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INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the dynamics of the relationship between the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) and what shall be referred to as 'crisis' ecumenical groups in Zimbabwe. Crisis ecumenical groups are defined as those groups that seek to rally Christians across doctrinal divides in pursuit of broader socio-economic and political objectives in the context of a crisis-ridden Zimbabwe. The chapter notes that while the ZCC was not a political body, its formation was prompted by the desire to address the political crises that had befallen Zimbabwe against a non-responsive Southern Rhodesian Christian Council during the colonial era in Rhodesia. Addressing social justice became a key task of the ZCC since its formation. On that basis, this chapter seeks to investigate the extent to which the ZCC has lived up to that responsibility. It takes a sociological approach in examining how religious structures function and are positioned to address crises within given contexts and seeks to examine the relevance of ecumenism during times of crises. From that vantage point, it

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examines how the ZCC as an institution has operated over time and how its structures have been enabling it in responding to the socio-economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe. The chapter argues and concludes that the ZCC as an ecumenical body has not been spared the limitations of ecumenical institutions, especially when faced with socio-economic and political crises. Consequently, crisis ecumenical groups emerged to fill the gap to facilitate transformation. The limitations of the ZCC and the consequent emergence of crisis ecumenical groups is, however, not meant to argue that ecumenism should be discarded. The emergence of crisis groups which conglomerate ecumenically affirms its [ecumenism] strategic position. But the ecumenical agencies can be more effective if they can change and reform, to adopt new strategies and tactics relevant to the needs of the times.

Formation of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Its Political Connotations

The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) was founded in 1964 with the following objectives: 'increasing mutual understanding and to develop more effective ecumenical witness and action on local, national and international level; to foster close unity through joint action and service, and by ecumenical studies in faith and order, life and work, to encourage reunion of the denominations, to stimulate and facilitate development of evangelistic and sustainable development programmes' (Verstraelen 1998: 5; Hallencreutz 1988: 56). The churches belong to the Protestant tradition, with some being African Independent Churches. The ZCC has specialised units such as Justice, Peace, and Reconciliation, Church and Development, Leadership Development and Ecumenical University Chaplaincy (ibid.). While the formation of the Christian Council of Rhodesia (CCR), which subsequently became the ZCC, was defined in religious and ecumenical terms, it had political connotations as well. It was formed due to a disagreement between black and white leaders in the former Southern Rhodesia Christian Council (SRCC). Some white church leaders felt it was not the duty of the church to speak against government on political matters. The Council emerged as largely an African-inspired movement to create a forum where Church leaders from different denominations could tackle matters of mutual concern in an increasingly tense political situation. Its significant activities then include condemnation of

the Unilateral Declaration of Independence and opposition to the racist Land Tenure Act of 1970 (Ruzivo 2008: 4–5; Hallencreutz 1988: 60). As this chapter shows, it seems that the longer the ZCC has lived, the more it has lost its political memories and as a result has become less inclined to, less able to change and reform, to adopt new strategies and tactics, and hence the emergence of new ecumenical groups. To understand how effective the ZCC has been structurally, it is illuminating to outline the general structure of religious organisations and how that influences their effectiveness in the public sphere.

Religious Structures

The institutional structure of religion and how these structures function influences its role in the public sphere (Marty and Moore 2000: 73–127). Institutional structure refers to the characterisation of religious groups as ecumenical agencies, denominations, congregations, special interest groups and networks. In this chapter, I will focus on ecumenical agencies, special interest groups and networks because they represent the structures under discussion, namely, the ZCC and the 'crises' ecumenical groups. The hypothesis is that flexible structures have a greater transformative potential to play a prophetic role and facilitate social change in times of crisis. The majority of official churches are often restrained by their own internal bureaucracies. They are also constrained by cosier relationships with state power or with the economically and politically powerful elites; hence 'unofficial' interventions are more likely to contribute to dealing with political crises (see Tarusarira and Ganiel 2012).

