it was not easy for me to tell them about my own struggles. For days I could not breathe, especially after the first announcement of going into lockdown.

During the evening of the announcement of lockdown I laughed so much because I did not understand what I was feeling. I found myself so scared! I did not know what COVID-19 was and how to deal with it. I found myself laughing and I laughed at whoever asked why I was laughing, I did not have answers because I myself did not know why I was laughing. I did not want to die of this virus; I did not want my family, friends, my neighbours to die or get sick. I was worried sick! How were we all going to survive this? My mind could not stop thinking. I could not stop worrying. I stayed up until 02:00 in the morning for days! I was anxious and could not breathe – I was a mess. I wanted to remember all those wonderful words I used to say to others, all my preaching and my songs that used to comfort me. All these things were gone. I could not remember. I wanted to be in control and that was not happening.

Then, I started to judge myself. What kind of pastor was I? I did not have something to give to others and I could not even console myself. I lost my voice and was unable to pray. What had happened to me? I needed help! But I hid all this because I was afraid that I would come across as a weak pastor. Everywhere I looked I saw many pastors preaching, praying and encouraging communities, while I was gripped with anxiety, unable to utter any words of comfort to others and to myself. I longed to escape but could not.

I struggled to understand why this was happening to me. My constant thought was that I needed to be strong so that I could help others face the challenges of COVID-19: women were being killed and raped, and domestic violence was on the rise; poor communities did not know where their next meal was going to come from; many people were losing their jobs and depression was taking over the lives of many. Calls and messages were coming through to me from those I knew and from strangers – all needed me to listen. Strangely, I was able to help many yet I was not able to help myself. Being a pastor for many years, I was caught up in the beliefs that I had carried for many years – that we are not meant to cry or show any emotions, that our role is to be strong for our congregations.

I was at an unknown level in my life. I was running away from facing my own reality, failing to live in the present moment. My partner reminded me that I needed to

stop, pause and start breathing. I needed to stop, feel, be present in the moment and present to myself. I realized that I had forgotten the words of hope and instructions that I offered to others! It was time for me to practice what I preach! So I started sitting under the tree in my yard at home. I sat there for hours breathing in and out, allowing myself to feel all that I have felt since the lockdown, that is, fear and anxiety. I needed to learn again to love me and be kind to me; to be gentle and allow myself to feel deeply in the simple realization that I am only a human being, and I needed to PAUSE. I allowed myself to know that I do not have all the answers. Self-care is a 'big one' because as pastors we take care of everyone else and forget about ourselves and that has been such a problem. I must say that was the best experience and best gift that I had given myself after such a long time! I felt like I was relearning something new and I sat there with me not worried about the next step. I am learning a new normal by allowing my own normal! Relearning to breathe in and out, breathe in again and out.

Breathing in a new normal! Being gentle, kind and patient with yourself. I listen to myself have conversations with myself and I stop judging myself as to why I was not praying or reading the scriptures, listening to sermons. I understand God more and have helped so many people more than during my years of being a pastor.

Months have passed and I continue finding my secret hiding place where I allow myself to be and just be in every moment that comes my way. I have found peace during Corona and I am ok with what I can do and cannot do. I have learned that every moment is an open door for learning and many possibilities. I am in the moment; we are all in the moment even when we do not know how or when it will end. Everyone's moment is different. COVID-19 is not the same for everyone. And our lessons are not the same.

My Prayer: I pray for peace, I pray for comfort, and love when we do not know what to do. As we continue with this journey, we also need to find our role and what it means to be in this moment and what are the lessons from all of it to learn.

Breathe in and breathe out! Be in a new normal in your own normal way.

A Story of a Woman's Lockdown: Personal Reflections

Rev Seipati L. Ngcobo

Seipati Ngcobo is a mother, wife and Anglican priest and is passionate about women's ministry.

Lockdown 2020 brought with it many mixed emotions. The first emotion was excitement. I happily welcomed the decision by the government to finally put strict measures in place to control the pandemic. I was even happier for a much-needed break and time with my family. In the first fifty days of lockdown, I had the privilege of praying live on Facebook with my family and friends, an experience that brought me joy and peace of mind during the lockdown. Nothing can explain how much praying consistently with people in a new way of connecting, really fills the heart with joy and a hunger to create such a sacred space of prayer for your own family and a greater online community.

It wasn't too long into the lockdown period that being enclosed confronted me and forced me to face my other emotions: loss, grief, pride and even confusion. A lot had happened in my life in a space of a year, and with my busyness as a priest, I somehow felt there were experiences, ideas and emotions I had stored up. Some of these experiences, ideas and emotions needed to be intentionally kept in the storage of my heart and mind. I needed to keep thinking on them, meditating on them, and getting in touch with them. Other experiences needed much de-cluttering, because I did not allow myself the courtesy to deal with each emotion that came with my vast experiences. When the excitement of exercising and trying new recipes wore off, the de-cluttering and re-storage process began. I remembered that I had become a mother, unexpectedly lost my own mother and my grandmother (my strong pillars), finished my Honours degree, was ordained a priest, all in my first



year as a married woman, living in a new province amongst a new people. It has been a tiring year. I have felt joy, sadness, grief and a deep sense of loss, while trying to find my feet as a newly ordained priest

With all the good training I was receiving, learning the do's and don'ts of ministry, it became clear to me that somewhere in the hierarchical structures within the church space, my place as an assistant priest had compelled me to put on hold some of my dreams and hopes for my own ministry. I have always loved the ministry of teaching and especially teaching the common woman in the pew. To me this means a ministry to women as ordinary as my mother, my grandmothers, my sisters, my aunts and my friends. These are women whose experiences showed that they carry a lot on their shoulders, and somewhere in their struggles of being women, I believed that the life-affirming gospel of Jesus needed to be preached and taught to ones such as these, beginning from where they are. I have done what I could at the parish level, within the various structures that existed, and it had given me joy to become a participant in some of the women's groups that exist within the church. However, I felt I had to stay within the parameters of how things were, somewhat becoming more of a participant observer, bringing nothing new and certainly not teaching and preaching this gospel to women as I had so hoped. Was my calling as a priest requiring me to adjust to systems and structures that existed? Or was my calling as a priest inherently equated to bringing about inevitable change in the community I serve? It was hard to discern.

The lockdown has awarded me the opportunity to discern my calling at this critical time. And in response to this discernment, I have been able to tap into a space of dialogues of impact, learning, and teaching. As I reflected on the things I have always wanted to do, I decided I was going to create that opportunity on an online platform. I called a few women to do reflections to be released every Thursday on my Facebook page. These were reflections done by women, with a focus on the 'forgotten women of impact' in the Bible. These are women who were not elevated, who were not popularised or hailed as heroines. They are women whose stories were hidden in the shadows of the men's stories. Some such women were Shiphrah and Puah (Exod. 1), Achsah (Josh. 15:16-19), Hagar (Genesis 16), Dinah (Genesis 34:5-7), Leah (Gen. 29: 15-18) Tamar (2 Sam. 13:14-20) to name a few. I named these videos "Women Impact Thursdays (WIT)".

This has been my way of exercising my ministry in affirming the life experiences, thoughts and feelings of women. The lockdown gave me a second chance at exercising what I had envisioned for myself in the church, a church not restricted by the parameters of denominations. This I have done without sacrificing what I envision God has called me to say and do. I am grateful that in a time such as this, a time of being enclosed, that I could open up and reach out and touch lives of women through technology. I am thankful that in fulfilling my vocation, women can experience the safety to open up and get in touch with other women, in a time when touch and physical closeness are restricted.

Spiritual Accompaniment in the Time of Pandemic

Dr Annemarie Paulin-Campbell

Dr Annemarie Paulin-Campbell is a Catholic lay woman who heads up the Spirituality work of the Jesuit Institute South Africa.

A significant part of my work for the past twenty years in the Jesuit Institute has been the ministry of spiritual accompaniment and the giving of retreats of different kinds. As 2020 began, we were looking forward to a full programme of residential retreats and retreats in daily life in parishes and communities. The pandemic and the lockdown suddenly meant that our usual ways of accompanying people spiritually were not possible, and yet, people were in desperate need of spiritual and emotional support.

Many were dealing with new challenges – the isolation of lockdown; home-schooling children while trying to learn to work online; relational stresses at home; grandparents missing their grandchildren, to name a few. Churches were closed and the comfort of familiar ways of worship was absent. People were trying to come to terms with a sudden and drastic interruption to their lives – longing to feel a sense of God's presence in the midst of uncertainty and fear about the future.

We began to experiment with offering online retreats of different kinds as well as online spiritual direction and spiritual conversations. Had it not been for the restrictions of lockdown which left us no other choice, I doubt that I would so readily have embraced this new way of working, given my lack of ease with technology. But we needed to adapt quickly and find new ways to offer spiritual support. The lockdown started not long before Holy Week, the most sacred time of the church calendar, so our first online retreat was offered from Holy Thursday to Good Friday with a combination of online audio reflections and one-to-one online spiritual



accompaniment. With level 5 lockdown restrictions in place, those living alone were totally isolated in their homes. The daily conversation with their prayer guide became a significant point of connection and support and provided a way of entering into the Holy Week mysteries meaningfully, at a time when people felt the absence of their usual spiritual communities particularly acutely.

We had previously always offered parish-based retreats in daily life. Retreatants and guides would come together to start and end the retreat as a community. Each weekday retreatants would come to the parish to meet one to one with a trained guide. Now online, and therefore not restricted to any physical location, we gathered retreatants from all over the country and beyond. We met via Zoom at the beginning and end of each retreat to keep the sense of a community making a retreat journey together, even though each retreatant was on their own journey. During the week, each retreatant would set aside around 30 minutes a day to pray, and also had a designated time to connect with their prayer guide via WhatsApp, Skype, or Zoom. The prayer guide offered a listening space to the retreatant, helping them to reflect on their prayer and on how things were going in daily life. They also offered material for prayer specific to the needs of each retreatant. Some of those who took part were very unaccustomed to using technology to connect, but their longing for some spiritual sustenance meant that they were willing to try.

As staff, we, and the team of volunteer retreat directors, also had to accustom ourselves to the differences in working online. We took care to set up our computers in such a way that the person had the sense of a sacred space, often putting a candle or cross behind them. We learned to listen even more intensely to pick up the questions and feelings without access to as much body language, especially when the internet connection was poor and the video feed needed to be cut. This time demanded a whole new way of working.

During level 3 of the lockdown, we offered an 8-Day online 'at home' retreat where participants let go of their everyday commitments, as far as possible, and prayed the four or five hours that they would have prayed each day had they been making a residential retreat, and met daily with their retreat Director. Interestingly, it was only women who signed up for this first retreat. We encouraged them to arrange practicalities such as shopping and cooking as far as possible before starting the retreat and to set up prayer spaces in their homes. Some of those making the retreat lived alone, making it easier for them to find space and silence to enter into

prayer. Others negotiated with their religious communities or family members for the space they needed for the eight days. One decided to break the silence of the retreat each evening for an hour to have supper with her family.

Some, who had children in the house, had to make the retreat while continuing to juggle getting children to and from school. There was a strange gift in entering into retreat so deeply in the ordinary space of everyday life and not going apart from it. Many of those on the retreat were accustomed to being able to go away to a residential retreat centre for eight days each year. It was a different experience to have some of the dynamics of everyday life alongside the praying for several hours each day. It gave more of an opportunity to practice the integration of the gifts that God was giving in prayer. One woman shared movingly that for her there was a learning of how to live contemplatively in family life.⁹

It was also during this week, a cold week in mid-winter, that South Africa was suddenly plunged back into a time of load shedding which added some complexity to the process of connecting online. At times, a guide or a retreatant had no power at the time they were scheduled to connect, which meant some re-juggling and the need for great patience and flexibility. I found that working online demanded even deeper listening and was challenging and even exhausting on those days when the connections were not clear.

Each evening we gathered via Zoom for a prayer space in common which included a time of silent prayer together and the bringing of prayers and concerns in intercessory prayer. Some retreatants were grieving at not being able to see their children or grandchildren; several had loved ones who were infected with COVID-19. There was a sense of a world groaning with anguish and a deeper sense of the preciousness and precariousness of life. It was the time of a surge in cases and many in the group prayed daily for loved ones who had died or who were critically ill.

My colleague, Puleng Matsaneng and a team of volunteers offered a different experience of spiritual support via daily WhatsApp messages. This was the adaptation of an introductory Ignatian prayer journey called *Tsoseletsa* that would usually be made by up to 100 people gathering each evening for a week in the parish. Given that they could not gather in person, those wishing to make the retreat were sent

9 Permission was given from the woman concerned to share this.

the inputs and directives for prayer via daily WhatsApp messages. This made the retreat very accessible to women who did not have access to Wi-Fi and who could not afford to buy much data and therefore were not able to make the online retreats.

For many of these women making the *Tsoseletsa* prayer journey via WhatsApp, issues of job security, unemployment and anxiety about finances came up again and again. Many women who were single parents and sole providers were in the position of having to earn a living but had no access to child care for children not at school. They were also anxious about the risks of their children contracting the virus if they went to school. As a result of the retreat process, they had access to the cell phone number of their guide. After the retreat they would often call their guide when they faced a difficult decision or were struggling and needed someone to talk to.

While all the retreat spaces offered emotional support in the sense of someone who would listen, they also helped the women to lean into their relationship with God and sometimes to grapple with difficult questions about faith in a time when they were not able to connect with their ordinary faith community.

Those of us who engage in the work of spiritual accompaniment faced a situation of grappling with many of the same struggles as those we were accompanying. It is difficult to listen and to hold the pain of many others when it strongly echoes one's own. To listen to someone who was unable to be with her parent in hospital when they died of COVID-19 stirs up one's own anxiety. Even listening to the more ordinary struggles of missing visits with friends and families, worries about job security, or battling to feel a sense of God's closeness, resonated with the personal experience of the retreat guides, and we, in turn, needed safe spaces to process the complex mix of feelings.

One of the surprises of this time was something I did to help anchor myself. After my morning prayer, several times a week I would write a prayer poem. Giving words to my encounter with God helped me to reflect on my own experience. I felt prompted to start sharing some of them on Facebook and found that especially during the lockdown they seemed to help some people, many of whom shared them in prayer groups or services. Sometimes what I shared was very personal and I felt that to put it into a public space was risky. But perhaps that risk of making myself vulnerable was what allowed others – some unknown to me – to risk reaching out to share something of what has been stirred in them. Many wrote to me of their own

experiences saying that the prayers had helped give words to what they were feeling but struggled to articulate. To hear someone else echoing some of their struggles and questions gave me a sense of relief.

The pandemic has intensified the struggles that were already in people's lives and made the questions they were already grappling with feel more urgent. For many in spiritual direction it has been a time of asking significant questions; of feeling the need to discern God's call with greater urgency, and yet, it is also a time in which patient waiting and holding the discomfort of 'unknowing' seemed to be the invitation.

The pandemic I believe will have lasting emotional and spiritual impact for months and years to come. This time has asked of us the courage to risk. To try new ways of spiritual accompaniment. To trust that while face to face presence may be the ideal, God is not limited and can and does work in ways we could not have foreseen.

I share two prayer poems from this time. One is from the time of the virus surge in late July 2020 and another which is a blessing written for the end of the times of retreat.

25th July 2020

*Beloved,
There is a relentlessness
To the unfolding of days
That has begun to feel endless.*

*It is exhausting to keep going
Day after day -
juggling,
ordinary and extraordinary
responsibilities.*

*There is a grief we hold together
As we persist
Waiting and longing
Scouring the news for signs of hope.*

*We nod knowingly as others share
Their experiences.
Their tiredness and frustration.
The endless zoom calls.
The desperate longing to get away.
Somewhere.
Anywhere.
To walk naked-faced
Breathing in the fresh air.
To have a date in the diary
When this will be over.*

*And as the virus surges
We dread the messages that come.
Bringing news of yet someone else
We know and love infected.
Praying their symptoms may be mild.
Grieve the loss of people
we have known and loved.
And that we could not say goodbye to.*

*It's a hard hard time,
Like no other time
we have known.*

*Perhaps – I console myself-
When the purple Jacarandas bloom
In the early days of summer
Things will have eased.
Perhaps when Christmas comes
Family and friends will be reunited.*

Perhaps...

*Drench us in your love,
At the end of yet another week.
May this desert harshness
not destroy
the tender shoots of hope.
(27 June 2020)¹⁰*

A Blessing for the End of Retreat

*As these days of retreat draw to a close:
As you step back into
the rhythms of ordinary days,
may they be lit by the soft light
of what God has shown you.*

*May you live from what your eyes have seen,
and what the ears of your heart have heard.
May you hold the
nascent awareness with tender care;
nurture the saplings of new life within.*

*May the One who showed you
something of God's self,
remind you gently when you forget.
Draw you deeper
into the truth of your life, your call.*

*May you hold sacred
the moments of encounter,
may they fill you with peace.*

10 First published in PDF format in *Prayer Poems for a Pandemic* by Annemarie Paulin-Campbell (2020).

*And may the love
you have felt in these days spill over,
that others may breathe in
the fragrance
of the gift -
and know that they too
are deeply loved.*

The Midwife

Nicole Dickson

Nicole Dickson is a pastoral narrative therapist and heads up the Institute for Creative Conversation in Kempton Park, South Africa.

“Allowing our wounds to become the womb where new life is conceived.”

- Julian of Norwich

I have been a witness to people’s stories for more than twenty years now. You see, as a pastoral narrative therapist I am in the ‘business’ of listening to stories, gathering stories and bearing witness to the birth of new stories.

It is the telling of stories that lies at the heart of all human experiences and which forms part of the fabric of pastoral work. Dr Roberta Bondi, professor emerita at Candler School of Theology, Emory University suggests that pastoral work is about the “messy particularity of everyday lives examined with excruciating care and brought into conversation with the great doctrines of the Christian faith”¹¹

The Significance of Stories

The idea that we live multi-storied lives is a familiar one in Narrative Therapy. We speak of the ‘single story,’ the ‘problem-saturated story,’ the ‘dominant story,’ the ‘alternative story,’ re-storying,’ and ‘thickening preferred stories.’ Stories help us make meaning of the world around us and connect our past to our present and serve as a guide for the future. This year, the year 2020, we have added Corona (also called Pandemic) stories – stories of living in lockdown, of illness, of loss and grief and of

11 Roberta C. Bondi, *Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1995), 17.

living in liminal space. For the first time since becoming a therapist I am living and experiencing my own version of the same story as those I encounter. This has made us co-creators in this global story of the pandemic and has levelled the notion of any power dynamic.