Ecumenical agencies are inspired by the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement is the quest of Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican and most Protestant churches for reconciliation and restoration of their visible unity in faith, sacramental life and witness in the world, against a backdrop of divided churches. It is traceable to the early decades of the twentieth century. The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 opened the eyes of many to the tragedy of disunity and competition among churches. Characteristic of the ecumenical movement and important for the argument of this chapter is that the ecumenical movement has always been dominated by the representatives who happen to be the leaders of the churches represented. By the fourth century the word *oikoumene* (the inhabited world) from which the word ecumenical is derived referred to Ecumenical Councils, composed of bishops and other

theologians who gathered in particular cities and at certain times to address issues of Christian faith that needed attention to enhance the unity of the Christians. This understanding has persisted and in recent times the word refers to those meetings and councils bringing together the representatives of various Christian churches. Ecumenism should not be confused with interdenominational or interconfessional, which have normally been used to describe relationships among Protestants (Fitzgerald 2004: 2–4). Ecumenical agencies are often the preserve of high-ranking officials and theologians. They are not readily accessible to the grassroots people (Ganiel 2008: 26). They normally speak through pastoral statements couched in high intellectual and theological language which is divorced from and unintelligible to the grassroots ordinary people. While carrying authority, 'their pronouncements may be quite remote in sentiment and theology from what one finds in local churches and its actual authority to effect change is limited' (Marty and Moore 2000: 78).

In relation to political conflict and ecumenism, the Irish School of Ecumenics has developed 'Ecumenics' as a field of study. It argues that this is about more than Christian unity, but a multidisciplinary field of study concerned with dialogue, peace and reconciliation. It has three strands: intra-Christian (inter-denominational), inter-religious and international peace and reconciliation. David Ford (2008: 18) states that the concept of 'ecumenics' is distinct in that it 'combines the inter-church, the inter-faith and the tasks of reconciliation and peacemaking in the whole of society … Since the term in origin refers to the whole inhabited world, there is no philological reason to limit it to Christians.' This vantage point allows for the deployment of the sociological features of ecumenism beyond the quest for unity strictly between Catholics and Protestants which is often the tendency to include intra-church and interdenominational/interconfessional unity. This approach is useful in examining the extent to which interdenominational or interconfessional unity or lack of it has impacted on churches' response to the Zimbabwean crisis, without us being entangled in terminological intricacies.

Religious special interest groups and networks are established to address particular issues. They publicise their work in the public sphere. They draw supporters from various denominations, and claim to speak on their behalf. This chapter argues that they are more responsive to issues on the ground than ecumenical groups and denominations. They are prophetic by design, dynamic and changing, constantly adjusting their message and methods to be more effective. They are fluid and marked by pooling of

resources, personnel and ideas. By virtue of this, they have a better chance to be transformative and prophetic. This is further strengthened by their willingness to work with secular civil society organisations (Ganiel 2008: 28), because they have specific goals to accomplish, and are not focused on doctrines.

The Zimbabwe Council of Churches and the Limitations of Ecumenism

The ecumenical movement believes that the divisions of churches are a scandal and impediment to the implementation of the Christian message. They have contributed to divisions among peoples and nations. Hence the search for the unity of Christians is not simply for mutual toleration of differences or voluntary cooperation. Rather, it is a sign of hope in contexts of conflict, divisions, polarisation and crises such as post-colonial Zimbabwe, especially in the last two decades. Hence 'for the churches to come divided to a broken world is to undermine their credibility when they claim to have ministry of universal unity and reconciliation' (Fitzgerald 2004: 5–7). Unfortunately, the churches in Zimbabwe seem to have lived up to the old and cynical remark that 'the churches will say and do anything about unity except unite'.

The ZCC has been characterised by divisions and polarisation, undue hierarchy, bureaucracy, co-option and elitism whose attendant challenge is alienation of the lay and ordinary people. This in part is traceable to the training institutions of the leadership such as the United Theological College which are not spared the ills of ethnicity, regionalism, denominationalism and historical backgrounds (Zwana 2008: 292; Matikiti 2009: 11). This makes the churches susceptible to co-option, silence and non-responsive to the crisis in Zimbabwe. These limitations have also compromised the key characteristics of ecumenics which are vital in dealing with crises, namely, dialogue, peace and reconciliation. In 1980, after being convinced of the role it had played during the liberation struggle, the ZCC left the realm of politics to the politicians and concentrated on supplementing government programmes. This proved a disastrous error of judgement which drew the churches close to the state, incapacitating them to be prophetic and speak truth to power. The ZCC, for instance, was conspicuous by its silence during the Gukurahundi period in the early 1980s when the government tried to deal with the so-called dissident

problem in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces resulting in the death of an estimated 20,000 people.

In post-colonial times, the state constantly reminded churches, unions and organisations of the importance of inclusion as the route to peace and prosperity. This strategy got organisations such as the ZCC to accept the benefits of inclusion and the cosy relationship with the state. When the Private Voluntary Organizations Act (PVO Act), for instance, was introduced to monitor and control activities of NGOs, the then ZCC Secretary General saw no reason to resist the move. He said, 'I am not really very worried about it … the basic welfare operations will remain the same … so I am not going to spend my time and energy trying to look at the dots and full stops … what difference does it make?' (Dorman 2003: 847; see Chitando 2005: 220–239).

When the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) was formed in 1997, under the auspices of the ZCC, discussing the constitution was viewed as an apolitical way of discussing politics. There was debate among the stakeholders on whether to keep the NCA under the ZCC or let it be a free-standing body. Some felt keeping it under the ZCC gave it a sacred canopy, thereby protecting it from attack by the government. As Dorman (2002: 14) records, 'ZCC was willing to cooperate only as long as NCA was seen to be providing merely civic education.' The ZCC has always watched its political intervention, preferring to enjoy the benefits of inclusion by the state rather than confrontation. It opted out of a march that was organised by the NCA against the unbudgeted involvement of the Zimbabwean army in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The withdrawal by the ZCC lifted the sacred canopy from the NCA, gave the police the opportunity to declare the march cancelled and an excuse to attack the marchers. This marked the end of the marriage between the NCA and the ZCC. The leadership of ZCC claimed that 'as churches we had to take issues that don't raise too much dust or rock the boat too much, but the boat was rocking'. The decision by the ZCC to abandon the NCA was taken at the highest level of the churches with no consultation with representatives of church members and staff (Dorman 2002: 14).

As the constitutional debate proceeded, the government responded by setting up its own Constitutional Commission (CC). The ZCC key church men joined the government-sponsored CC. The Anglican Bishop of Harare was Deputy Chair of the CC. He did not allow the NCA to hold its meetings on his premises (ibid.: 16). Bakare (2013: 11–12) calls pro-government groups 'latter day saints', adapting a term normally reserved

for the Mormons. He says the term in lower cases depicts those religious groups that were on the side of the Rhodesians during the liberation war but have now emerged as functionaries of the political elites. The Salvation Army is a case in point. During the liberation war it disapproved of the support given to the liberation movement by the ZCC and the World Council of Churches, but today it is parading in front of the politicians. Some mainline church leaders such as the deposed Anglican Archbishop Nolbert Kunonga (Gunda 2008: 299–318) buttressed nationalist rhetoric at state functions. Bakare (2013: 28) is of the opinion that the ZCC today has gone into hiding like Jonah of the Old Testament and has abandoned its legacy, such as the support for liberation movements during the liberation struggle.

A divided and weak body is susceptible to the politics of inclusion and exclusion and politics of coalition building (Dorman 2003: 46). A united body would minimise fears of isolation and victimisation and hinder politicians from taking advantage of the divisions to further their agendas (Chitando and Manyonganise 2011: 107). Divisions and ambivalent positions in the churches weakened the churches' response to the crises. Makwasha (2011: 236) lamented the divisions saying 'because of the lack of strong ecumenical cooperation, the ZCC, the Evangelical Alliance and other church bodies have not been really influential in the formulation of government policy'. The state deployed a divide and rule, inclusion and exclusion approach, which saw it selecting some clergy members to speak on behalf of the church. Wermter (2003: 71) articulates the effect of inter-church division as follows:

> A deplorable lack of unity between Christian churches is exploited by the government and its media: the latter never seem to have a problem finding some pastor presented as 'speaking for the church' who will support government positions and denounce truly Christian voices as being 'spiritually misguided'.

A glaring example of internal church division has been demonstrated by the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe. The Anglican church led by Nolbert Kunonga in Harare and Elson Jakazi in the Manicaland diocese withdrew from the Church of the Province of Central Africa (CPCA), which is part of the worldwide Anglican communion world union, on allegations that the latter promoted homosexuality. This line of argument dovetailed with Mugabe's position on homosexuality (Gunda 2008, 2010). The Anglican

sides led by Kunonga and Jakazi appealed to the state which vigorously supported them using state apparatus such as the courts and riot police. The year 2008 saw the persecution of the members of CPCA Harare and Mutare dioceses at the hands of the police as they were chased out of their church buildings. This conflict was fanned by political interests, but there was no coordinated support by other churches. This lasted for five years. The saga ended when the High Court eventually in May 2010 ruled in favour of the CPCA. This ruling was upheld by the Supreme Court in February 2013 following an appeal by the Jakazi faction.