During this time, I have been re-imagining a metaphor to describe the unique circumstances I find myself in

Metaphorically Speaking

Lisa Hinz suggests that metaphors and images become a 'midwife' between experience and language¹². Metaphors offer us an entrance into someone's experience (written or spoken) more vividly than mere statements of facts. It is within this understanding that the metaphor of midwife has come alive for me. It formed as I sat wrestling and lamenting 'outside the tomb' on Good Friday and Easter Saturday. I wrote:

*Cocooned in darkness,
Stillness,
The sound of a heartbeat
Flows the blood of the lamb –
Tainted by betrayal
And the weight of the world.
A place of waiting,
Of rest,
Of mourning a life that was.
A place of anticipation
And new creation ...*

*The dawn of a new birth
– resurrection Sunday*

12 Liza D. Hinz, Drawing from Within. Using Art to Treat Eating Disorders (London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 12. Accessed on 20/8/2020, <https://nancylevin.com/is-it-time-for-a-grace-ful-exit/>

In the days that followed I reflected on the words I had written. The image of the tomb became an image of a womb and I had an overwhelming sense of waiting for something to be born. This metaphor was helping me to name my own experience of living in liminal space. As I have continued to listen, to witness and to gather stories during this time, the midwife has become a prominent image for the role I play in conversation with others.

The Midwife

Karen Hanson writes, in a book entitled *Images of Pastoral Care*¹³ that midwives and pastors (I interpret this to include those of us working pastorally) have much in common. Both are in the “practice of tending births, the physical and the spiritual.” I resonate with her suggestion that she attends to “people in travail, in any kind of tribulation or anguish, as God does the miraculous work of delivering new life in its myriad forms.”¹⁴ She writes that we are in the business of “assisting God in birthing new life in people and in their relationships with self, others, and God.”

The metaphor of midwife embraces my position within my own story of this time in lockdown yet also in the stories of those I accompany in a therapy journey. Historian Laurel Ulrich shares a line from an eighteenth century midwifery book, “There is a tender regard one woman bears to another, and a natural sympathy in those that have gone thru’ the pangs of childbearing; which doubtless, occasion a compassion for those that labour under these circumstances”¹⁵ I offer some thoughts which are nurturing the conversations I am having, both with myself, my loved ones and others and I continue to explore this experience through language such as ‘Expectancy,’ ‘Labour Pains,’ and ‘Birth.’

13 R.C. Dykstra, *Images of Pastoral Care. Classic Readings*. St Louis (Missouri: Chalice Press. 2005.)

14 R.C. Dykstra, *Images of Pastoral Care*, 200.

15 L.T. Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785 – 1812* (New York: Vintage Books. 1990.) 12.

Expectancy

There has been a pregnant pause during lockdown which sees me waiting for something 'new' to be born – be it for life to give birth to a 'new normal' or for 'life after pandemic' to emerge. I imagine time spent in lockdown being like a time of living in a liminal space. The word liminal comes from the Latin word 'limen,' meaning threshold – any point or place of entering or beginning. A liminal space **is the time between the 'what was' and the 'next.'** It is a place of transition, a season of waiting, and not knowing. In the words of Nancy Levin, we are invited to “honor the space between no longer and not yet”.

I acknowledge that I have surrendered a measure of control over many aspects of my life to Corona and lockdown and I acknowledge that I am familiar with anxiety. As a result, body, mind and soul call on me for loving care. This has meant finding a balance of rest, regular meals, movement and prayer. Philippians 4: 6-7 (*The Message*) encourages me: “Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down.”

Labour Pains

*The old midwife calmly sponged off sweat
She hummed a lullaby to soothe her pain*

(Annalise Brigham... a.k.a. Audrey Haick, 2010)

As a mental health professional, I have not been immune to the disruption brought about by this pandemic. I am grieving the loss of contact with both of my children who live away from home. I am grieving the disconnection from life sustaining relationships and the inability to support myself financially. I am grieving the lonely journey of death experienced by dear ones. I wrestle with guilt and shame as I again acknowledge both the economic and racial privilege my white skin affords me at a time when so many are homeless, constrained by poverty, and racism. I lament and rage against the injustice of gender-based violence, women and child abuse and femicide as the numbers grow, seemingly as a result of lockdown.

Some of my labour companions during this time of groans and pain are the image I have of God, the awareness of breath, and the narrative practice of externalization.

Image of God as a Labour Companion

The image of God I have right now is significant. It explains how I see the world around me at any given time. If I see God as a condemning God then I might see the pandemic as a way in which God is indeed punishing humankind. If I have a loving, nurturing image of God, I am more inclined to sense God's lament along with mine and to move into a relationship in which I lean on God. Fr. William A. Barry SJ, in his book *A Friendship Like No Other* suggests that "the best analogy for the relationship God wants with us is friendship. God desires humans into existence for the sake of friendship"¹⁶

The Awareness of Breath

Women in the pangs of labour are encouraged to breathe to help manage the pain of birthing. At the very least, it helps women to work through the pain. An important role of the midwife is to 'breathe with' those who labour. Conscious breathing is known to help calm racing thoughts and the lack of control that tends to accompany anxiety. Breathing relieves tension mentally, physically, and emotionally. It provides mental clarity, calms down the nervous system and can boost emotional states. I consciously remind myself to breathe during this time.

Externalizing Practices

I am intrigued what the narrative practice of externalization offers to conversations and how it makes both myself and those I encounter 'allies' in finding ways to stand against the destructive forces of Corona and lockdown. Once problems are externalized (i.e., viewed as if they don't simply exist as an inherent aspect of a person) they can then be put into story-lines. For instance, it is possible for us as therapists to ask questions about how long the anxiety has been an influence in someone's life, when it came into their life, if there were factors that contributed to its entry, what the real effects of the anxiety are (on the person, their relationships and others), when these effects have been strongest and weakest, what sustains the depression

¹⁶ William A Barry, *A Friendship Like No Other* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 2008)

and what acts as remedies in certain situations. These sorts of questions, and many others, begin to place the existence of the problem into a story-line.

Personifying the pandemic and all it has brought into our lives can offer a sense of how it has come to have such a big influence on someone's life. It can also begin to provide people with a lot of information and richer understandings of how they might be able to reclaim their lives from the influence of problems.

Birthing

I would like to offer the ancient midwifery practice of 'calling into life' here. Stories suggest that in times where birthing or labour was protracted the midwife is believed to have asked the mother to name the child so that she could call the unborn child by name, and it would enter the world. I imagine that we too are calling into life a world without pandemic, a life after pandemic, a life lived through the lens of a 'new normal.'

I highlight thoughts on 'birthing' that come to mind:

The Birth of New Language

We are constituted in language. Language provides the basis for all our thoughts and gives us a "system of categories for dividing up our experience and giving it meaning"¹⁷ so that our 'selves' become the products of language. Language produces and constructs our experiences of ourselves and each other.

As the world comes to grips with the 'new normal' coronavirus has wrought on our towns, cities and communities, society faces the challenge of figuring out how to talk about the impact the virus is having on our everyday lives. Coronavirus has led to an explosion of new words and phrases, both in English and in other languages. This new vocabulary helps us make sense of the changes that have suddenly become part of our everyday lives. Think of terms and phrases such as: 'COVID fatigue,' 'Zoom burnout,' 'coronacoaster,' 'COVIDiot,' and 'coronation.'

17 Burr, V. 1995. *An introduction to social constructionism*. London: Routledge, 44

Doing Hope

The final moment of the pregnant pause is labour and the moment of birth. I liken this to hope.

I have found Weingarten's (2010) work on hope very meaningful. She suggests that hope, as a verb, is also the act of 'doing hope.' She defines this as the responsibility of the community to do hope with those who are hopeless. For Weingarten there is a sense that caregivers co-create hopefulness with those we journey with¹⁸. Weingarten uses the concept 'reasonable hope' in a similar manner¹⁹. She defines reasonable hope as something:

Both sensible and moderate, directing attention to what is within reach more than what may be desired but [is] unattainable. Reasonable hope's objective is the process of making sense of what exists now in the belief that this prepares us to meet what lies ahead. With reasonable hope, the present is filled with working not waiting; we scaffold ourselves to prepare for the future.²⁰

Creativity

I am inspired by creativity. People around the world are re-imagining ways of 'being' during this time. Consider the online offerings such as retreats, concerts, virtual tours of museums, cooking classes, conferences and workshops, to name but a few. The important rituals and ceremonies through which cultures acknowledge times of transition are also finding new expression these days with people celebrating marriage, graduation, rites of passage such as bar mitzvahs, christenings, and funerals through online platforms. Each moment of creativity is a counter story, an act of resistance to COVID-19.

18 K Weingarten, "Witnessing, Wonder, and Hope, *Family Process* 39, no.4 (2000): 389-402.

19 K Weingarten, "Witnessing, Wonder, and Hope," 7.

20 K Weingarten, "Witnessing, Wonder, and Hope," 7.

Wrapping Up

In conclusion, I do not only hear the stories of others. I have my own story to tell too. As these stories intersect, they change, and I am changed too. When these stories and the truths of our faiths enter into conversation with one another, our longing for healing and wholeness, and our faith in God's promises of a mended world, touch our consciousness in new ways. (Ackermann 1998)²¹. Amen

My closing words are spoken through the poetry of Natalie Evans, birth doula and midwife, who writes:

Birth Blessing

*Close your eyes and breathe deep
 Breathe in peace, breathe out pain
 Imagine your feet
 Toes curling into dirt
 Think of yourself as rooted
 Think of your place in the earth
 How did you come to be here?
 Through generations of women named
 A maternal lineage
 That brought you to this place
 Think of their birth stories
 What you know, what you believe to be true
 Realize that their births carry deep wisdom
 Some may carry the memory of joy and transcendence
 Each birth is a powerful experience
 Each birth traces down to you.
 Just as you pass this knowledge on to your baby
 Understand that your birth is your own
 It will be different from all others
 Like the swirls in your thumb
 Your birth will have a unique pattern*

21 Ackerman, D.M. in Ackerman, D.M. & Bons-Storm, R (Eds.) 1998. *Liberating Faith Practices: Feminist practical theologies in context*. Leuven: Peeters, 125

*Unfolding with each contraction
Rising and falling like a newborn's chest
This birth belongs to you
This birth is an opening
This birth is the end and a beginning
May this blessing of birth come to you without fear
May this blessing of birth come to you with great understanding
My this blessing of birth make your heart soar
May this blessing of birth bring shouts of delight to your lips
Blessings to you and your birth.*

- Natalie Evans²²

22 Evans, N. 2004. The Birth Blessing. <https://www.natalieannevans.com> accessed on 12/8/2020

Amidst the Chaos

Ebbah Dube

Ebbah Dube describes herself as a “Daughter of the flames using the gift of words to heal the world”.

*Water droplets race on the window pane,
I shift my gaze towards the empty space
I reflect...
I am paging through my mind,
weaving through the maze of my memory.
I can barely recall,
the woman whose laughter
was soothing like the trickling waters of a stream.*

*She battled with herself
Fought so hard to forget,
she refused to take note of the evil around her
evoking long buried emotions.*

*I admired her, she was a rock
She stepped on her pain and fortified her walls.
Her crooked smile anaesthetized her distress
The wrinkles mapped on her face
whispered tales of struggle and resilience,*



*The frozen tears in my eyes
burn with grief.
I want to cry because no one can see inside her
Nobody pays attention to the withering of her soul*

*All her life she has desired sweet healing
I wanted to be the one to mend her tattered soul,
But I fear, for I know that I might shred her even more
So all I do is cry,
All I do is mention her in my prayers,
All I do is love her from a distance...*



PART 4:
Trials and Faith

Part 4: Trials and Faith

Reading the (Christian) Bible in a COVID-19 Infected Context:

Learning from Job?

Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'á Mphahlele)

Life Redefined, Order Reordered, and Faith Still the Constant –

Am I Safe?

Zanele Makombe

Journey with Me Through My Unknown Winter

Virginia Mafaralala

New Beginnings

Manazi Mncube

Gratitude in the Midst of the Pandemic

Nobesuthu Tom

The Power of Connection During a Pandemic

Najma Khota

Raped Girl: Healing in Harmony

Phephisa Survivors'Network

I'll Still Speak

Rev Bulehwa Woolly

Reading the (Christian) Bible in a COVID-19 Infected Context: Learning from Job?

Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele)

Madipoane Masenya (Ngwan'a Mphahlele) is Professor of Old Testament Studies in the Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies at the University of South Africa, Pretoria.

An Immersion into COVID-19-Conscious Bible Readings

The advent of the coronavirus (COVID-19) overwhelmed the faith of many a Christian believer. Their gadgets were bombarded with surplus of information circulating on social media. Among the pieces of information circulated were those which contained what may be regarded as eschatological (end-time) exhortations. One such piece of information in the form of a video was sent to me by an African American missiologist friend asking that I make an input on its contents as a biblical scholar. The invite came at the beginning of the month of March, before the beginning of the National Lockdown here in South Africa. That was the very first time that I was 'pushed' to revisit the Christian Bible informed by the COVID-19 situation. It is an indisputable fact that the Bible is a cultural document which is highly esteemed by many an Africana Christian believer, both on the continent and in its diaspora. Consequently, my first immersion into what may be regarded as a COVID-19-conscious reading of the Bible came through my analysis of the video, supposedly on the end times, that I was asked to comment on. From listening to the video, one gets a sense that the main text which informed the main interviewee in the video was Rev.13:11-18 (cf. the Second Beast; NRSV).

The contents of the video basically focussed on a conspiracy theory which claimed that a nano-chip vaccine was to be developed by one of the richest men on earth. The video also claimed that the injection of this vaccine would actually be tantamount to the injection/insertion of the mark of the beast i.e., 666 (see Rev. 13:18) on those who would receive the vaccine. In this way, the video claimed that the whole world could be controlled easily. The man in question, who is also identified as a fan of the depopulation of the earth's (read: Africa's) conspiracy theory, was simplistically regarded as the second beast, the antichrist, who is featured in Rev. 13:11-18.

In my response to the video, I basically challenged the tendency to read difficult texts like those from the apocalyptic literature (in this case the book of Revelation) out of the contexts of their production. My reading of the text gave no credence whatsoever to the claim that the author of the episode in question was concerned about a plague/epidemic of some sort. My reading also cautioned that the number 666 should not be taken literally as it may have been used, in the context of the text's production, to foreground the challenge of the antichrists/ or humans taking the place of Christ and/or God. Having highlighted this I went ahead to caution:

In the case of the claimed nano-sized chip vaccine that BG is alleged to intend to implant in humans to heal them from the coronavirus while the motive is control, if that is the case, such a toxic, death-dealing motive should be exposed for what it is; even as it must never be allowed to take root anywhere on the globe, especially in those spaces whose inhabitants have historically and even up to date, been viewed by powerful countries including the US, as disposable.

The second invite I received was during the month of April. Although more localised, it had a wider reach in terms of the audience. Thobela FM (TFM), one of the oldest radio stations in South Africa, has a listenership of over three million people. My family, under the auspices of TFM, had embarked on a feeding scheme for the homeless in a location in Pretoria West. The reasons why the specific reporter invited three members of my family were two-fold: First, that the listeners would be encouraged to also, in their own small way, make whatever contribution they could towards the relief of those hardest hit by the stringent conditions during the COVID-19 lockdown level 5 which impacted many a life of the poor in our context.

Second, that those who may be having more resources could contact us and contribute towards the family's project.

The focus of my presentation that evening was on reading poverty texts especially in the Old Testament /Hebrew Bible, specifically during the COVID-19 context. The main point highlighted in my presentation was that the God portrayed in the Old Testament was on the side of those on the margins, especially the widow, the orphan, and the alien. As an example of Yahweh's care for the widows, I gave the example of Ruth, the widow, and the gleaner of the remnants from the harvest (cf. Ruth 2). I also highlighted selected passages from prophetic literature on the theme of social justice and God's care for the poor.

Last but not least, I was invited by the same coordinator of the TFM radio program, *Tumelo Yaka* (My faith) to speak about the topic of the last days in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, the COVID-19 situation had pushed Christian believers to revisit eschatological texts about what would happen during the last days. My main focus was on the text of Matthew 24. In verse 7 we read:

"There will be wars and rumors of wars: "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines, epidemics, and earthquakes in various places." (Matt. 24:7 MEV- Emphasis: Author's).

Could it be that COVID-19 fits within the category of "epidemics" in this Matthew text – a claim that could then be an indicator that we were living in the last days? How may we read an eschatological text such as Matthew 24 in light of the situation in which disease and death appear to be the order of the day? Could the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic be an indication that these are the end times? In the conclusion, I made the following observation:

Today, we are also invited to ponder the above observations amidst the COVID19 situation. Like the harsh situation of the persecution of the Christians by the Roman Empire during the time of the production of the apocalypse of Revelation, in which 1) believers if not careful may be tempted to believe that God does not care; 2) God is no longer in control; 3) the risen Lord is no longer sitting on the throne; 4) challenge the texts about the power of the death of Christ to bring healing to our bodies; 5) yield to the spirit of fear and thus deify the virus; we must be reminded that things have the appearance of what they are not. As we

continue without wavering to await the coming of the end of the world, we should continue to proclaim, even against all odds: that, Yes, God is still in control and is thus not taken by surprise; God is still the healer of our bodies; God is still the God of life as we read: "... Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, And the living one. I was dead, but see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev 1:17-18 NRSV).

Building on these three engagements with the biblical text, I would like to focus our attention on the book of Job in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Could we learn something from Job's experiences as he was grappling with the harsh reality of sudden losses in his life, especially the loss of his health?

That the church pews on the African continent are filled mostly with female persons (read: African women) is a fact.¹ Ironically, that the African pulpits remain an androcentric space, mainly reserved for African male interpreters, is still a fact in many an African church setting, not excluding the South African churches. Does it occasion any surprise then that as women, or members of the female-folk, we have been trained and our ears conscientized to hearing/ reading the word through male lenses?