Admittedly, the mainline churches have done something with regard to the Zimbabwe crises. They participated in the constitutional process of 1999, and have issued fearless pastoral statements, which have irked political elites (Chitando and Manyonganise 2011: 83–86; Ruzivo 2008: 4–14). The ZCC issued a statement following the formation of the inclusive government bemoaning the manipulation and closure of democratic space and selective application of the law. Together with the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ) and the Heads of Christian Denominations (HOCD), the ZCC also issued a statement calling the nation to conscience in 2005 and asking for people's freedoms to be observed (Chitando and Manyonganise 2011: 85). Despite these efforts, as Dube (2006: 46) argues, the bodies that churn out the statements are not grassroots based. No matter how polished the statements, they cannot dissuade people from aligning themselves with perpetrators of violence. They are far removed from the people with their offices located in inaccessible big cities. Chitando (2005: 143) questioned the efficacy of pastoral letters saying, 'How much of pastoral letters trickle through to the common people in the work place, families and even the local Christian communities?' Matikiti (2012: 303) challenges this approach as alienated from and alienating for ordinary Christians.

CRISIS ECUMENICAL GROUPS AND POLITICAL CRISES IN ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe has been engulfed in crisis since independence in 1980, but more conspicuously over the last two decades. There have been economic, political and social crises that have plunged the country into poverty and instability, threatening the human security of its citizens. There is an extensive catalogue of examples of the crisis to which a united church

voice had been expected to respond: *Gukurahundi* ('the wind that blows away the chaff'), the mass killing of an estimated 20,000 people in the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces (Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace 2008), Operation Restore Order/*Murambatsvina* ('clean the filth'), when allegedly illegal houses and market stalls in urban areas were demolished by the government, political violence around election periods since 1980 to the present and Operation *Wavhotera papi* ('for whom did you vote'), through which those accused of having voted 'wrongly' received retribution from political parties. This is to mention just a few.

The ecumenical bodies, including the ZCC, failed to effectively implement the principles of ecumenism and ecumenics, namely, unity, dialogue, peace and reconciliation, necessary to respond to the Zimbabwean crises. The failures of institutional churches resulted in new 'extra-institutional' initiatives (Ganiel 2013) or crises ecumenical groups, which emphasise flexible accessible structures as well as an ecumenical and grassroots approach to responding to the crisis. Examples of such crisis ecumenical groups in Zimbabwe include the Zimbabwe Christian Alliance (ZCA) and Churches in Manicaland (CiM), on which I conducted research in 2012–2013. These groups represent a pattern of religious groups observable in Zimbabwe especially from the year 2000 when the political instability increased. They indicate the general operations that are present in numerous similar organisations in the country.

The ZCA describes itself as a Christian faith-based organisation having its foundation in Biblical principles. Its mission is to bring about social transformation in Zimbabwe through prophetic action. An official of the ZCA spelt out its formation as follows: 'It is a network of faith based groups that were already involved in peace and justice work, but it also targeted Christian leaders that have a calling in issues of justice.' CiM is an 'ecumenical' gathering of members from Christian denominations and organisations in the province of Manicaland. It was formed in 2000, with the aim to 'seek guidance of the Holy Spirit in taking action to promote tolerance in society, to give direction to public decision-makers and to enable our people to live Gospel values and principles' (Churches in Manicaland 2006). It describes itself as 'strictly non-partisan in regard to party politics and are available to all for counselling, pastoral care and the building of a Christian vision for [...] society' (ibid.).

The ZCA is consciously an ecumenical framework that is motivated by an understanding of faith that transcends doctrinal specifications. Members are free to get back to their denominations. It does not define itself as a church; hence it does not report any doctrinal problems. While it

emphasises working with Christians, it does not exclude non-Christians. A respondent said the following:

> When we engage in action, we work with non-church organizations like the prayer meeting that we organised on the 11 of March 2007 when leaders of political parties and civil society were thoroughly beaten up. We organised that with civil society organizations, not necessarily Christian, and this is where we add value. We do not work in isolation. We believe the struggle for democracy should not be compartmentalised, but we must make an effort to reach out to other organizations that are not necessarily church organizations but that we share a vision with. So we are always open to share platforms with non-Christians.

Through the preceding conception of membership, the ZCA incorporates traditional methods of peace building, conflict resolution and reconciliation. A member argued: 'Even though we are a Christian organization, we don't nevertheless limit ourselves to Christian ways of handling trauma and conflict. There are traditional means that are not contrary to Christian practice, and we allow people to use them, there is no problem.' This is the entry point for engaging traditional leaders who are custodians of traditional culture and entrusted by the community with the responsibility to ensure community cohesion.