Irrespective of the marginalization of the female-folk in interpretive history, also the fact that pandemics such as HIV and AIDS and COVID-19 carry a Black feminine face especially in our poverty-stricken contexts, one is also aware of the limitations that the concept of gender carries, especially if it is only restricted to the binaries of the male and female sexes/genders. Also, studies have exposed the assumed normativity of heterosexuality in many a writing on the Bible and theology. Hence, one would opt for a broader understanding of the concept of gender in the present narrative even as one is persuaded that the struggle against all gender-based injustices and violence as well as the struggle against androcentric readings of biblical texts, should be a deliberate joint effort by people of all genders and sexualities. Let us now turn to the book of Job in the Hebrew Bible.

1 Henriks et al. *Men in the Pulpit, Women in the Pew? Addressing Gender Inequality in Africa*. (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2012)

The Book of Job, Wisdom of Own Kind?

Classified as one of the Wisdom books in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, the book of Job deviates from the traditional simplistic wisdom philosophy found in yet another Wisdom book, such as the book of Proverbs. The philosophy of the book of Proverbs simply assumes as follows: if one does good, one will be prosperous but if one does evil, one will be punished. Hence, according to the wisdom philosophy of Proverbs, the wise – those who fear the Lord will necessarily reap good, for example, good harvests, progeny, and good health among others (cf. Prov.1:7). There was a stage in which rigidity set in, so much so that when someone was prosperous, it was simply assumed that he/she was good and when they were not (including ill-health) it was assumed that they had necessarily sinned against God (cf. Eliphaz' response to Job in Job 4:7).

However, the core of the book of Job turns the wisdom mentality of Proverbs upside down. The simplistic status quo is problematic and the underlying question asked is: Why do the righteous suffer? In light of the theme of this book, I ask the following question: Why are we experiencing the sudden harsh situation of a pandemic that leaves in its wake thousands and thousands of the earth's populations dead, so quickly and so mercilessly? Although we are sometimes made to believe that COVID-19 shows no discrimination on the basis of gender, race, socio-economic class, and geography, among others, we also know that just like the pandemic of HIV and AIDS, those hardest hit by it, are the poorest of the poor (read: African women in the South African context).

In the following section we will take a quick snapshot of the woes which suddenly befell the very devout man Job, in order to identify the lessons we could glean from the book as we all grapple with hard questions and seek their answers during the COVID-19 season.

Reading Job Amidst the COVID-19 Context

When the book of Job opens, the reader is presented with the story of a devout righteous man who was very rich: thousands of sheep and camels; hundreds of oxen and donkeys and numerous servants. He was blessed with ten children. Calamity struck and Job gets reports one after the other about the loss of all his flocks, his servants, and eventually, the loss of all his children. His first verbal response is: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked will I return there,

The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away, blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

As if that was not enough, true to the saying that "it never rains but it pours," in chapter 2, Job loses his health. Job's whole body gets afflicted with sores (Job 2:7-8). The immediate advice comes from one who was closest to him, that is, Job's wife: "Are you still maintaining your integrity, curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Job's response is recorded as follows: "...Will we indeed accept the good from God but not accept the adversity?" (Job 2:10).

What then follows, and which would also occupy the better part of the contents of the book of Job, is a debate between Job and his friends, that is, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. It centres on what we have noted in the previous section. On the one hand, one party, that is, Job's friends, as we will show from Eliphaz's response to Job's speech, argues in favour of the optimistic simplistic wisdom philosophy of Proverbs. It appears that the rigidity alluded to in the last section had already set in, as the calamity which Job went through, including his ill-health, seemed to simply persuade his friends that he has necessarily sinned. On the other hand, by persistently arguing his innocence, refuting his friends' accusations that he should be experiencing all that he was experiencing because he had sinned, Job not only turned upside down the simplistic notion that the righteous will always be rich and healthy. He was enabling all of them to ask the following critical question on theodicy, the question around which the theology of the book of Job centres, that is: "Why do the righteous suffer?" From the debate, the reader gets a glimpse about the act-consequence schema embedded in both the Israelite and African worldviews, which says, "When calamity/adversity strikes one, it means that one has necessarily done something wrong/sinned." As already noted, Job's friends were persuaded that he had sinned against God. Eliphaz could thus remark:

Remember now, who being innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright ever wiped out, just like I have seen, those who plough iniquity and sow trouble, reap the same, by the breath of God they perish (Job 4:7).

What is encouraging and empowering about Job – the righteous man, the one who knew that he had not sinned, that the God whom he worshipped was so big not to be confused or angered by all his questions, complaints and the venting out of his anger – is that Job keeps reminding his friends that he had not sinned. Job reminds those who link our present COVID-19 situation with God's judgment upon us to apply such analogies with caution. Those infected and affected by the pandemic have not necessarily sinned against the Sacred Other. The many thousands whom we have painfully lost to the pandemic were not the worst sinners.

Amidst his sudden calamity, his sudden loss of good health, Job is prepared to speak to God. He seems to have been persuaded by what White has said:

Prophet and psalmist alike teach us very firmly that the right way to deal with doubt and protest within the soul is to carry them straight to God and never let them carry us away from him. God is his own interpreter, and he will make things plain²

Indeed, Job engages God seeking justice for his suffering as a righteous person: *Why do the righteous suffer?* As already noted, this question underlies the whole book of Job.

At the end of the Book, Job, who stood by his faith in God through all his calamities and criticisms (ironically from his friends), is praised by God and also rewarded.

2 Reo White, *The Indomitable Prophet: A Biographical Commentary on Jeremiah: the Man, the Time, the Book, the Tasks* (Illinois: Tyndale House, 1992) 161.

What Can Job Teach Us?

- 1) When calamity like the COVID-19 pandemic hits, it does not mean that the infected and affected have sinned.
- 2) When disaster hits, it does not mean that God is out of the picture. Calamities in our midst do not imply that God no longer cares for humanity. Instead, God remains in control all the time.
- 3) When suffering and death appear to be the order of the day, believers like Job can approach God in all honesty, openness, frustrations, weeping, and above all, through a stubborn faith. They would be taking their cue from Job: "Though he kill me, yet I will trust in him." (Job 13:15 NRSV).

Conclusion

Moments like these, when things have the appearance of what they are not (cf. the book of Revelation), when pessimism and fear stare all of us in the face, may we be reminded about the following?

- The secret things belong to God... (Deut. 29:29)
- As *mortals*, there is a constant need to cry out like the Psalmist: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to wisdom." (Ps. 90:12 MEV)
- There is a need for a stubborn faith in God, *holding on to faith*, even when, according to James Dobson: "*God does not make sense*"³ (*Emphasis Author's*)

3 James Dobson, *When God Does Not Make Sense: Holding on to Your Faith During the Hardest Times* (Illinois: Tyndale House, 2012)

Life Redefined, Order Reordered, and Faith Still the Constant – Am I Safe?

Zanele Makombe

Zanele Makombe describes herself as “The Sunflower located by Grace”.

She believes in the power of using “our” words to tell our stories. She believes that individual and collective voices are meant to be heard and it is important to use words to call out injustices and change narratives.

I am reminded of my daughter, Nolwandle, when she was 18 months old. I used to carry her up two flights of stairs in her pushchair. I always had groceries or other items in the pockets of the pram, so I always preferred to carry her and the groceries all at once up the stairs to avoid frequent trips. In all the occasions I carried her, it was always on cue when we were at the bottom of the staircase, she would ask me the same questions:

“Mummy, are you going to carry me? Mummy, you will hold me tight? Mummy, will I not fall? Mummy, I should sit still and not move around?”

I had to assure her that she was safe, and I knew I had to make sure that I did not drop her. What struck me was the faith that she had in me. She knew without fail that mummy was strong enough to carry her!

These were the words I had to sit with during the COVID-19 lockdown.

On the Sunday that the President announced the impending lockdown, panic, fear, and anxiety set in! I remember counting the things I had not done. I had not stocked up on food, herbs, medicine ... I was not prepared! Somehow, there was an overwhelming flow of texts and calls on how “we” were not prepared.



In all this panic, I knew I needed to be still, and I was challenged by the same story that I needed to relax and stop moving around. I was in safe hands.

I would have classified myself as being a creature of habit – order and patterns being my way of doing things. Being a mother of two teenage daughters, Nolwandle and Shamiso, a wife to one man, and a working mother, the lockdown became a life of lots of uncertainty. It challenged me greatly in the triple roles of women as defined by Sen (1999:4) ⁴.

Sen highlights that women are the thread that holds society together: “Women stand at the crossroads between production and reproduction, between economic activity and the care of human beings, between economic growth and human development” 1999:4) ⁵.

I found that the lockdown made me mindful of the fact that I was indeed in these crossroads.

Early Lockdown Days

I realised that in the early stages of lockdown, I was still buzzing and wanting to hold everyone together. I wanted to see myself as a superhuman.

At home, I tried to redefine order and new patterns. I was trying to organise the new schooling approach for my girls. I was trying to bring about some “stability.” At work, I tried to be present so that I could pull my weight. Broadly, I wanted to keep track with what was happening and being part of what is happening. I was trying to be the anchor, being strong for everyone and bringing some semblance of order. Percy was the one who went out for groceries and other necessities. His return was always news, we requested updates on the outside world, Are there people? Are they surviving? How do the shops work? Are there cars? etc.

4 Gita Sen, *Gender Mainstreaming in Finance: A Reference Manual for Governments and other Stakeholders*. London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1999.

5 Gita Sen, *Gender Mainstreaming in Finance: A Reference Manual for Governments and other Stakeholders*. London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1999.

At work, it seems all partners, stakeholders just went online; we started Zooming around and hearing or muting each other. There was personal and external pressure to keep things happening and to be part of “lending a hand.” This made one spend time trying to be part of the crowd. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) was real; everyone was in solidarity with everyone in WhatsApp groups and I tried to keep up!

Working from home also meant that there were a lot of adjustments to be made. There was no domestic help as our helper had to be on lockdown. The pressure of maintaining the household and at the same time being expected to be fully present at work was overwhelming. I realised that the triple roles of women do not change and the pressure to juggle all the things was ever present.

Some of this pressure, I realised, was self-inflicted because even though family members helped and participated significantly in the functioning of the household, there was a nagging guilt to want to do it all and show that I am capable and able to do this.

Personally, I tried to monitor what was happening with regards to COVID-19 statistics and development. I was trying to draw conclusions and analyse my own space. I was in fear of the ever-increasing numbers, thoughts of death and dying were, and continue to be, real. In my mind, I was still in a state of shock and denial about COVID-19 and the real and ever present impact. COVID -19 is real! I tried to rationalise, I got angry, I got confused. I tried to hold it all together!

To say I failed is an understatement. I failed dismally! I was exhausted. It felt like I was at war with myself! I crashed within the first week.

Reimagining

I took a step back. I acknowledged the reality of the situation. I started using the buzz words, ‘nothing is certain,’ ‘it is the new normal,’ ‘life will never be the same,’ ‘the unknown.’

We had a family meeting of four; we spoke frankly about our fears and anxieties around the time. We agreed on a few elements:

- Timetable to assist on chores and around the house
- Regulating what we watch and when we watch news

- Allocate time for exercise as a family
- Boundaries around work and personal time
- Open communication as a family to check in

Rethinking

COVID-19 is real, and I am still here; life has to go on. I found that in these uncertain times, I held onto my faith!

I started thinking and looking at things I am in control of and what I could do. I looked inwardly, opted to start doing things that I liked and spread them throughout the week as things I look forward to. I took professional coaching sessions on Public Speaking which was a highlight throughout the lockdown season. The twelve week sessions were timely in the uncertain times because they reminded me of, *"Who I am, what I hold to be true and what I can control."*

As much as we spent most of our time together in the same place, we were not directly together. The teenagers tended to isolate better; the school programmes also kept them busy whilst the adults spent time on laptops and calls. The family activities like exercise, cooking and game night became special moments to reconnect and to come into a common ground. We maintained those regular moments. Chef Shamiso would lead the meal planning and preparation and Nolwandle would take care of the fitness regime of the family.

My Faith My Constant

My faith was a constant source of comfort. When I was angry, confused and overwhelmed, I went to lash out at God.

Proverbs 3: 5 was my reminder to *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding."* The conclusions I tried to draw from all this fell off and I was able to revisit my own faith and hold onto my trust.

I wrote a Psalm to remind myself of my place in the kingdom and a celebration of life.

My Affirming Psalm: My Lord, My Rock, My strength,

I will sing your praise all the days of my life. You are worthy to be lifted up and exalted.

Your blood, death and resurrection have given me meaning for my life. I come before your table and I am covered with your unending grace, undeterred and focused in your glory.

*I celebrate the person you have chosen for me to walk this journey called life
I celebrate the fruit of my womb, that you created in your image and blessed.
I glorify you for the life of favour*

Under your wings, I will not be ashamed or fearful. I am not shaken for you hold me and protect me from all harm. I am written in the palm of your hand. My strength is all an honoured privilege from you. You are God and radiate light in my life and in my pathways

I want to be all You created me to be and fulfil the dreams You've put in my heart and the paths you have set for me. I want to live by the promises that you have declared for us.

I shall sing for joy for my strength is renewed every morning by the promises in your word.

I found myself thinking about how great and mighty our God is. When panic and fear set in, I remembered to check in with Him, even in the weakest moments to still ask... God I won't fall? ...God, I will wait on you?

Journey with Me Through My Unknown Winter

Virginia Mafaralala

Virginia Mafaralala is a lay minister/church warden in the Anglican Church. She is also a feisty, compassionate and fun loving person.

My name is Virginia C Mafaralala. Mother, church leader and employee at a financial service provider. On 30th January 2020 I turned 40 years old, the best and exciting time of my life full of new dreams.

When the news about COVID-19 broke and how it came to be known, I was not ready. I never thought we ourselves would be on lockdown together with the whole country! My life was disrupted and turned upside down in a number of ways.



First, my workspace was not co-operating and had indecisive leadership. I was anxious and not in a good space.

The first day of the lockdown on the March 26, 2020, was extremely difficult. I spent the first three days sleeping and eating a lot. On the fourth day I decided to have a structure of some sort to be able to cope better.

Second, my relationship with my local Church before lockdown was difficult. On February 23, 2020, our church had a vestry meeting. I was elected to the position of alternate churchwarden. The role of alternate churchwarden is to stand in as churchwarden in the absence of the churchwarden at the parish if they are incapacitated

by illness or another cause. We were six candidates contesting the three positions of church leadership which are two churchwardens and one alternate. There were four male candidates and two female candidates. The outcome of the elections for the position of churchwardens was that two males and one female were elected. After the vestry meeting about ten parish members (all women) wrote a petition to the Bishop about the outcome of the vestry meeting. One of their dissatisfactions was my election. I thought being a female representative, the women of the church would be more supportive towards me but I was wrong. It is sad that every day we have to fight for a seat at the table. That situation led me to a sorrowful state. I felt betrayed more so because these women are senior women in the church in terms of their age and one of them was also in the running for the position of churchwarden.

This time of reflection has helped me to choose God over personal pain. The pain that I was going through changed me for the better. I can say that having a strong support system that God has blessed me with is a privilege. As I was sharing my pain and betrayal with one of the members of my support systems, the individual highlighted the lack of prayer from me during the difficult time. I knew I had to let go of the things that have no significant bearing to my journey on earth or seeking the approval of fellow humans. It was just my walk in the garden of Gethsemane.

I wasn't ready to accept online church. The fact that I was no longer able to physically walk into the church building or even smell incense was daunting to me. It became overwhelming. Now it is a blessing that I had to find myself physically away from church. This new time has given me the opportunity to work on me and my relationship with God, just the two of us. It has reminded me of who I am in God.

Third, at a personal level – my anxiety was more of losing control of my 40th birthday plans that I had had for myself throughout 2020. I was broken because concerts and other events that I had already bought tickets for were cancelled. But the big pain was not being able to participate in the Two Oceans Marathon after I trained and prepared to run especially after the Doctor informed me that I couldn't run and I needed a year off to recover from the injury I suffered in September 2019. The blessing was that as I planned all these celebrations, not one of them required me to be on my own. The lockdown has given me time to be on my own. I finished reading the books that I planned to read and taking Jewish classes online. But most importantly, I am able to hush my mind against the deafening sound of everything that happens around me. I am able to have arguments without taking things personally.

Fourth, God sent me someone who I refer to as one of Moses's sons, Mr. Peter, a companion who opened my eyes to see, my ears to hear and my heart to know beautiful love. At a time when I was lonely and lost in the wilderness, he invited me into his space and shared his learning space. My curiosity led me to a place that I have now grown accustomed to and appreciate and love. Finding this space has eased and soothed my anxieties. The depth of his music and poetry sessions are a source of comfort and have become my smile and laughter keeper.

Fifth, Losing Papa – on the May 5, 2020, Papa took ill. Sesi Mosima phoned to tell me Papa took ill. I asked her whether there was a need for me to travel home. I could tell from her voice that she didn't know how to respond to me. My heart knew I had to go home. Seeing Papa laying in his bed, I knew that Papa and God were having a *Lekunutung Le Morena* (My secret with God) moment. Days after I returned back to Jo'burg I experienced out of body episodes and had panic attacks every time my phone rang. Papa went home on Mother's Day May 10, 2020. I cried to the point of running out of tears. As much as I knew or know that age was no longer on his side, my grieving heart needed the comfort of knowing that he is alive.

I had to read the book of 1 Kings 11:21b-22. "Then Hadad said to Pharaoh, 'Let me go, that I may return to my own country.' 'What have you lacked here that you want to go back to your own country?' Pharaoh asked. 'Nothing,' Hadad replied, 'but do let me go!'"

I have used the above text to comfort other people; now it was facing me. It is scary, and uncomfortable and emotional to lose a parent.

As I was still experiencing the raw sore of losing Papa, on the May 28, 2020, Mmane Matsie sent me a message saying, "*Rakgolo, O ntlogetse*" (granddad passed away). I literally lost my mind. How could two men that have raised us with so much love and discipline leave forever in such a short space of each other? Again, it was my grieving heart speaking. Both gentlemen have done beautiful and remarkable jobs of raising us. After a lot of crying, I knew my heart and mind needed to remember their love and selfless giving to us. Life has drastically changed; no more protection and knowing that you can go home to recharge from their souls.

As I journey through the unknown winter two quotes comfort me. Kahlil Gibran wrote "For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one" and Rumi

wrote, "Goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. Because for those who love with heart and soul there is no such thing as separation."

In conclusion the lessons that I take from the new norm are:

- Happiness is free and from within.
- Future is uncertain, one has to live their life to the fullest.
- Love is a beautiful thing.
- I now clearly understand "Be still and know I am God."
- I know for sure I will never take my freedom for granted.
- I will continue to appreciate nature and its beauty.
- I will continue to embrace the new ways of doing things.
- Some of the restrictions have revealed how wasteful we are and some things are irrelevant and we can live without them.
- I remain grounded in the presence of God.

New Beginnings

Manazi Mncube

Manazi Mncube describes herself as a humble, loving and strong woman.

I want to tell my story about what I have experienced in life and how I have become a strong woman.

I am a mother of two, an eleven year old and a seven year old. I grew up in a children's home because of the abuse in my home. My Mom sometimes left me with my grandmother, who used to let me starve me for a week if I was hungry and she was not around. And it was after another severe sjambokking by my uncle when I was 9 years old that a neighbour took me to the children's home. They said my body had fifty marks all over it. He was mad because he always made me stay home from school to babysit his many children, but that day I had run away and gone to school. I stayed at the children's home from 2006 for nine or ten years until I finished school. After that, I wrote letters for sponsorship so I could go to a hotel school. Once I got to the hotel school, life seemed to be going my way.

Then I got married and moved to Ulundi. And life went downhill again. I was staying with my mother-in-law and my husband, who both abused me. I was so oppressed. For example, my mother-in-law used to do all the shopping, even for groceries. I was not allowed to do any shopping. She would choose even the type of roll-on I had to use. The abuse was so bad from both of them. One day my husband nearly killed me. I saw that if I stayed, then it would really affect my girls, so in 2017 I moved down to Durban with my girls. Without anything, just the clothes I had on. I called a friend and she hooked me up with money to come down. I stayed at a friend's house until my aunt came and invited me to stay with them in Inanda, and she promised to look after me.



It was hard for me to get a job, but eventually I did. That was the happiest day of my life, because I knew I was getting my independence back. But unfortunately, the company was under investigation. It was raided by police and all the funds were frozen. So then I went back to square one. As the employees of that company, we waited for about six months, and eventually we were told we were going back to work, at the end of March this year. Everybody was happy that we were going back to work. But then, to our surprise, that's when the COVID-19 disaster was announced and the lockdown started. We all just went crazy. We didn't know what was going on, and it felt like it was the end of the world. It was so scary for me and my family; we didn't want to go outside, because we were scared that we would get contaminated. And I remember I was miserable for the first two weeks. The lockdown was driving me crazy.

But then one day, I decided: "I am just going to switch off the TV, and I am just going to pray." I did it because everything you heard on TV was how many people had died, and the stats just kept going up and up and up. So that day, I shut the world out, and I prayed with my girls. We prayed so hard. I prayed and asked God to show me what was happening. And just a small voice inside me said: "You need to go out into the world and bring back the spirit of humanity. You need to go back to what you used to do as a young girl." A long time ago, when I was at school, I used to be involved in charity work. I felt I was just giving back; even at church I used to do that. So I decided to go back to that. I joined an outreach programme in my community, and I began to see all those people who had less than me. I also didn't have much, because I didn't have my own shelter. But I was so blessed, because I was looking after someone's house. What about those who are living in mud houses and don't know what they are going to eat? I looked at my situation – that God had provided for all my needs for all these years. I had never gone to bed hungry.

One day, I got a request from a lady to find people who needed food parcels. That was really the start of it. As I wrote down the people's names, I also prayed: "Lord, since you want me to provide for these people, please, you need to make provision, because you have called me to bring back the Spirit of Ubuntu to the people, and we need to look after our neighbours and strangers." At first, we gave out thirty parcels, then it was 100, and in the end, it was 170 and more. I have been doing this ever since.

But it hasn't been easy. There have been many challenges in my ward, because some food parcels were not being distributed in the correct way – things were not done right. And corrupt community leaders began to be threatened by us, because we were distributing to those who really needed food. These people were being chased away by the politicians when they went to collect food parcels, and then the politicians distributed parcels to their friends and families. The politicians began to video record me to try and intimidate me. But it didn't work. Then they went to the lady whose house I was looking after and threatened to burn her house down if she let me stay there, so she had to ask me to leave. One of the leaders who tries to help the community, and is with us, arranged for me to look after another man's house. This is where I am staying now, while I am still trying to fight my divorce and trying to get my 50% share so I can look after my daughters properly.

Through COVID-19, God was so amazing, because we were able to host our first ever meeting in our Ward on June 16. It was only fifty people but we were able to make history. And then we organised a workshop with the men to build awareness on gender-based violence. We also hosted another event too, and spoke about a lot of things with the men, just to build up the men in our community. Just those few. That trended so well, and we saw that it was growing. Then we started a women's group, and we invited more people to come and motivate the women in our ward.

For other people COVID-19 has been the worst experience ever, but for me, it is different. COVID-19 has made me stronger, and my faith has grown so much. And I have been challenged to grow. I didn't know that I could grow this much. Throughout COVID-19 – I continue to be amazed. Together with others that I have been working with, we have even decided to register a non-profit company called Isinamumva Liyabukeka Community Development. We source donations and build homes for those in mud houses, and provide food hampers, wheelchairs and many other things. I started this company to help raise funds for my work in the community.

My final thought is that nothing is impossible. And nothing in life is a mistake. God will use every experience. I believe that this COVID-19 was meant to come and bring back the Spirit of Ubuntu. It was God saying that we need to go back to our roots, and know what other people are experiencing.

Gratitude in the Midst of the Pandemic

Nobesuthu Tom

Nobesuthu Tom is a Religion and Theology Masters student at the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. Her research interest is in African Traditional Religion.

In the beginning I was scared. All the news on television pointed to a deadly virus that was already killing thousands of people across the world. When South African Twitter users started calling on the President to “close the country” and go into lockdown, I felt overwhelmed. By the time the President did declare a state of disaster, I was already convinced that the end, mine and the world’s, was indeed nigh.

I went into lockdown with my daughter. We live together in Cape Town while the rest of the family lives in the Eastern Cape. The implications of this set-up hit me hard one day when I realized that if COVID-19 got me, my daughter would have to take charge, not only in making sure that I got the necessary medical treatment but also that, if I died, she would be responsible for making sure that my body got home to Cala for burial. While I had told her my wishes for when I died in many conversations before, we could have never imagined a situation such as this – this time called for concrete plans and clear instructions. And so, at the tender age of twenty-six, my daughter had to commit to memory what she would need to do should I suddenly take ill. This, in the order of what to do and who to call:

- Call the ambulance – have the emergency and medical aid numbers on hand.
- Ensure emergency medical staff take along the small purse with my chronic medication.
- Put my cellphone and charger in the same small purse with chronic medication.



- Call our family in Cala.

And, if I then did die:

- Call our family Doctor for antidepressants. I knew the family politicking would be brutal for her.
- Call my financial advisor to release funds for the funeral. Later, we decided to better set aside a specific amount in her bank account and leave all financial debates for after the funeral. I transferred into her bank account the amount of money I thought would be sufficient for my funeral.
- Call our family.
- Do whatever else needs to be done for a speedy burial. If more convenient, bury me in Cape Town.
- Go for grief counselling.

For the duration of level 5 of the lockdown, we tried to be positive and to hold each other up. The most important thing for me was to ensure that neither of us disengaged emotionally. But, as it happens with people who have been cooped up in the same space for a long time, issues we had never addressed started coming up. Sometimes brought up tentatively, other times one light conversation burst into flames of other, deep unresolved issues. Thankfully, due to previous incidents, we had undergone some family therapy before, and so, as we navigated these turbulent times, the understanding of tackling the issue and not the person still prevailed. I will be honest, despite all the care and respect, these were very painful moments, filled with pain, shame and regret. It was hard for me to listen to my daughter give me feedback on the areas I had fallen short as a mother. I think it was just as hard for her to hear my concerns about her and her future. Buckets of tears were shed during these times.

Level 4 and allowance to go out for exercise were a most welcome break. Tentatively, we started an exercise routine of going walking for the two hours allowed. This became not only a time for us to get some fresh air out of the house, but also grew into a different type of bonding for us. Being the more organised and consistent of us, my daughter took charge. She had the alarm set and would wake me up, have the coffee ready and herd me out the door by seven o'clock. I now believe that exercise

does activate the happiness hormone. Our conversations on these walks became lighter and more optimistic about the future.

As I write this, we are now on 'advanced' level 3 as it has come to be known. I am still concerned about the possibility of contracting COVID-19 and dying, and I feel deeply sad for the people who have lost their loved ones. But my mindset has changed for the better. I can feel the bubbly and optimistic side of my personality returning. For every negative thought I have, a positive perspective or experience comes up to cancel it. As I worry about the future, my daughter, friends and family, for each concern, I am shown a positive possibility:

Jobs:

Just as the news of companies closing down and people either losing their jobs or having their salaries cut, I have been introduced to the world of network marketing. I have attended a number of online seminars where entrepreneurs share opportunities they are spotting in the midst of all this economic turmoil.

Deaths:

At first, local and international news channels mostly reported on the deaths due to COVID-19. The images were horrendous. Over time, the number of recoveries increased steadily and now, in South Africa, recoveries outnumber deaths.

Relationships:

From the beginning of lockdown, social networks were awash with the theme that the lockdown would show relationships for what they are, that is, unhealthy and not working. There was a lot of talk that we would see who of our friends and family cared and didn't care for us. While writing this story, I wondered about the truth of this way of thinking. There are friends for whom I care deeply but who I have also not had much inclination to keep in touch with in the consistent manner I did before the lockdown. Interestingly, they have also not kept in touch with me. Does this mean we don't care for each other anymore? My answer is no; we still care. However, it may be that our friendships were not meant for times like this; maybe our friendships work better when we feel confident and secure. Similarly, I do not care any more deeply for the friends with whom I have kept in touch. The truth is that I

feel more comfortable to be vulnerable in front of them. Our friendships extend beyond the times of confidence and security, to include vulnerability and insecurity.

Academics:

As a fulltime Masters student, I had big plans at the beginning of the year to reach certain milestones at set times. According to those plans, by now, July 2020, I should have completed far more work than I have. I mourn the loss of that progress. But, being part of a cohort of students supported by the Desmond Tutu Centre for Religion and Social Justice, I am part of a community pursuing similar goals. Conversations and online workshops with my peers and our supervisors pull me back from the brink of despair and give me a realistic view that despite what I am feeling, I am actually making progress because I am still able to produce the work required albeit with timelines adjusted to the situation we find ourselves in.

And so, while not negating or undermining the pain of loss many people around the world and in South Africa are experiencing, there are several things this lockdown has made me grateful for:

Deepened Relationship with My Daughter:

I believe that were it not for the time we spent in close quarters, we would not have had the conversations we did. We have now resolved to continue these conversations with the help of a therapist to help us be better able to support each other as we navigate life post-lockdown.

Good Health:

The news that people with pre-existing medical conditions have a higher risk of contracting COVID-19 put me on an emotional rollercoaster. Exercise and being careful of emotional eating helped me maintain my weight and keep other indicators relating to my chronic illness on the healthy side. I was very relieved when, after much procrastination, I went for my annual blood tests and the results came back showing that I am doing well.

Meaningful Relationships:

I am very grateful for the friends and family who kept in touch. Some called to check how I am doing while others called because they too were scared and needed some reassurance. At other times, it was just gossip as usual, a welcome break from the seriousness of the reality of this time. All these moments told me I matter to someone, as a sister, a daughter, a cousin and a friend.

The storm of COVID-19 is not over yet. I continue to hope that all will end well for my family, my friends and the rest of the country. And I stand in gratitude that I have so far been spared many painful experiences and pray that it may remain so, for I do not know if I have what it takes to live post the trauma I see and hear about.

May we all live to see a better future.

The Power of Connection During a Pandemic

Najma Khota

Najma Khota is a counselling therapist, freelance consultant and is driven by her passion for human rights.

My name is Najma Khota and I am a counsellor to cancer patients at a private hospital. It is a daily blessing for me to be in a position to offer support and an empathetic ear to cancer sufferers.

The rapport I share with patients and their families is inevitably strong because of the nature of my role in their lives during their physically and emotionally challenging time.

Under COVID-19 regulations patients are not allowed visitors at our hospital.

My first experience of the reality of the dire situation that these regulations have caused was when a young 18-year-old patient suffering from lymphoma was hospitalised as her condition had deteriorated. She was critically ill. Her prognosis was poor. I had counselled the young lady and her next of kin since the time of her diagnosis, which was in early December 2019.

Under the current circumstances her mother could not visit her.

I kept the family informed of her condition through telephone and messages passed on to the patient on the family's behalf. The patient was conscious but not responsive.

Her aunt's message was: "Please tell her we love her and we are praying for her. Tell her to pray as well. Apologies for not being able to be at your side but we are all with you."



I conveyed the message as best as I could. The patient passed away the following day.

To my knowledge the mother was given the permission to visit her for a short time a day before I had conveyed the “last” message.

It was a rather unexpected position for me to be in.

Another similar experience took place when I was at the side of a critically ill cancer patient on behalf of her family. The family contacted me and I explained that they are not allowed to visit. I offered to visit the patient on their behalf.

This patient was distraught because she was not allowed to see her closest family members.

It was heart-warming for me when she embraced my presence. In fact, I was deeply humbled to be asked by her to give her water. Here again I offered to pray with her and so we did. Needless to mention that this brought much peace to me and my patient. This visit took two hours.

Fortunately, she was sent home and passed away surrounded by her loved ones.

As an experienced trauma counsellor, I have had experiences that dealt with death and dying. However, having to be at the side of a dying patient on behalf of the family is not anything I would have ever thought I would be doing.

The pandemic has brought with it unprecedented circumstances.

This, I guess, is a personification of unprecedented circumstances.

.... and this is my story.

The role continues ...

Here is my prayer:

We pray for healing.

We pray for unconditional love.

We pray for peace.

We pray for humanity as one.

Raped Girl: Healing in Harmony, a Project of Phephisa Survivors' Network

1.

They said wait for marriage, I listened
They said, your virginity is your pride
I honoured my mother's teachings
Little did I know, I'm saving myself for abuse
*R) Sexual violence took away my pride
Confused me about my identity
Made me carry the stigma of being called a raped girl (2)*

2.

My father promised me a celebration
He said make me a proud dad
Oh I remember your reaction when I delivered the news
*R) Sexual violence took away my pride
Confused me about my identity
Made me carry the stigma of being called a raped girl (2)*

3.

Justice system now has also failed me, (2)
I fear for his next target (2)
R) With all the pain, shame and anger, I survived!

Background

The "Healing in Harmony program" was born from a partnership between Phephisa Survivors' Network in KwaZulu-Natal Province and a global survivors' network that some Phephisa members are part of. The objective is to integrate an innovative music therapy approach into Phephisa's holistic healing model, which allows survivors to express their pain through music. The songs are used in advocacy work. It has been a blessing to sing in conferences and workshops. We wrote this song together after talking about our challenges after having been sexually abused.

I'll Still Speak

Rev Bulelwa Woolly

Rev. Bulelwa Woolly describes herself as
"a soul that searches for inner peace more than anything."

*I won't be silenced
I won't be cancelled
I won't be defeated
I won't be afraid.*

*You can chain me,
Put my light out,
Hang me on a tree
Try bury me, but
I will still speak.*

(Repeated)

'I'll still speak' is a song dedicated to all the women and children that have died at the hands of abusive men, how their voices are still heard and how their voices will never be cancelled. Just because they are gone does not mean they are not alive. They are alive and should be alive in each of us. When we speak of the injustices done to us as women, we speak also for them.



PART 5:
Multiple Experiences

Part 5: Multiple Experiences

The Dark Night of the Soul

Rooks Moodley

My Story of Gratitude

Christine Assy

The Effects of COVID-19 on my Mental Health and Ministry

Ntusi

Reflections of My Experience with a Coronavirus Infected
Family Member

Mapula G Ngoepe

COVID-19, the Face of Real Pain

Busisiwe Gasa

Letter 01

Duduzile Pila

Passion of Our Lord – Passion of our People

Adri Sutherland

Into the Wilderness with Jesus

Frances Correia

The Dark Night of the Soul

Rooks Moodley

Rooks Moodley has been a social justice activist, community builder, social facilitator and human development practitioner for the past 26 years, serving primarily in the non-profit sector.

Background

For the past 26 years I have been working as a social justice activist, which I believe is my vocation/calling. In my capacity as the Director of the Eastern Cape NGO Coalition (ECNGOC – an umbrella structure for over 1000 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's), the organisation found itself hugely impacted by the global economic recession. In June 2019 it was forced to enter into a restructuring process rolled out in two parts: Firstly, all staff contracts were terminated on grounds of settlement retrenchment on 26th June and secondly, the organisation reduced its operations drastically but continues to remain functional albeit offering reduced services.

At the time I realised that my vocation/calling cannot be dependent on income security as my purpose for my existence in the earth is to be a “social justice activist.” I was approached by the Board to implement the restructuring roll-out plan. I agreed to continue in my capacity as Director in a “voluntary” capacity. I then had to look for ways to sustain myself, so I started offering professional consultancy services as the Board suggested I do.

The consultancy work started in June 2019 and I managed to sustain myself while still playing my role as “Director” of ECNGOC in my voluntary capacity. At the time, it seemed like it happened by default but that was what I felt I needed to do (have an enterprise) so I can continue my vocation knowing I am sustained.



Impact of COVID-19

My husband and I were just coming back from a holiday in Knysna where we were celebrating our 25th wedding anniversary. We had in mind that after the President's announcement on 21st March, he would alert the public on further developments of lockdown on 25th March. Our week holiday was then short-lived as the lockdown regulations (level 5) came into operation at midnight on 26th March. We returned home to East London. But wow! I am so thankful to the Father for allowing us four days to celebrate! Even that came as supernatural provision. My husband must be commended for his generous spirit in celebrating our 25 years of marriage. He gave generously. It was truly an unforgettable holiday.

The implementation of the lockdown regulations (level 5) came with the daunting reality which confronted me when I realised that due to the fact that my client base is government consultants, my last earnings would be at the end of March and my payments would be received late due to the lockdown regulations. Since 26th March I came down to a zero-base income and at the same time I was expected to increase my social justice work. I needed to advocate and lobby for NGOs in the Eastern Cape who did not receive funding from the Department of Social Development from April to date. It was a challenging experience trying to worry about my own survival and realising that the masses of our people would be affected if I did not participate in advocating for the NGO payments. This situation was further exacerbated by COVID-19. NGOs had continued distributing food parcels, supporting the elderly and other groups affected by COVID-19, only to realise they would not be paid.