Critical in the membership of the ZCA and the CiM are grassroots people and the laity. This is against the background of an ecclesiology that privileges ordained men and a few women in Zimbabwe (Togarasei and Chitando 2011: 224). It has what it refers to as 'hubs'. These are branches or chapters of ZCA. They are made up of grassroots small groups of people who come together, because they identify with the ZCA and discuss issues to do with faith and action within their locality, but also looking at demands at the national level, and how Christians can respond to those demands. To this effect a ZCA member said, 'By and large the church in Zimbabwe has been clergy oriented […] so we need a well-equipped laity. So that was also bought in, the laity became a critical component.' On 26 January 2007 the ZCA members were arrested at the launch of a chapter of the organisation in Kadoma as part of a nationwide drive to establish Christian leaders' networks in the country's ten provinces. More than 500 church leaders and Christian lay people were in attendance. The aim of establishing these networks is to create local Christian Alliance chapters as platforms to equip Christian leaders on church-based advocacy and peace building (Zimbabwe Network, 26 Jan 2007).

The CiM is open to everyone who subscribes to its mission and vision and is ready to contribute to the realisation of the objectives. The organisation was formed by a charismatic and prophetic clergy with the aim to serve the grassroots people. In an email communication a founding member of the CiM wrote: 'CiM was initiated by a few individuals who were more in leadership positions in their churches […]. But they were trying to serve the grassroots who were affected by the threatening social, economic and political disintegration.' In a demonstration of its grassroots and practical approach, the CiM states that its Compendium of Christian Social Teaching '*The Truth Will Make You Free*' (2006: v) is 'intended that Christians, and people of good will, will reflect on these teachings either as individuals, or preferably in small groups where individual sharing enriches group members'. Ordinary members in the CiM participate in formulating statements and publications, and everybody who is present is allowed to make a contribution. Every member is invited to participate at the level he or she is comfortable with as long as it is in line with the objectives of the organisation. An example is given of a pastor who wanted to participate but sometimes felt issues got too political. He was asked to be in charge of the prayer life of the organisation since that is what he was comfortable with. As with the ZCA, there is no register of membership. It is just a platform.

Participation in the CiM goes beyond doctrinal boundaries to being ecumenical. A respondent answered that there is no denominational theology involved. He said:

> There is nothing to do with doctrinal theology there. There is a simple theology of Jesus Christ, that you do to others as you would want them to do unto you. Whether you are Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, it applies.

This is because there is a common challenge, and therefore the members spent their time and energy interrogating the problem that affects everyone. 'When violence does erupt, it has nothing to do with religious affiliation. It affects people just as people. It does not consider the denomination from which one comes. Therefore, we have not had any problems,' asserted a member of CiM. However, facing hard political issues has not been easy for all religious groups. This results in irregular participation. A leading member of the CiM lamented that being a forum comes with mobilisation challenges. There is no obligation to participate. Neither are there sanctions or incentives for participation. He cites that one Pentecostal church has withdrawn. At the beginning it was interested, but withdrew when the CiM began to deal with hard political issues. Zald

(1982: 322) observes that social movements are plagued with the free-rider problem. Its goods are collective. A success such as changes in law benefits everyone; hence there is no push to participate. This is a problem for the CiM, as it is for the ZCA.

The importance of grassroots people for the CiM is against an observation that the mainline churches have not paid adequate attention to the ordinary people. This is despite the fact that the laity constitutes the bigger part of the Christian community and is the most vulnerable and hence forms the majority of victims of political violence. That is why the use of the term church by the CiM does not mean buildings or institutions but those people who would not be able to speak at high platforms (Mkaronda 2003: 30).

Conclusion

In principle, ecumenism stands strategically positioned to facilitate how effective ecumenical agencies can be in times of crises. The foundation of the ZCC as an ecumenical group and the objectives it set out for itself as well as the emergence of groups that adopt an ecumenical character prove the point and demonstrate that when ecumenical groups fail to facilitate change, it is not ecumenism that is the problem. Rather, it is the resistance to change and reform to adopt new strategies which adequately respond to the needs of the times. Against a crises-ridden Zimbabwe, the chapter observed that institutionalisation can suppress the transformative potential of ecumenism. While it is necessary for the continuity of initiatives and maintenance of founding principles, if not kept in check it can be a hindrance to the dynamism and creativity of the agencies as well as its members who may feel compelled to start new initiatives. The institutional structure of ecumenical agencies is susceptible to domination by the leadership at the expense of the ordinary people, corruption of leadership not to act when it should as well as the comfort with power and authority resulting in being inflexible. These challenges account for the emergence of crises ecumenical groups.

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