From the 26th March till 26th May it felt like the Dark Night of the Soul. What kept me going was being in this struggle together with my husband and our strong anchor in our Father, His Word and Faith, Hope and Love. It seemed like there was complete silence from our Father for sixty days. We were exercising all the spiritual disciplines but, on the surface (natural), everything looked the same; nothing was changing. There were many days that I struggled emotionally, asking critical questions and doing prayers of protest. I said "Father, I have given the past 26 years of my life in service to you and humanity, why do I have to struggle for my own survival?" There were days my body had no energy and all my dreams seemed to fade

into insignificance. Me, a woman who was always strong, resilient and a delusional optimist.

I also experienced moments where I cried only to my Father about matters that pained my heart. I started to see how a word, a song, a video would come at the right moment as a response to the cries of my heart and bring healing. I have heard that old cliché “When days are dark, friends are few.” We felt the SILENCE from everyone and everywhere.

On 27th May it seemed like the floodgates of heaven opened and we have been receiving supernatural provision till this very day.

Conclusion

I want to end my story by reaffirming the fact that Abba Father is faithful. He is true to his word and his promises. When his word says “I will never leave you nor forsake you” he means exactly that. I am convinced this next decade is going to be the best season of our lives and we are yielding and will continue to yield the fruit of our labours.

We will keep planting seeds because in due season, they bear fruit. The Letter to the Philippians 2: 16 and 17 encapsulates our journey, “As you hold firmly to the word of life and then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.” Indeed, our lives have been poured out into the lives of others as established in Matt 22:37 – 40 paraphrased, “Love God, Love People.”

In the words of Tata Nelson Mandela:

What counts in life is not the mere fact that you have lived. It is what difference you have made to the lives of others that will determine your significance. If you live and you live for yourself, when you die you die but if you live and you live for others when you die you still continue to live.”

My Story of Gratitude

Christine Assy

Christine Assy says she is “better known as Chubby.
I am a mother of four and love cooking.
I try to help people in need whenever I can.”

My story is a story of gratitude to the Lord Almighty for His grace and love that we receive every day. I’m married to Edwin and we have four children. They are all married. We had thirteen grandchildren but one grandson was shot and killed when he was 19. We have two great-grandchildren.

On the evening of 15th of March, we went to watch a screening of “The Harvest,” a documentary about families living on a dump site in Brakpan. The dump site is called Plastic City. There were eleven of us who went to watch the screening at the synagogue in Brakpan. About thirty people attended the screening.

Edwin was going to turn 70 on the 21st of March which was during Lent and my mother-in-law, Daphne, would turn 90 on the 17th April. We were planning to give them a combined birthday party on the 18th April. On the way home from the screening of the documentary, we received a message from Alfie, our son, saying that his daddy and grandma Daphne’s party was cancelled. We wondered what it meant till we arrived home and heard that the schools would be closed from the 18th March and no large gatherings were allowed – no more than 100 people which was changed to fifty afterwards.

Our journey with COVID-19 began on the 18th of March.

Having the children at home since the 18th March was difficult; it wasn’t like a normal school holiday. You had to be careful and start teaching them about washing their hands every time they came in. We told them to say one of their Bible verses while washing their hands to make sure they wash for 20 seconds! Then the



real bombshell came when the President announced that we would be going into Stage 5 lockdown on the 27th March and people would have to stay at home. Jason, our third eldest, and his family were in Margate at that time. They came home on Thursday, a day before the lockdown started on Friday. We were not allowed to go and see them.

We have a son, Alfred, who lives in Bloemfontein and our daughter Audrey lives in the Hill. We haven't seen them since lockdown. That is the worst experience I have ever had as I miss them and the grandchildren so much.

Donovan, our baby, lives with us. He is our youngest child. He works for a company that installs gas pipes as a franchise of Sasol. He had to stay at home. Only essential workers, health care and supermarket workers were allowed to go to work. My fear was for Donovan. He is a recovering drug addict (Thank You Lord! He has been clean for three years now). I was worried that he didn't have anything to do. Some of his friends that he had while he was on drugs came to our house every day asking for food. I was so afraid that the presence of his friends would make him slip back to taking drugs. I give thanks to the Lord that he did not succumb to temptation and stayed clean. His wife and children were with him at our house and helped him to stay focused. At the end of April – thank you, Lord – there was a leak in one of the gas pipes in Germiston and he had to go and help. He is a driver at the company but he helps to dig trenches if needed. Thankfully he has been working since then and travels a lot to Durban, Harrismith and Mpumalanga.

There are twelve people living in our house: my husband and I; Lynn who helps to take care of my mother; her daughter, grandson and twin brother (He has brain damage. He was attacked one night when returning from work. The damage is irreversible); my mother; my mother-in-law; our son Donovan, his wife Joyce and their three children.

Donovan is the only one earning a wage. All of us are on pension. Mandy, Lynn's daughter, works at a creche but they are also closed so the only one leaving to work is Donovan. We have one car so Edwin and I have to take Donovan to and from work Monday to Friday.

Thankfully we have never had to go to bed hungry. God is so good. We have food every day and can even share with others who are in need. When my mum was alive we had a prayer meeting and there was a lady that prayed for us that our cupboards

must stay full. They have never been empty. We could always make something no matter how difficult it has been.

The scary part now about COVID is that it's getting nearer to home. You hear about more people that you know getting infected. The first one was my brother-in-law's cousin Kenna and his family. Sadly, Kenna didn't make it. He passed away just two days after the test results. Then a week later it was our dearest Khanya. When Colin announced it on Sunday morning, he sounded so sad and confused. A week later it was my two cousins Shireen and Russel who are both diabetic. We were very worried. Shireen had said she was okay, that she did not have bad symptoms and even asked for fat-cakes. Russel lost his sense of smell and taste. Then two weeks later my nieces Maxine and Micaela and my nephew Dewayne were told they were positive. Thank you, Lord, that Joni and the boys haven't got any symptoms. Maxine is diabetic. We are praying for God's hand on her. Now it's my sister-in-law's brother-in-law and his daughter. He is diabetic as well.

It is very scary seeing the numbers going up. I pray for Cyril Ramaphosa, our President, who is being blamed for everything that goes wrong. I don't understand politics but I'm grateful for everything that he is doing.

Thank you, Lord for Khanya and all the people that have recovered.

God's strength to everyone during this trying time.

God bless.

Stay blessed, warm and safe.

Lots of love.

The Effects of COVID-19 on my Mental Health and Ministry

Ntusi

My name is Ntusi. I am 57 years old. I am a wife, a mother and a grandmother. I have, for almost 30 years, worked as an activist. Since my youth, I have initiated many youth and women empowerment groups including environment structures as the South Durban Community Environment Alliance (SDCEA) and Durban South Unions. I also launched the first Family Violence Court in Wentworth. Previously I was a Director of the Wings of Love organisation after the previous Director earned the 'Community Builder of the year' award for the successful work that is still going well since the 1990's. I have recently been a Director of a non-profit organisation 'Women and Men of Valor' since 2013. My motto is always to use the finance that I earn through jobs I acquire and use the salary to sustain the work in the field because volunteers come and go. Thus far, we have never applied nor received funding from government or non-government sources.

COVID-19

In December 2019 my husband found himself without a job and in January I was called in and given notice, and soon also found myself without a job because I disagreed on moral ethics issues and theft. The COVID-19 pandemic came with an unexpected bang. Lockdown happened. Since I do not have a degree and my age is against me, by the end of March we were dry and had concerns of becoming homeless. The car would be repossessed and debts were piling up with debtors calling. In all this, I continued to help the most vulnerable i.e., victims of abuse, poverty, etc. Then I began to notice certain individuals being over-resourced with food parcels due to connections; food parcels being sold; corruption and the injustices to the

poor were setting in, and the illiterate were confused by the abuse of power. My phone began to buzz endlessly from unhappy leaders and people on the ground. I was being called to help even with the little I had while trying not to move around too often, as petrol was running low. There were many cases of victims stuck with the perpetrator under lock and key. First I was counselling two, then others were added to that list. Many were keeping the peace by taking groceries that were distributed because they did not want to leave the kids or take them out of their comfort zones. There were mental and physically disabled people including a sick elderly woman, alone at home, who was found living in her faecal matter. Some who were going through substance withdrawals were agitated, while still others were getting sick and had to be rushed to hospitals. Mothers were calling me crying. It was worse when the sale of alcohol was relaxed. Families were aware of the results of alcoholism... the few Rand left were forcefully taken and used to purchase alcohol – and thereafter, the violence ...

Forgetting Who My Source Is

Every time I was called my heart broke. I began linking people up for resources. Then the help became politicized and became a money-making scheme for the stronger ones with friends in the right places. I was becoming angry to the point of bitterness because people would not speak out against injustices out of fear of being left out and isolated – which also meant no benefits for them and/or their families. Meanwhile, my focus was not on my situation. I was swallowed up in my empathy for others whilst my debts were rising and my cupboards and purse strings were drying up. I became angry with my husband because he seemed to become a liability instead of being valuable. My love and hope in him was dying. I began to stop praying. I began to withdraw from helping big groups. Instead, I began to network people because I no longer had anything to offer except to link them up. I knew that this way they will be kept abreast and sustained. From there, I went into a slow and painful depression. I remained in bed for three days. I couldn't utter a prayer, couldn't get up and bathe or eat. I had a case against me for challenging a drug lord for selling drugs to the youth in the area that I'm from. I had to attend court several times, watching my back in case his cronies did a drive by shooting or stabbing attack, as they began to inform other drug lords that I was an informer (not true), so they should attack me. Then they tried a character assassination on me. All failed.

Oblivious to this, God was with me yet it was almost as if I was self-destructing. Both my married daughters called to tell me they were not well. So even if not for me, I began to earnestly pray for my daughters and grandchildren as these two ladies were their families' breadwinners, with both husbands unemployed.

I began answering my phone. I was given an opportunity to market medical face masks, e-learning tablets for learners, PPE material and infrared thermometers for companies. I began to market them because I believed that this would work both ways: to protect people and create awareness while also being a way to earn an income. But it didn't go well; no one was interested. I then approached two ladies I interact with to help me market these but they were not able to assist. One kindly left a food parcel in my car and placed R350.00 in my hand; the other called me to her place and without telling me, purchased bulk veggies for me, and spoke to her friend who blessed me with half of her birthday gift. I received a call from a pastor who thought God was mistaken when he said he must bless me with R2000, but eventually he did call me again bless me after realizing God was indeed speaking to him about me. Another person asked me to assist with sending emails. I was forced to tell him of my predicament of not having Wi-Fi. He paid my arrears to have my internet connection restored. As for my debts, rent, car payment, etc. I'm trusting in God that I'll be able to secure some type of job that will help me get up to date with all payments. I thank God that I was able to stand on his promises even in my lowest time, when not one of my family members contacted me because they believe that I had everything because I don't ask. I never look downward and sad even in my toughest times. I am always uplifting others even in my brokenness.

I began to take charge of my relationship with God. I got out of bed, had a bath, cooked a meal and began to watch motivational documentaries from other women and men of God who had gone through similar situations. I sought help at the hospital and received treatment and within the week, I was back into recovery mode. I began my new journey with God. I began having conversations with him through his Word. I was no longer feeling angry and frustrated. I started attending Bible studies on Zoom, and although the finance situation hasn't changed much, I will no longer stress. The challenge is no longer mine; it's the Lord's struggle. I do not have control over the situation. God is my sustenance, my comforter, my lover, my advocate. If they take my materials from me, it will not be without his permission and for a purpose.

I knew with all this I was not doing anything evil. All I did was to love others selflessly and God was protecting me all this while. He protected me when my Mom was brutally raped and I was conceived. He protected me from the various rapes including one by a police officer when I was fourteen years old, and later from being raped by by a pastor. There was also the failed rape attempt by gang members opposing our community. He protected me in accidents. He protected me from an assassination plot by rogue police. He protected me from an assassin from a different political party with whom I worked closely not knowing that he belonged to SAPS Crime Intelligence. Although I worked so closely with him, I only got to know his true identity after he was arrested and someone told me to read the *Mail and Guardian*. He protected me when I worked with SANCO, when we had to sneak in and out of meetings. He protected me when I tried to commit suicide by shooting myself after my divorce. Somehow the gun shot passed my head. I was found unconscious. It was all hushed because of my high profile in the community. No one knew my personal life and tragedies.

Mind Over Matter

Science shows that we are wired to love with a natural optimism bias. This is exactly what this scripture says as well. 2 Timothy 1:7 says God has not given us a spirit of fear but of a sound mind.

The bad thoughts I had through the traumas in my life since childhood somehow twisted my brain, overcoming all my good thoughts and pleasant words and it began to malfunction. This was an ultimate way of the enemy destroying every good plan God has for me by attacking my mind, body, soul and Spirit BUT by the grace of God, I have overcome the enemy once again, by daily practicing Philippians 4:8.

The Outcome of My Experience in My Relationship with God

The outcome of my experience in my relationship with God is – I realise that all the circumstances I go through are to make me wiser and sharpen me. The pain and humiliation are nothing compared to the pain Christ went through for me, to show how much he loves me. I love people and if, in doing so, I have to go through hardships, then it's worth every pain and humiliation. And I say this now, even after the

fact that I thought I was not going to survive the many ordeals I have been through. I know that God is alive and true to God's promises and his word will never return void. It is we who fail by turning away from God and trusting human beings who are just as weak as we are and therefore end up betraying us, letting us down and leaving us devastated. They let us down especially when we, with our own twisted thinking, think that we are fatherless and not loved. Yet, that is who they are, mere people. They can never take the place of God.

I'm praying that the next job available for me will be one that helps others get out of the desperate situation of poverty, abuse and depression. I continue to seek ways to act as a bridge to link the needy to the service providers whilst allowing me financial stability.

Reflections of My Experience with a Coronavirus Infected Family Member

Mapula G Ngoepe

Prof Mapula G Ngoepe is an Associate Professor in the Department of Mathematics Education at the University of South Africa, Pretoria. She is a member of the Tshwane chapter of the Circle and has a passion in gender issues.

I had just come from a funeral of one of my close relatives in the second week of March 2020. As a big sister, I had to be physically present for my sister-in-law. Usually the family supporters would sleep on sponge beds on the floor, couches, and so on. I luckily brought my sleeping bag and spent three nights before the burial. The night temperatures were beginning to drop. We were six ladies in that room. One of the ladies had flu but it was normal especially at the beginning of March. I drank hot water and lemon in the mornings as I felt the flu knocking. Rehlotje (pseudonym) arrived for the funeral from an international space where he was working, and we were glad he managed to travel before lockdown. It was good to see him back home. On Monday, 23 March 2020 the President announced lockdown in South Africa for 21 days beginning from 26 March and extending until 16 April 2020 to manage the COVID-19 pandemic.

Back in Gauteng, two days later, Mom was hospitalised in Polokwane. I left Gauteng to go to Polokwane to visit her. I spent four days at my parents' house with my other sisters as we took turns at the hospital. By that time, I was coughing, had fever; I felt tired, had pains all over my body and headaches – these were all the symptoms of COVID-19. I went to the pharmacist to get self-medication. I did not feel better.

At that time, the hospital could allow only one person per visit. There were many frustrated family members outside the hospital negotiating to see their loved ones. Some of them had travelled hundreds of kilometres. And then, the rule was passed that no visitors were allowed into hospital wards. It was at that time that I decided to



drive back to Gauteng, but also to consult the Doctor since there was no point staying in Polokwane when I could not visit Mom. After consulting the Doctor, I had to go to my work in the computer department to fix my laptop on Thursday, 25 March (last day before lockdown). I did not pay much attention about the lockdown preparations. Some people, including Rehlotje, knew better because he was urging us to buy groceries, and alerted us that the shelves in the shops were becoming empty. He did buy a few essential groceries including sanitizers, antiseptic, Dettol soap, and so forth. Lo and behold, it was when I was attending to my laptop that the unexpected call came from Rehlotje. He broke the news that he just got the results which says he tested positive for COVID-19. I froze but collected myself. I did not even know he went to test. He earnestly told me that I should go to the Doctor immediately to get tested (I was not even aware that testing does not happen at the Doctor's surgery; I was not even sure about the procedure). The Doctor was surprised to see me there again because I had just consulted him and this time I did not even make an appointment. I told him I had come for a COVID-19 test because Rehlotje just tested positive and was in quarantine. Whilst still in the Doctor's consultation room, Rehlotje called to say that I should ask the Doctor to prescribe medication for him. With wide eyes, the Doctor said with a low voice, 'There is no cure'. Then there was silence. He continued to say that the patients are treated as they manifest symptoms.

The Doctor then took me to a separate room where I was given a mask and asked many questions by a young practitioner who sat at a distance away from me. I was a bit terrified. He asked me among other questions who was staying with me. He advised that all the family members in the house should be tested for COVID-19 at Ampath laboratories. We were all frantically looking for who was where, to tell them to go for tests. Rehlotje was concerned for me because I was having flu and besides I had pneumonia in the last year and was on chronic medication. My house helper was supposed to leave for home since it was the last day to travel between provinces. We had already arranged a lift for her to Polokwane. Lo and behold, her journey had to be terminated because we had to send someone to bring her back and take her straight to be tested. We were all tense, had a sense of confusion and a myriad unanswered questions. The process of testing by the swab in the nose and throat was horrible. That day, we tried to call all the people that Rehlotje was in contact with to tell them to test. It was heavy information to relay. We feared for Rehlotje and the outcome of our tests.

The Waiting Period

Having to wait for the COVID-19 test results was a question of life and death. We had to take it one day at a time. In the waiting, I was holding on to scriptures for example, 'Be still and know that I am the Lord'; 'David encouraged himself in the Lord'; 'They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.'

Thanks to the Lord that the results for all four family members were negative, and also for those whom Rehlotje had been in contact with. We were called by the health professional now and then to check how we were coping.

Nothing but Prayer

Having been convinced there was no cure, the only help was in prayer and complete trust in the Lord. My Mom was also in hospital for three weeks. After talking to her, I would go into a state of low energy, frustration, and desperation. She was complaining a lot about the hospital staff, the food, and everything. She wanted to go home and said that we did not love or care about her anymore. 'You just dumped me here,' she said. Indeed, being sick in hospital and not visited by family affects a person's emotions and mental well-being. This was painful for all of us. At that time three of my family members were in hospital in different places and Rehlotje in quarantine.

I started the day around 5 a.m. to do my academic work and then prepared and boiled *motswako* (mixture of ginger, garlic, lemons and honey) in a big pot. This mixture was to boost the immune system. It was customary for me to prepare *motswako* in winter when bringing up my children and when they had flu. The other method that I encouraged was to put boiling water in a container with Vicks, cover the sick child with a blanket to inhale the steam. This was helpful even in this time. Rehlotje used a nebulizer and steamed with eucalyptus because of discomfort in the chest. I gave him half litre of *motswako* twice a day. I would ask him what he would like for breakfast, lunch or dinner. This was a daily routine. There were times when I forgot to give him food as I was focussed on my work. He would call or WhatsApp. He said he wished he had a little kitchen in his room. In between, I would do my academic work, other house chores like preparing meals, cleaning, laundry, dish washing, and answering calls from my other two children who were

not in the house, my Mom and my siblings. Being used to working in the office, it was difficult to work from home.

The idea that Rehlotje was quarantined was stressful. I had to ask him time and again how he felt, and if he needed anything. At times he switched off his phone. He asked that we put flowers in the garden for him to see. Sometimes we talked to him through the window and that's when we got to see him.

It was 14 days of total trust in the Lord. At first, we watched the news a lot and then we stopped watching as we heard of new infections and more people dying. One of my children was still out of the country. As we watched the news, infections were the highest in the United States of America where they also recorded many deaths. One child was working in a hospital in KwaZulu-Natal. The calls were to continuously check how they were doing and they too wanted to know how we were doing. I encouraged them that the Lord knows. When relaying about colleagues and patients that were infected and some who died, I earnestly prayed all sorts of prayers. The one prayer, was, "Devil you are lost. You have a wrong address. You are not welcome here. Leave now in Jesus name." For days on end I was praying this. There were also times when prayer just could not come.

I had to be strong for the family members in the house and those who were away, to try and alleviate the stress caused by this pandemic. As they say, *Mosadi o swara thipa ka bogaleng* (a woman holds the knife by the blade).

My Lockdown Back to Eden Project

During this experience with coronavirus infected family members, I took solace not only from the Lord but in what I call, "My lockdown back to Eden project." – The veggie patch was therapeutic. Seeing a seed popped in the ground germinating and growing to produce fresh tasty vegetables was an indication of the presence of the Lord. Not buying veggies such as spinach, carrot, peas, beetroot, green beans also showed God's provision from nature. I was also able to try planting vegetables that I had never thought to plant earlier such as garlic, okra, radish and turnip. This project gave me tranquillity. It reminded me of Philippians 4:7: "And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

COVID-19, the Face of Real Pain

Busisiwe Gasa


Busisiwe Gasa describes herself as “an ordinary village woman from her dusty village of kuSabalele in the Eastern Cape, with her heart on the sleeve and loads of stories to tell.”

My first pregnancy ended with a miscarriage which is a story for another day. After that I wasn't too keen on procreation. My pillow neighbour wanted a child, badly, and I conceded because the trip to town with the kids is an outing of my liking. Anyway, his wishes were granted and in no time I was ballooning. Before I knew it the midget inside me was knocking, wanting to see what this whole world is about.

The night before her arrival, I was the cause of a traffic jam between our bedroom and the shared toilet at his parents' house. The next morning he went to work and I was left behind turning the bedroom upside down. Only later that morning, my mother-in-law observed that my madness was from labour pains. She called her son to take me to hospital. He came in no time and soon I was in the car to hospital.

On the way we came across a roadblock. Someone had been shot and we were expected to go back and use an alternative route. “*Hayke hayke* (No, no way!) I wasn't gonna be inconvenienced like that *mna* (me)!” While my partner was busy trying to make a U-turn, I asked him where he was going. He said, *Ukhulele elokshini mahala woyika amapolisa* (Your growing up in the township didn't help you, here you are, afraid of the police). *Ndamjamela* (I glared at him). In a second, my upper body was outside the window screaming my lungs out to the men in uniform: *Yheey nina andizujika mna ndiyalunywa susani ezi zinto okanye sogqitha phezu kwazo* (Hey, I am not going to turn around. I am in labour. Remove these things or we will drive over them). *Andazi ke abelungu beva njani kodwa yangu qhu saaa* (I don't know how white people understood me speaking in isiXhosa but everyone suddenly sprang into action). It was all in the command in my voice *mntaka Bawo* (my friend). That time *iyatsho into esinqeni ngaske ndime ngentloko kwistulo semoto* (In the meantime, the pain around my waist was killing me. It was so bad, I could have easily stood on my head on the car seat).

As we reached Sayofika eNewlands Surgical and I ran inside. Quick! Quick! I was on the bed with machines on my side. I kept calling for Dr. Dhansay because I was sure the child was gonna die inside me. This nurse kept checking me and telling me my centimetres. I told her I didn't care about centimetres *mna* (me)! I wanted this child out of my stomach. Dr Dhansay arrived and checked. He said there was no hope that I'd be able to give birth on my own. The nurse wanted to give it more time, *ndamjamela* (I glared at her). The Doctor wasn't even finished saying it was gonna be C-section and I was already ripping off the things they had around my belly. He made a call for someone to prepare the theatre and I was already asking for directions to the theatre. All this time my pillow neighbour was standing quietly. The Doctor confirmed with him that I was gonna be operated and my pillow neighbour still wanted to call his mother to come in case there was some assistance requiring someone with experience. *Mna* I was off the bed running slightly towards theatre butt naked. Lo *wheelchair yabo yandibamba eway(ini)* (Their wheelchair caught up with me on the way).

I got to theatre and soon the whole team arrived!  So many people! Clearly *ndiyacisha moss kwaphela undweba tututu* (This made me think, clearly, I am dying. I lost all my bravado). I didn't even register the introduction of who was gonna be doing what. I remember asking the Doctor how many people he had killed during these operations and he responded, "Seems like you'll be my first considering that you talk too much and don't give me time to concentrate." Before I could answer, I was shown a big child who had taken residence in my tummy for nine months, apparently. The nurses took the child and I told my pillow neighbour to follow them. That child was too cute and they were gonna steal her! The laughter in that theatre! Did I tell you that child was 4.36 kg at birth?

I miss that human today. She is stuck in another continent and I'm here. I want her inside my tummy just to keep her safe. She wants to return home and the COVID nonsense is making it difficult for both of us. I want to smell her hair and be annoyed when she's lazy to wash the dishes. I want her to practise her make up on me only to be annoyed an hour later when I take it off. I want to wake up to her walking in and out of my bedroom and disturbing my sleep. I want her to cheat on card games with a straight face. I want to be with my daughter I can't take this any longer.



Letter 01

Duduzile Pila

I have so much to say, but I do not know how to say it.

I want a lot but I know you are not a genie, although I am well aware of your abilities of making the impossible possible.

Today was not a good day; emotionally I'd rate it a -1/10 and would not recommend. That sentence would have made a great tweet, but I decided this time, I'm telling You.

I am sad. I cannot even tell you why. I thought a thought which led to a thought and now here I am engulfed by a negative feeling. Also why must these bad feelings be so intense?

Why did you make me this way?

Anyway, I do not want to sound ungrateful. I know you see me, laughing out loud but dying inside.

I know you hear me when I am quiet.

Most importantly I know You love me, even when I feel like you don't I know you do, and that should be enough.

Dear God, it's tough sometimes but I am grateful for everything, but more especially for my sanity.

Love,

Your daughter

Suddenly, Lent became more than fasting from eat and drink

Passion of Our Lord – Passion of our People

Adri Sutherland

Adri Sutherland is a Pastoral Counsellor, Retreat Leader and Educator, striving to provide encouragement and hope through counselling, teaching, prayer and meditation.

*Suddenly we had to fast from people we love
Instead of giving up willingly as sacrifice that which we choose
We were compelled to give up time and freedom and loved ones,
Or become unwilling sacrifice!*

*During Passion Week a lament arose
“How will we celebrate Easter?”
As churches were forbidden
Yet, for some, church was thriving at home.*

*As infection increased and the death toll rose
The cry of the people became louder
As children, the poor, the vulnerable
Suffered in their passion of poverty, hunger, domestic violence*

*And the roar of the substance deprived reached the ears
Of the powers that be
Opening the vats and stores to the perpetrators of violence
Imbuing them with liquid courage to return to their victims*



*Easing the suffering of the poor and vulnerable
Has become the task of those whose hearts are touched
To strive to multiply and hand out bread and food
As the throng of hungry people spread the message of their good news*

*And Jesus is found in communion
In the bread and food that is handed out
And Jesus is found in the person who has contributed
He is found in the person who has cooked
He is found in the person who collected
He is found in the person who hands out*

And Jesus is found in the grateful hands and eyes and hearts of those who receive

Into the Wilderness with Jesus

Frances Correia

Frances Correia is a married lay woman with three children. She has worked her whole adult life in the area of Christian Spirituality, as a spiritual Director, and as a trainer of other directors.

This COVID season has been an unsettling one for many of us. In my work as a spiritual Director, I have heard the stories of all sorts of people – people who are afraid of getting sick; people who are battling with mourning a loved one; those lost (for any reason) during this time where the normal help of a loving community are not allowed; people who had pre-existing mental issues who have really battled in this season, and some who have developed or regressed back into mental issues as a result of the isolation and underlying anxiety of this time; people who have lost their jobs; people who have been abused; and doctors, nurses, and teachers who have been on the front lines of dealing with this disease. For many it has been a distressing time, but for some, there have been the consolations of more time with family, and space for deeper interior work and awareness.

In this time, I have felt a profound invitation to greater intimacy with Jesus in his own feeling of aloneness and isolation. I offer this Contemplation on Jesus' time in the desert based on Mark's Gospel, as a possible doorway into an encounter with the One who made us in love, and who knows and loves us in all our vulnerability, our weakness, and our brokenness.



Into the Wilderness with Jesus (Based on Mark 1: 12)

'Immediately afterwards the Spirit drove Him out into the wilderness'

I invite you to join me. Let's take a few moments to sit quietly with our eyes shut, listening to the sounds we can hear outside. Perhaps the sounds of birds, or insects, perhaps the sound of traffic or people.

Listen for a moment or two and then let the sounds fade from consciousness, and turn your attention inwards, listen to the gentle rhythm of your own breathing. Don't try to change it, just listen and then let the breath lead you into silence.

Sometimes when we are really silent and attentive, we can feel our own heart beat in our body. In this deep silence consider Jesus sitting also in deep silence in the wilderness. In your imagination ponder his experience. Imagine the wilderness. What did it look like? As he looked about him, what would he see?

Imagine what he would hear. The sounds of insects, birdsong, the sound of the wind.

What would he feel?

The harsh sun, the soft breeze, the feel of sand and stone beneath his feet. The delight of the shade... perhaps he sat playing with the sand in his fingers or toes. Did he enjoy walking at evening or early morning? Did he sleep in the heat of the day? At night could he look up and see the wonder of the stars unhindered by human lights?

Jesus is alone for 40 days. In a way, during this time, he is profoundly available to all of us.

What would it feel like to walk into the wilderness and find him?

Imagine setting out, perhaps in the early morning or the late afternoon. Walking to find Jesus. What do you see, hear, touch, feel as you walk?

Perhaps ask yourself these questions: Where do I find him? How does he greet me? What do I say to him?

Imagine being with him, sitting or walking. Perhaps the two of you lie down and gaze at the night sky.

Again ask yourself: What do we (Jesus and I) talk of? What do I say to him? What does he say to me?

How does it feel to be with Jesus like this?

Spend as long as feels comfortable staying with Jesus.

Later, to reflect on this prayer and to help deepen it, you might imagine writing a journal entry about what you did with Jesus. Or you could imagine writing to Jesus and thanking him for the experience.



PART 6:
Hoping

Part 6: Hoping

Stories of Hope? Sustaining Hope in COVID-19 Times of
Despair and Anxiety

Selina Palm

Meditations: Lockdown Rose Blessings

Rev Tracy Bell

Lament and Assurance

Rev Janet Trisk

POST SCRIPT

Covid-19 breaks in! Being Covid-19 Positive: my story

Nontando Hadebe

Stories of Hope? Sustaining Hope in COVID-19 Times of Despair and Anxiety

Selina Palm

Selina Palm is a feminist scholar-activist whose work disrupts patterns of violence against women, children and queer bodies. She holds a PhD in Theology.

Introduction

Feminist theologian Sharon Welch asks, “What does it mean to work for social transformation in the face of seemingly insurmountable suffering and evil? How can we sustain energy and hope?”¹ This question of sustaining hope is one that we can reflect on together as diverse women from many walks of life in the light of two pandemics that South Africa faced in 2020 – coronavirus (COVID-19) and gender-based violence (GBV). These intersect in troubling ways that leave us with feelings of loss, despair, and uncertainty. Together they highlight the dangers of stigma, silence, isolation and the rise of fear, trauma, and bereavement. They confront us with a loss of hope.

While COVID-19 affects us all it does not affect us all in the same ways. As Daniela Gennrich has laid out in an earlier chapter in this book, COVID-19 is a gendered pandemic. COVID-19, and our social responses to it in the South African context, come with particular risks for women. As Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians within the African continent, we seek a spirituality in the midst of these lived challenges. How can we find hope in the midst of our lives, not hanging abstractly above it, controlled by the hands of male pastors? Many of us may

1 Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 1.

become understandably entangled in individualised negative patterns of hoping only (that I don't get sick, that I remain safe from violence, that I keep my job). However, these hopes alone while reflecting real fears present in our COVID-19 realities can run the risk of narrowing our hopes to ourselves alone, disconnecting from the wider world and even becoming trapped and further isolated by those fears. This chapter suggests that our hopes must remain 'choral' if they are to build the solidarity between women that can enable increased safety and empowerment for all women and nurture our imaginations for positive social possibilities including the need to build back more gender-just social norms and more resilient GBV prevention practices. COVID-19 heightens risks for many women and girls trapped at home with abusive family members, most of them juggling the pressures of gendered labour in the home and in society, their roles in housework, child care and caring for the sick, or facing the loss of vital economic resources as jobs are lost or go on hold. This is especially true of the informal roles often held by poorer women in, for example, home-based early childhood development centres, as informal traders or offering personal services. COVID-19 also highlights the existing imbalances of power within many households. Whose job counts more? Whose time matters? For example, female students may be under increased pressure in their homes to assist with childcare and housework, causing them to fall behind more in their academic study as compared to their male counterparts. Gender intersects in complex ways with other oppressions to make some women and girls far more vulnerable than others. Daniela Gennrich highlights this earlier in this book in her real-life stories of women in South Africa in 2020, who escaped from violent husbands under lock-down only to be stopped by security forces and returned home to enraged husbands, or of migrant women having to pay with their bodies for food for their children, as men took advantage of their lack of access to grants under the Covid-19 lockdown. These form a fraction of the stories of how these pandemics intersect in ways that create despair for women.

However, while COVID-19 and GBV interrelate, COVID-19 does not cause GBV. GBV was already a spiralling pandemic in South Africa across all races and classes before COVID-19. It has a long history tied to our socio-spatial history of apartheid that often split women and families apart. When we look together at what we can do in this COVID-19 time in relation to preventing and responding to GBV, we must bear in mind the systemic nature of the many drivers of GBV, and the everyday

normalisation of intimate partner violence or the power of family social norms. Confronted with COVID-19 many people are saying 'when can things get back to normal?' But 'normal' in South Africa has been bad for many women and girls for decades. President Ramaphosa made this connection from the start between the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and GBV in the light of recent presidential committee reports on GBV, national protests.²

Despite the many challenges of COVID-19, it may also open up possibilities of doing things differently in the future. Who would have imagined our current lifestyle changes two years ago? This is critical for GBV prevention work. We have opportunities at this time of social crisis to progress towards to a 'new normal' around the entrenched patterns of violence between men and women. German theologian of hope Jürgen Moltmann insists that while an ethics of fear sees only the crisis, an ethics of hope also perceives the changes that are made possible within the crisis.³ This rings true right now in South Africa in relation to these two entwined pandemics and requires a feminist ethics of hope.

In this chapter I engage with feminist theologian Flora Keshgegian's five contours of hope. They invite us to step beyond hopeful visions alone to embed hope in habits and practices.

Practising Hope

Feminist theologian Dorothee Soelle suggests that the character of hope is like a baby beginning to walk.⁴ It is in the practicing that we learn, we gain confidence in hope as we enter more deeply into the practices of hope, the process of hoping, shaped by practices and nurtured by habits. Chinese philosophers have also noted, that hope is like a country path, and that as many people walk it, it comes into being. I have found this image of practicing hope alongside others helpful, imagining God not as the object of our hope but God as a verb, a life-giving spirit present in our hopeful acts no matter how small they may seem.

2 Estelle Ellis, "Gender-based Violence is South Africa's Second pandemic, says Ramaphosa," 18 June 2020, *Daily Maverick*, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-04-09-is-gender-based-violence-not-a-serious-and-violent-crime-minister-cele/>

3 Jürgen Moltmann, *Ethics of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 4.

4 See Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope: Practices for Living in Today's World* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 189.

For many years I worked for a faith inspired organisation whose grounding mantra was 'where others see despair, we see hope.'⁵ My work took me to the rubbish dumps of urban Kenya, the streets of Zimbabwe and to former child soldiers in Uganda amongst many other places of seeming despair. In my own life the HIV pandemic became a springboard to an invitation to hope differently, alongside those who lives had been directly infected and affected by this pandemic. In 2012, I completed a Master's degree on the role of hope in social transformation and what it means to hold to the vision, virtue, and practices of hope in ways that do not blind us to the data of despair in our world.⁶ In these anxious times of COVID-19 and despairing times of GBV, I returned to the same question, how can we sustain hope?⁷

The theme of sustaining a choral inclusive hope is also found in the Bible. Romans 15: 1-13 reminds us that the central purpose of Scripture is to nurture hope – not an exclusive hope for the elite few – but a plural, inclusive hope for both Jews and Gentiles, who were the insiders and outsiders of that particular time and place. In an early church marked by the economic divisions of those who had and those who did not have, the social divisions of slave and free persons and the gendered divisions that limited women's hopes and roles in that world, the apostle Paul sought to knit the community together and develop patterns of shared hoping for one another (Gal 3:28). He envisions a unity in diversity where the strong do not run ahead and leave others behind, but where we become hope bearers for one another, founded in a God of hope (Rom 15;13) large enough to encompass many diverse human hopes. As women face the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and GBV, they need to embody this social hope for one another.

The community of the early church was also gifted with a feminine Spirit-filled dynamic energy in the Pentecostal indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This challenged these social injustices of the day to offer new ways of being together. However,

5 For more about this organisation, cf. We See Hope (n.d.).

6 Selina Palm, *Transforming Hope? A Theological-Ethical Vision, Virtue and Practice for the Common Good* (Masters diss., Stellenbosch University, 2012) Selina Palm and Clint Le Bruyns. "Transforming Hope: A Theological-Ethical Vision, Virtue and Practice for the Common Good," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 146 (2013): 104-121.

7 Surveys in South Africa on social attitudes have identified an emerging group of 'pessimists' characterized by a recent 'loss of hope' South African suicide rates are one of the highest in the world. A sense of hopelessness was a key reason for suicidal thoughts by one in five young people who often feel overwhelmed and powerless in the light of issues around them.

many Christian communities have since misused the Bible to create texts of terror for many women, justifying gendered forms of slavery, submission, obedience, and silence as well as an Eve-infused legacy of shame around female bodies and their sexual needs and vulnerabilities. Feminist scholars such as Letty Russell⁸ have sought to radically remap our dogmatic traditions by revising the groans of abused women as the cries of the Holy Spirit as has been explored in recent years by Selina Palm and Elisabet le Roux⁹ in specific relation to violence against women and girls in South Africa. Narratives of rape in the Bible such as the story of King David's daughter, Tamar whose rape by her step brother is then covered up and silenced by the rest of the household (in 2 Sam. 3:1-22) have also been reinterpreted by feminist theologians on the African continent in ways that offer life-giving sources of resistance and hope to women survivors of sexual violence and their need for lament.

At this time in South Africa, we must seek out the possibility of shared hopes as women. This is not an easy task. South Africa's segregated, colonial history has historically divided women and pitted them against each other, by race, class, sexuality, socio-economic location and ability. But at important times in our history, diverse women have found ways to come together in forms of liberating praxis that refuse to leave any women behind, forging shared struggles to move from homes of bondage to households of freedom and to make hospitable room for more women in our communal practices of hoping.

8 Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

9 Selina Palm & Elisabet le Roux, "Households of Freedom? Faith's Role in Challenging Gendered Geographies of Violence in our Cities." In *Just Faith: Glocal Responses to Planetary Urbanization*. ed. Stephan de Beer (Pretoria: AOSIS Online, 2018), 135-164.

Theologising Hope with the South African Circle

“There is such a thing as an ecology of hope. There are environments in which it flourishes and others in which it dies.”¹⁰

At the heart of the Christian story stands a hope for resurrection and new life. However there are many ‘stones’ that still need to be rolled away from our current tombs of death if women and girls in South Africa are to experience resurrection in the here and now. GBV is one of those stones – trapping women within spaces of death. Women understand that a ‘return to normal’ is not the hope of most women in South Africa. It is the normality of violence against women and girls that requires committed hope-in-action if a new normal is to emerge. In this unexpected moment of upheaval, how can women’s voices play a role in resisting old patterns, transforming the present and anticipating the new. What needs to ‘die’ for new life to emerge? What stones must be rolled away? The COVID-19 question “When can we go back to normal?” needs to be reassessed through the lens of the ongoing GBV pandemic and the experiences of women and girls in South Africa to imagine what the new normal can look like? This involves reaching outwards to make space for more women’s voices.

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians has placed the lived experiences and voices of African women at the centre of new ways of doing feminist theology. They have offered critical new insights into the drivers of, and theological responses to, the HIV and AIDS pandemic across the African continent – another gendered pandemic that created high levels of fear and stigma. In recent years, The Circle has also intentionally taken a stronger focus on issues of gender-based violence. South African Circle member Denise Ackermann points to the need for the hopeful imagination of *poesis* that nurtures our ability to envisage a better world as part of the liberating praxis work of healing and reconstruction in our society.¹¹ In response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Anglican Archbishop Thabo Makgoba drew on Ackermann’s words in public Easter reflections in the midst of a strict country-wide lockdown:

10 Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope against Hope – Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1999), 4.

11 Denise Ackermann, “Engaging Faith: A Critical Feminist Theology of Praxis,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, (1996) 42.

Despite the challenges, I pray that we will keep up hope for the future even as we work through the reality of the pandemic... Hope, as Denise Ackermann has written, 'is not that blithe sense that all will end well.' Hope is about acknowledging our fears, dealing with the pain, the reality and the uncertainty brought about by the coronavirus.¹²

Ackermann herself points to the dangers of an approach which defers hope only to future end times when one day all will be well. She insists that hope be tied not to optimism, certainty and assurance, but instead to possibility and agency. Faithfulness is not about sitting back patiently and waiting for God to act, but in taking up our call to be God's hands and feet in the world in a liberating praxis, inspired by a theological imagination for the kin-dom or beloved community of God. As a result, hope must recognize the tragic and be lived and connected to communities of concrete lament in the present day. Circle member Nadia Marais¹³ shows how hope is a critical element in Ackermann's triad of abundant life as a form of resistance and risk which insists we must never surrender our power to imagine a better world with God as the ground of our hope enabling us to challenge the provisionality and precariousness of many current socially unjust patterns of living:

To hope is to refuse to accept despair or defeat. It is our response to the dilemma of being both oppressors and oppressed. Hope is resistance. It actively avoids the void of hopelessness by wrestling with all that seeks to deprive us of hope and disempower us. It risks daily engagement in liberating praxis. It risks ambiguity, uncertainty and darkness.¹⁴

Storytelling is seen in The Circle as a way for women to nurture hope. It is to this power of storytelling in nurturing hope for life that we now turn.

12 Thabo Makgoba, "Archbishop's Eastertide News & Reflections – May 18, 2020," accessed on 5 June 2020 https://archbishop.anglican churchsa.org/2020/05/archbishops-eastertide-news-reflections_18.html

13 Nadia Marias, "Blessed? A Critical Analysis of Salvation In Denise Ackermann that Portrays Human Flourishing as Liberation, Grace and the Goodness of Life," *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif* 55 (2014):721.

14 Denise Ackermann, "A 'Spirituality of Risk' for Christian Witness in South Africa," *International Review of Mission* 83, no. 328 (1994): 126.

Opening Space for Telling Stories: A Feminist Methodology of Hope

Stories can help us make sense of reality. Ackermann suggests that “telling stories is intrinsic to claiming one’s identity and in the process finding impulses for hope...”¹⁵. South African theologian, Charlene Van der Walt notes that stories have a sense-making function that breaks the silence where “telling the story helps to make sense of an often-incomprehensible situation, a suffering and chaotic world in which people wrestle with understanding and seek to experience relief.”¹⁶

In our current context of GBV and COVID-19 in which fears and risks can compound to create stigma and shame which isolate us, storytelling can become an act of resistance where “[t]elling stories breaks the silence which blankets the lives of women and other marginalized and oppressed people and is thus intrinsic to the healing of our diverse communities.”¹⁷ For Ackermann as a feminist theologian, telling stories is also a form of doing theology which is urgently needed for liberation and transformation, as stories can nurture relationships and open up possibilities for healing. The life stories of those who have been oppressed must be heard and reflected upon in particular because they hold the potential for transformation of both the oppressed and their oppressors. She notes that “(i)t is only when hearing and telling stories begins as a process of openness, vulnerability and mutual engagement that alienations of class, race and gender can be challenged.”¹⁸ I concur with Ackermann and suggest that stories like those in this book can challenge their hearers to act as agents for the mending of creation and point to the necessity of political and personal transformation.¹⁹ We can nurture shared forms of hoping by listening with empathy to the stories of other women who are different to us

Ackermann, Van der Walt and others read the Bible stories of women such as Tamar against the background of the HIV pandemic and the reality of gender-based

15 Denise Ackermann, *Tamar's Cry: Re-reading an Ancient Text in the Midst of an HIV/Aids Pandemic* (Cape Town: Ecumenical Foundation of Southern Africa, 2001), 18-19.

16 Charlene Van Der Walt, “Hearing Tamar’s Voice: How the Margin Hears Differently. Contextual Readings of 2 Samuel 13:1-22,” *European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis* 2 (2011): http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/11_2/van_der_Walt_Charlene_2011.html

17 Ackermann, “Engaging Faith,” 48.

18 Ackermann, “Engaging Faith,” 48.

19 Ackermann, “Engaging Faith,” 48.

violence and sexual abuse in South African society to note that “violence is an endemic reality in our society. The very fabric of our communities is fracturing as fear invades South African homes and lurks at our stop streets.”²⁰ On the cusp of the new South Africa, Ackermann insisted that it was time for women to hope in ways that entailed risk and resistance. Living out hope and practicing it in dark days to make hopes become real requires creativity and boldness as well as a refusal to make peace with oppression. The reign or ‘kin-dom’ of God must be one of wholeness where peace is not enforced through the powerful threat of a police weapon or husband’s fist but is nurtured through justice and equality to build a society of equals who can share power. Christian hope is never cheap but is always called to be a ‘hope against hope’ which points not to places of progress and optimism in our world, but paradoxically towards solidarity with dark and suffering places inhabited by the victims of our systems and in conversation with lived experiences of despair. All our work for social transformation must begin here or our vision of hope will fail to be in solidarity with God’s vision of the common good that requires a critique of the present. Only a hope grounded in solidarity and lament enables us to see the suffering God who is already present in the darkness with us:²¹

A vision of hope offers standing ground outside the system from which the system can be evaluated, critiqued and perhaps changed. Hopeless people eventually conform but hope filled people are not as dependent or contained. Hope is an immense human act which reminds us that no system of power or knowledge can finally grasp what is true – and offers an alternative reality as the substance of hope. Hope makes it possible not to submit – even if defiance is not successful²²

Over 25 years on from Ackerman’s initial call, many women still struggle to maintain hope. The vision of a society liberating for all has not extended to the freedom to be free of fear for many women, and this fear has been exacerbated by the lockdown of COVID-19 where women’s existing fears of violence and entrapment within exhausting gendered labour roles come under greater pressure. We need to find new ways to embrace hope. To do so, I enter into conversation with Armenian-American

20 Ackermann, “Engaging Faith,” 45.

21 Selina Palm, “Reimagining the Human: The Role of the Churches in Building a Human Rights Culture in South Africa Today” (PhD thesis, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, 2016).

22 Walter Brueggemann, *Hope Within History* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1987), 81.

feminist scholar Flora Keshgegian whose 2006 book *A Time for Hope* offers concrete ways to practice hope that may resonate in times of COVID-19 and GBV.

Nurturing New Habits: Exploring Five Contours of Hope

Keshgegian's five contours for new social habits of hoping in women's lives are: 1) seeing time differently; 2) accepting finitude; 3) challenging transcendence; 4) an ethic of risk; and 5) reconceptualising transformation. These have been explored in relation to other theologies of hope in my earlier work.²³ She is one of a number of feminist theologians who challenge ways of understanding religious hope within a linear progressive model of time. Instead, she connects these theological contours to five concrete practices by which she suggests that women can nurture improvisational tools of hope.²⁴

1. Seeing Time Differently

First, Keshgegian suggests that the Judeo-Christian affirmation that God acts purposefully within history to bring about 'his' will, providing an overarching 'guaranteed' grand hope for a happy ending to human history can lead to 'once and for all' thinking which can be both utopian and unhelpful.²⁵ It can encourage an attitude that our human actions in the present do not really count because the future is fixed by God and builds on a western, linear and progressive notion of time that can fail to ring true for many, and can benefit some at the expense of others. To see the world as a 'divine comedy' where all will be redeemed in the end can repress lived experiences of the tragic, limited and ambiguous nature of life.²⁶ I find this particularly relevant to the concrete, compounded bereavements and tragedies surrounding us in new ways through Covid-19. It highlights the dangers of a theology that insists that there is nothing that we can do, as the future is in God's hands. Ironically in South Africa, certain large church events have become Covid-19 super spreaders of death.

23 Palm, "Transforming Hope?"; Palm and Le Bruyns, "Transforming Hope."

24 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 191.

25 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 78.

26 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 17.

Both GBV and COVID-19 present us with tragic experiences and human limits that require action for change and not merely a passive hope that God will one day change things, bring miracle cures or transform abusive husbands. She suggests we 'relearn the contours of hope for today to inhabit time differently'²⁷ and look for smaller hope generating narratives that let go of our human tendency to seek total solutions. I resonate with her call to better honour both the complexity and the limits of life in ways that nurture forms of social hoping that do not rely on a 'guaranteed happy end' but point us towards meaningful values that centres us in the present and can accompany us on a journey into the unknown future. I find an androcentric insistence on finding a cure for COVID-19 and the war-like metaphors used to fight for this goal or indeed the 'fight' against GBV to be problematic metaphors resurfacing again today.

Keshgegian invites us into *the practice of honouring time* by being mindful to the present as God's time.²⁸ We are all travellers on the way and need to pay attention to the signs of our times and 'take time' to slow down. Keshgegian is concerned that a constant drive to the future can mean that the cries of victims in the present go unheard. This is particularly true with GBV where a solutions mindset can close down the spaces of lament and trauma needed for change to emerge. Like Ackermann, she points to the need to spend time in our public spaces on loss, grief, mourning and the unpacking of trauma and shows hope's dialectic with pain and grief. Remembering our painful pasts together also recalls alternative histories that do not exclude the voices of the survivors. In these COVID-19 and GBV times, a call to mindfulness, public lament and empathic listening to the stories of alternative histories is valuable.

2. Embracing Finitude and Limits

Second, Keshgegian points out that much traditional Christianity has postponed the fulfilment of hope into heavenly place or has refused to accept human finitude. Finitude and death are then seen as a punishment for original sin with salvation through Jesus and eternal life presented as the answer to that fear of finitude.²⁹ In-

²⁷ Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 157.

²⁸ Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 191.

²⁹ Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 129.

stead, much feminist theology explores death in a more holistic eco-centred way, as a natural part of the cycle of life, by drawing on personal experiences of new birth. The reality of limited space in our world requires us to see death, not as a punishment of sin, but as an intrinsic part of creation's own renewal. The hope claims of eternal life and immortality typical of Christianity may reflect a damaging refusal to accept finitude and the limits that are a natural part of human life. Women's theological voices instead argue for agnosticism in the face of death buoyed by trust in a relationship with a God of Love rather than holding to doctrines about our post-death future that can fail to ring true, bring genuine comfort or speak meaningfully into our times. Seeing death as a cost of the privilege of life may help Christians avoid a triumphalist approach to resurrection that is too quick to deny the reality of our human experiences of finitude, and our lack of certain knowledge about the future beyond this horizon. At a time of COVID-19 where death hovers on our horizons, this offers new ways to inhabit the life we have and to accept its vulnerabilities and limits, whilst still resisting ways in which death often comes to women at the violent hands of angry men.

Here, Keshgegian invites us into the *practice of concrete embodiment*. As women we can pay closer attention to our own bodies and the spaces which they need to thrive. In relations between men and women, men's bodies and needs often take up more space or make shared spaces unsafe for women. Reclaiming the value of our bodies as women and learning how to live together within limited space in ways that are healthy for all involved reminds us that all our bodies matter to God. The smaller spaces which COVID-19 has pushed us into require urgent critical reflection on both hospitable and dangerous spaces for women and girls in their everyday lives. A recognition of the inherent limits of life for all also rejects unlimited ideas of growth, prosperity and expansion as unsustainable. As the natural environment flourishes under the curbing of economic consumption, a hope generating practice can emphasise the value of making enough space for all bodies in the here and now and not too much for some. It offers a sobering reminder that women should not have to create safe spaces for others in need of care at the expense of their own needs and safety.

3. Challenging Transcendence

Third, Keshgegian, following Welch, questions whether we should hold to a transcendent horizon of hope outside history that guides and grounds our human journey as Christians. She chooses to let go of a transcendent God outside history and embrace finitude as part of the human condition whilst remaining hopeful. She notes that Jesus held up the idea of God as immanent and discoverable in the ordinary and the human but that the institutional church constantly pushes away from this radical idea and in doing so, often splits off the transcendent dimension of hope, emphasising transcendence over immanence, splitting space and time and frequently rejecting finitude as a result. She invites us into a more incarnational position with transcendence reframed within our human history and experience.³⁰ Social transformation's refusal to accept how things are becomes a form of 'horizontal' transcendence where people go beyond what currently exists to develop new possibilities but it is also about living fully within the present with all its limitations. Her critique challenges our core image of God as overall controller to point to an improvisational energy for life:

The living god is known in and through the process of living. This is a god of improvisation, an abundant energy, powerful and ever moving. This god is ground of our hope. The monarchical god reigning in heaven so often portrayed as the object and ground of our hope is not adequate for the vision of life we need today. Nor is a god made in our image of a loving parent granting our every desire – able to provide the hope needed. The god of life, ground of hope, speaks forcefully out of the whirlwind. God's power for life makes resurrection happen – not person but relation.³¹

Keshgegian invites us into *incarnational practices of awe and wonder* within our everyday lives that help us step away from trying to control everything. This can enable us to experience mystery within wider creation that can ground us in a sense of perspective and humility.³² It encourages women to live in the habit/at of wild wonder where transcendence is not controlled by fearful patriarchal doctrines or man-made church buildings but is found in the creative energy of the spirit of life and

³⁰ Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 222.

³¹ Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 221.

³² Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 210.

in the rituals of nature where we relinquish control and become active participants connected to each other. This can offer us perspective on our interconnected place in the world and stimulate our imagination for hope generating dialogues and relationships of solidarity. In a world where COVID-19 and GBV fears can confine women to smaller and smaller spaces, stepping out into nature together can be an act of resistance against the female fear factory that keeps us trapped, to reconnect us to generative possibilities. When writing this part of this chapter, I took time away from my desk to hike a mountain trail with a female companion. I returned energized and envisioned, reminded that I need open spaces to be free to imagine different ways of living in the world. I also felt more aware of how many women remain trapped inside, due to fears of being attacked if they venture out without male protection.

4. An Ethic of Risk

Fourth, Keshgegian contrasts an ethic of control with an ethic of risk and solidarity.³³ She points out that there are no guarantees of decisive social improvements but that we can choose to resist in hope by imagining a world different to the present, developing strategies of resistance and finding ways of sustaining each other in the struggle for justice. She seems to let go of a transcendent, omnipotent God outside the system whose promise forms the guarantee for our actions in the world. She suggests that utopian thinking is often about control and power over others, framed in terms of the good. She challenges the image of a sovereign God who holds absolute power and invites us to relinquish absolutes to live in an alternative space of the 'beloved community that celebrates limits, contingency and ambiguity with no one to offer us a guaranteed future'³⁴ This requires a relinquishing of all forms of 'power over' to work in solidarity towards mutually transformative relationships and interactions. While all our social responses are temporal and partial, they are still meaningful and needed. She and Welch both use the playful image of God as a jazz improviser rather than an omnipotent controller where an interactive space emerges between divine and human action where there is potential and possibility.³⁵ Hope then enables us to craft meaningful values for the journey as opposed to hope for a

33 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 86.

34 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 88.

35 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 89.

utopian end-goal where, as Ackermann also reminds us “to hope is to engage hour by hour with life in a way that our deeds express that for which we hope.”³⁶ This points away from a passive reliance on God alone towards a commitment to do what we can to sustain life, a focus that is needed in our times of COVID-19 and GBV where women and girls may retreat away from the idea of taking risks or resisting because of its accompanying dangers and in this way can quietly cease to hope.

Keshgegian invites us to *practice creative imagination* and to refuse the cultural colonization of women's expectations as tied only to what has been or what is and not what could be, as a form of atrophied imagination. She notes that “being able to envision change in our circumstances and to imagine a different and better life are fundamental to being able to hope. Hope not only imagines the correcting of injustices and wrongs but it also brings into conception what has never existed before, initiating birth process of the new.”³⁷ Poets and artists may often lead the way, but we can all learn to imagine. She is concerned that we run the risk of falling into only negative imaginings about the future and that women's busyness, anxiety, preoccupation, and often cramped living spaces can make it hard to step into spaces of positive imagining of creative alternatives for change as a hope generating practice.³⁸ She invites women to reclaim the prophetic imagination of God's desires for justice and use our discontent with the present to generate and embody alternatives.

5. Reconceptualising Social Transformation

Finally, Keshgegian draws on insights from earlier generations of feminist theologians that social change is about conversion to the centre rather than to the end³⁹. Our motivation for social transformation can come from centering on core values such as peace, justice, equality rather than falling into ‘once and for all’ thinking about the future which privileges the end over the means, and “turns visions into utopias, transforms imagination into wish fulfilment and hope into the eternal embodiment of desire.”⁴⁰ Society is in need of constant correction as new forms of injustice and new victims emerge. Smaller hopes for the possibilities of improvement

36 Denise Ackermann, “A Time to Hope,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 81 (1992): 67.

37 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 201.

38 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 200.

39 Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 200.

40 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 78.

enable us to work for ongoing changes rather than relying on a single hope for a one-off transformation. New beginnings will always be needed, and God can be envisioned as the journey. Constant correction is not a failure of social transformation but an inevitable part of life. Women's work in relation to transformation has often been daily, ongoing, repetitious tasks – turning ingredients into meals eaten, dirt into cleanness that dirties again, material into clothes that wear out, children into adults who have new children. This lived experience brings a slant of worldly housekeeping to bear on social transformation.⁴¹ In this theology, responsible action does not mean the certain achievement of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible. Partial successes are valued and anticipations on a small scale enlarge others imagination and offer glimpses of other social structures.

Keshgegian also invites us into *participation in interrelation* where hope is a social habit directed towards social change.⁴² This is founded on an interconnected web of interrelations with which African people are already familiar in the reciprocal concept of *ubuntu*. We can become hope bearers for one another and value positive appreciation by cultivating the habit of 'being-in-relation' with a sense of gratitude for others. This calls for a generosity and willingness to share that lets go of fearfulness about scarcity and that can resurge in our responses to COVID-19. It decentres a life lived at the expense of others and nurtures a life lived in right relation to all others and in solidarity with those who are excluded. Women embody this social hope when they refuse to move ahead at the expense of more marginalised women and create a matrix of possibility for the next generation to experience life without gender-based violence, where God does not hover above our relationships but inhabits them. The reality of our web of interrelation becomes more visible in a pandemic where our actions impact the safety of others and where God's commitment to healing and safety can be incarnated in how women domestic workers or nurses, highly vulnerable groups in the pandemic, are being treated by those who hold power.

41 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 91.

42 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 204.

Becoming Communities of Hope

Keshgegian's five contours or habits of hoping can help us avoid the danger of an ethic of control that only seeks one-off solutions such as a COVID-19 cure, total lockdown or a war on GBV. Instead her ethic of risk and solidarity helps us celebrate partial successes and let go of a desire for absolute guarantees. Sustaining social transformation requires a daily focus by all on contributing towards a better world rather than grand visions of perfect worlds that can lead to new tyrannies in the name of the good.⁴³ Covid-19 invites us to re-engage with the realities of human finitude and to be wary of the triumphalist tendency of some religions to explain our limited vulnerable existence away. She problematises a linear approach to time at the expense of alternative metaphors by paying attention to those who are the victims of the stories. Finally, she reimagines transcendence within immanence to introduce everyday worldly housekeeping as an ongoing task of social transformation.⁴⁴ Hope then becomes a social habit that honours both time and place in an embodied way that can help us inhabit our lives differently in the midst of life's challenges.⁴⁵ In the face of the twin pandemics of GBV and Covid-19, entrenched harmful gendered household and social patterns need to change.

This alternative narrative of hope can ground our shared journeys into unknown futures within core values. It recognises limits, rejects guaranteed blueprints for change and learns to improvise and imagine creatively within the messy realm of possibility. Hope is not a system or a controlling vision. Instead, it maintains a risky openness to the continual possibility of new goods. Social transformation is a human journey in partnership with the divine inspired by the possibilities with which our realities are laden. It turns a critical eye on present realities without becoming fatalistic, cynical, or despairing and to engage with the messiness of life in history.⁴⁶

The pandemics of both COVID-19 and GBV can thrust us either into a superstitious fatalism where we desperately pray for God to protect us or we can fall into an apathy where everything feels too hard. Alternatively, it can generate a control ethic where I must keep myself or my family safe at the expense of others' needs.

43 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 77.

44 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 91.

45 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 90.

46 Flora Keshgegian, *Time for Hope*, 78.

In between these dangers are habits of hoping that refuse to confine God statically to a fixed place of worship, but sees the divine on the move in hope with us – as a fellow traveller journeying alongside women and men in the search for better ways of being together. The church is called into being in new ways under COVID-19 as its established patterns and places of worship are disrupted. It can become an embodied people in hope, a dynamic community that participates in the practices of a God of hope, found in unlikely places. Walter Bruggemann says the church is called to be “a hope-filled church that can resist, reform and offer alternatives”⁴⁷ to the many social injustices that still mark our world today.

Conclusion

To hope in these despairing times must be a choral social practice. It requires a choir of voices to bring out its harmonies and is not merely the action of a soloist. New habits of hoping can open up space for small hope-generating stories in unexpected places of suffering and struggle and not only in places of success. These shape the contours of hope in ways that do not leapfrog over lived data of despair. Authentic hope does not seek to escape or control the limits that are part of human life but offers a way to inhabit time with all its risks whilst being open to the good possibilities with which all reality are laden. To nurture resilient hope in action requires fuelling resistance to present injustices and taking risks to shape alternatives. As women we can each add our voices to the choral community of hope to contribute our story.

Opening spaces for women's storytelling of their experiences offers many possibilities for nurturing these smaller hope generating narratives. They are theological acts which can help us lament, recognise limits, understand time differently, imagine creatively and seek right relationships. They are not just the raw material onto which theology must be crafted. This book has focused on self-narrated stories of women in South Africa living amidst the pandemics of COVID-19 and GBV. It offers habits of hoping within the despair, anxiety and messiness of their real lives. These stories speak about trauma and mourning, reclaim practices of lament, engage with the reality of death, the pain of separation from loved ones, and the reality that formal church services and traditional access to the Eucharist (still often a male dominated

47 Walter Bruggemann, “Communities of Hope Midst Engines for Despair” in *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context*, ed. Walter Bruggemann (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2001), 157

ritual) have not been possible under Covid-19 lockdown. However, new signs of hope are emerging through ways in which women minister to other women to birth new stories of hope and to accompany one another through these twin pandemics.

Take a moment to think of one person in your life who embodies hope for you at this time and place in South African history. For whom do you feel your story can embody habits of hope? We can become hope bearers for one another, cultivating a sense of honouring our own time and the time of other women, creating spaces of safety and care within our finite and vulnerable lives for ourselves and others, embracing the wild wonder of creation as a form of transcendence and taking risks to imagine and embody a different world characterized by right relationships and world housekeeping.

Meditations: Lockdown Rose Blessings

Rev Tracy Bell

Tracy finds peace in wild places, amongst the daisies and dandy-lions.
She is also a Parish priest and school chaplain.

So, it is one of 'those' days. So much sadness and suffering. So little kindness and care. And that's to say nothing of the persons – each with their own stuff, sure – who just fall short, and do such damaged and damaging things. Sigh.

Today's blessing
is holding space...

for the unloved
and the unloving

for the damaged
and the damaging

for the peace makers
and the peace takers



for the hurting
for the hurters
for the healers

we hold space
gently

allowing our care
to sweeten the air

and
waiting, breathing
in shalom

Lord, graciously
hear us...

And let our cry
come unto Thee.



As someone who is literally in the dark – seems the wind brought all sorts of problems to the Burrah – I find myself contemplating with a kitty on my chest... There's this moment before the dark, and another before dawn breaks – an anticipation, a still... I've tried to capture it on film. But it's fleeting. And elusive... I guess the point is that you just have to be there and aware.

I've also felt them just before rain, when I can't see droplets but the earth starts to breathe oxygen...

Or when the wind has been howling, and there is a sudden still – before the birds and critters of the fields find their voices again...

Or that instant between ebb and flow on the shore – or the sucking in that happens before the wave crashes...

These moments are, I think, what spiritual writers mean by liminal space... A kind of in between, when rules and norms and expectations don't fly, and everything glimmers and glistens with this quality which we know but can't put words to...

And so you just have to BE – and be there.

So.

May your day glimmer and glisten
With moments that can't be captured.

May your heart be open to them
So that you can be fully "there".

May your heart be full, this night,
With the wonders and gorjusness
Of the extraordinary life you live
As well as this ordinary benediction.



Lament and Assurance

Rev Janet Trisk

Prayers: Diocese of Natal Gender Ministry⁴⁸

LITANY OF LAMENT:

Holy God, Maker of us all (*Lead*)

Have mercy on us. (*Response*)

Jesus Christ, Servant of the Poor

Have mercy on us.

Holy Spirit, Breath of Life

Have mercy on us.

When children are beaten and abused

Lord Jesus your body is broken.

When women are raped

Lord Jesus your body is broken.

When people are hungry

Lord Jesus your body is broken.

When people suffer and are in pain

Lord Jesus your body is broken.

When prisoners are tortured

Lord Jesus your body is broken.

⁴⁸ This prayer by Rev Janet Trisk of the Diocese of Natal was published by the Diocese of Natal Gender Ministry in November 2017: "Advent Resource Pack for Clergy and Lay Ministers: Responding to the 16 Days Campaign for No Violence against Women and Children, and World AIDS Day."

When lonely people cry

Lord Jesus you weep too.

When the earth and rivers and sky are polluted

Lord Jesus you weep.

When animals are mistreated and killed

Lord Jesus you weep.

When our hardness of heart keeps us from caring

Lord Jesus you are crucified.

When our fear keeps us from speaking against injustice

Lord Jesus you are crucified.

When our greed keeps others poor

Lord Jesus you hang naked on a cross.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

We bear the consequences for what we do
but we are not condemned.

Our hope is in God, who makes all things new.

Hear the good news, and believe it:

Our sins are forgiven

Thanks be to God.

SENDING PRAYER

May God go with us

in all that is gentle:

Christ go with us

in all that is brave

and the Spirit go with us

in all that is free.

Amen.

POST SCRIPT

Covid-19 breaks in! Being Covid-19

Positive: my story

Dr Nontando Hadebe

This book as described in the *Introduction* was birthed out of the concern by members of *The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians* about the impact of COVID-19 on women, particularly the rise in violence and lived experiences of suffering and death of women. An invitation was sent out and publicly advertised on social media, asking women to write about their experiences in the context of COVID-19. The reflections in this book are responses to this invitation. Their power stems from the honest unfiltered sharing of real experiences of trauma, violence, pain, and resilience. COVID-19 was also experienced by all the contributors in their personal and family lives. COVID-19 did not passively pass me by. It broke in and entered my body as well. Just as it entered into the bodies of millions around the world and thousands in South Africa, leading to many deaths, and hospitalization of still others, and just as it was also overcome by many who survived without hospitalization, it touched me too. Here is my story.

I received results from a COVID-19 test that I was positive. Before the test I thought I had a mild flu and so the positive result came as shock. I learnt that one can be asymptomatic or have mild symptoms that are not severe. Many people recover from COVID-19 but some do not. Mild symptoms could also develop and become severe. There was no straightforward formula to predict how the virus would run its course.

I went into fourteen days of isolation at home. On the first day of isolation, I was awake all night processing the reality that I was COVID-19 positive with a virus in

my body that has caused the deaths of millions of people around the world; worse still that I am a potential transmitter of this lethal virus. I was worried about my family, particularly my elderly father and others around me. It was a terrifying night. I sat with these thoughts in shock the whole night trying to process this experience and unexpected turn in my life. I did not know how the virus would develop in my body. Would I be hospitalized? Would I die? I turned to God in prayer holding nothing back, pouring out everything I was feeling and thinking: my confusion, questions, fears and disorientation until I felt as if there was nothing more to say or think or feel.

Finally, exhausted, I fell into a deep peaceful sleep. I woke up and found myself reflecting on situations in my life where I faced challenging moments with no way out and remembered how God came through for me in the most unexpected ways in those times. As I relived those moments, I knew that God was with me in the current crisis. As I continued to 'faith think' I reminded myself of the basic principles of faith, most important of which was that God did not promise me that I would be exempt from trials or difficult situations that are part and parcel of the mystery of life. I am in the world and therefore the experiences that affect others will affect me. Scripture attests to the difficulties, trials and hardships experienced by people of God in the Hebrew Bible and followers of Jesus in the New Testament. One of my favourite stories in Scripture that I learnt from Sunday School proved a rich source of inspiration: the story of the three Hebrew young men (Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego) who were thrown into the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:19ff), where they encountered the presence of God as the 'fourth person.' They came out of the fire unharmed 'not even a smell of fire came from them.' I knew then that grace would be given to me to live through the experience without being destroyed spiritually and mentally. Thankfully I did not develop severe symptoms. I was even more grateful that no other person was infected in our household.

I knew that the call to live out my faith remained the same whether I had COVID-19 or not and regardless of whether I was in isolation. The call to follow the path of Christ, to love, serve, give and be the salt and light of the world and much more, remained the same – unchanged. So, while taking care of my body – healthy diet, vitamins, steaming and keeping hydrated – there was the call to live out my faith. I re-dedicated my life to God's service through one of my favourite hymns by Frances Havergal: 'Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee.' Daily nourishment

for my spirit came through reading scripture and devotional readings; daily messages of prayers and inspiration from family and friends; listening to Radio Veritas (which is a special radio station that I am part of and present a weekly programme in) and other inspirational programmes on television and radio. I also kept up to date with news and developments related to COVID-19, particularly social impact on all aspects of society: education, employment, economy, and marginalized groups. The response to the call to service included prayer ministry, sharing my experiences with others and thinking creatively about social responses. I invited family members and friends to send prayer requests. I prayed for front line responders: health workers, scientists, priests and religious leaders from all faiths. I reflected on responses to the impact of COVID-19 on women and marginalized groups.

Isolation does not cut one from society or the lives of others. I experienced traumatic moments when a friend died of COVID-19 during my isolation – it was a necessary reminder that this virus kills and it strengthened my commitment to be in prayer for those who have lost loved ones. Another friend was hospitalized which was a reminder to continue praying for patients in hospital and health care workers. There was also a social dimension to the pandemic. COVID-19 affected everyone, but in unequal ways, as was evident in inequality in health care, education, housing and lack of basic services that affect the poor and vulnerable populations. Increased levels of violence against women and children exposed the life-threatening nature of entrenched patriarchy in our society.

In summary, my experience is in continuity with all the contributions in the book. Our shared trauma allows us as contributors of this book to speak of all our experiences during this time of COVID-19. COVID-19 has had profound effects on each one of us, whether it has infected our bodies, caused emotional suffering and loss, increased our vulnerability to abuse, or plunged us into economic uncertainty or destitution. All voices need to be heard so that the fullness of experiences by women can be amplified!

This book captures the journey of “walking through the shadows of death” during the COVID-19 pandemic. The stories reflect women’s vulnerabilities, uncertainty, and shifting realities at a time when they are expected to hold everything together. Through these stories, faith, hope, and solidarity shine bright as they sail through the storm. What an inspiring way to capture this once in a lifetime experience.

– **Zanele Makombe, Programme Advisor, Gender and SRHR**

The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologian SA has produced this new volume of work in which African women’s voices speak with passion and clarity. Personal reflections of pain and triumph and critical theological thinking together with the rich imagery of poetry, bear testimony to the depth and variety of the Circle’s engagement with life in present difficult times.

– **Denise M. Ackermann**

COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the other pandemic – the unabating high levels of gender-based violence. At UN Women, we have identified one way to help end violence against women is to listen to and believe survivors as a first step to breaking the silence.

This is what the Circle of Concerned African Women theologians has done through this incredible book, which has ably and vividly brought to life women’s realities in a unique and accessible way. It provides unparalleled insights into what women have been going through during the COVID-19 pandemic; yet it is also filled with hope.

Most commendable is that the book reflects on the intersectional challenges faced by women, while courageously taking on some policy debates on issues such as the alcohol ban and challenges in the church in addressing GBV.

Solidarity matters and this is what this book provides. A must read for everyone!

– **Ms Anne Githuku-Shongwe, UN Women Representative, South Africa Multi-Country Office**