

Let My People Breathe: Black Lives Matter and the Church in Africa

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Abstract

The world was recently reminded of centuries-old racial discriminations and inequalities through the brutal murder of George Floyd in Minnesota in the United States. In the light of the events that ensued his senseless killing, this article looks at and reflects on the realities of discrimination in Africa. It stresses that the perpetrators of discrimination against black people are not only people of other races but also fellow black people. It also points out that

the church has been a perpetrator of discrimination through some of its actions and its alliance with structures and institutions that undermine black lives in Africa. It bemoans a church whose prophetic voice is increasingly silent or weak as Africa sees the killing of many Black lives by Black people themselves. This article aims to call the church to recover its prophetic mandate in society by tangibly demonstrating that black lives matter. It uses the interpretive framework of John 13:35 to point out the realities of lack of love in society such as the marginalisation of the youth, women, persons living with disabilities, homosexuals, poverty, migration and the lack of access to land. It attributes this lack of love to self-hatred. It concludes that the African church is called to be known in all seasons by the way it loves and implements the philosophy of ubuntu which encourages solidarity. The African church, therefore, needs to demonstrate through its actions that it is a leading voice in showing that black lives matter.

Introduction

The world was recently reminded of centuries-old racial discriminations and inequalities through the brutal murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in the United States. His killing at the hands of four police officers led to global protests that revealed the existing wounds of black people's marginalisation around the world. These protests asked for this marginalisation to stop because all human beings were created with equal right and worth. This unfair treatment has, whether implicit and explicit, made it apparent that black lives do not matter. The guilty parties have not only been people of other races but also black people themselves. The protests were started by the #BlackLivesMatter movement—a movement that was founded in 2013 following the acquittal of white police officers who were involved in the brutal killing of an African American man. Its mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on black communities. It also aims to create space for black imagination and innovation so that joy can become a palpable reality and the quality of life of black people can be improved. The movement calls for black lives of different back-

ground, origin and nationalities to be liberated from the current oppressions and discriminations they face.¹

Racial discrimination is something that black people are familiar with around the world. Therefore, anger, sadness, frustration, and fatigue are not episodic responses, but chronic conditions caused by different events of discrimination in their lives.² This is why what happened in the United States resonated with most black people from all over the world. In South Africa, the government urged its citizens to “support the movement, and South Africa and other countries across the globe joined in solidarity with the struggle for social justice.”³ While this move is applaudable, it is also problematic in the African context. It comes out like a finger pointing effort and hypocritical from African governments that are known for undermining Black lives. The South African Council of Churches responded to the president’s call for the support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement by holding a silent protest on 7 June, 2020. It used that opportunity to remember that almost two months before their protest, there was a Black South African, Collins Khosa, who was also a casualty of law enforcement officers’ brutality. This is a reactive action by an institution which is guilty of undermining black lives through some of its actions. It is also guilty of being silent or an ally of many African governments with a reputation of undermining black people. The protests that followed the killing of George Floyd made this author—as a Christian—to wonder if black lives matter to the African church. It is a reflection of how black lives matter to the African church. The latter continues to grow numerically, “but so too grow the realities of poverty, tribalism, corruption, violence, and civil wars”⁴ which, in my estimation, are a knee on many Africans’ neck. The African church is an institution that has participated in atrocities such as the “political imagination of Tutsi and Hutu as distinct races or tribes,” which culminated in hatred and the killing of Black lives in Rwanda and other countries on many occasions.⁵ These facts challenge a re-imagination of the African church as an institution that promotes black lives. In this article, I use John 13:35 as a framework to reflect on the role of the African church in affirming black lives. This passage

equates followers of Jesus to lovers of others. These followers could help catalyse “meaningful reconciliation built on the bedrock of eliminating all forms of structural [discrimination].”⁶ Discrimination has meant that many black people *cannot breathe* in their local communities, their countries and local churches.

The Framework of John 13:35

This passage captures the legacy the church is supposed to be known for. In it, Jesus challenges his disciples to strive to be known by the way they love one another. Some scholars argue that it is meant to be an inward-focused love among believers. Tertullian is said to have used these words to encourage Christians: “See how they love one another, the pagans.”⁷ The gospel of John is generally interpreted as focusing on building up the community of disciples around Jesus. However, Elizabeth Johnson points out John 3:16 which talks about God’s love for the whole world.⁸ That passage clarifies the mandate of the church to be a tangible sign of love to the whole world, not only its inner circle.

This mandate can be connected to an existing philosophy which encourages Africans to live in solidarity with one another as an expression of love. This philosophy is called *ubuntu*. It prioritises “communal interests above individual’s.”⁹ It promotes “mutual respect, decency, civility and good manners.”¹⁰ It frowns upon the ill-treatment of fellow human beings or the neglect of their human rights. It embraces the enhancement of “the communality of our human race and the advancement of truth, reconciliation and unity.”¹¹ The African church can be inspired by both John 13:35 and the philosophy of *ubuntu* in order to be a role model in testifying through its actions that black lives matter. This role could be critical in the African context that has a track record of undermining Black lives.

A Context That Undermines Black Lives

History reminds us that slavery and colonialism undermined black lives. That same history reminds us that some fellow Africans were lured by the things slave traders and colonisers offered them and sacrificed the lives of their fellow Africans. Mongo Beti points out that Africa is known for its countless “tribal identities”¹² which, often times, prevail because they undermine the lives of others. This made Wole Soyinka remark that Africans are “destructive” of life like all other human beings.¹³ This is evidenced by the many acts of violence the continent is suffering. Such acts do not allow the majority of Africans to breathe. Magezi Baloyi calls these acts of Africans undermining the lives of their fellows as self-hatred. Even nowadays, “black-on-black violence typifies Africa,” says Baloyi.¹⁴ It is expressed “in different forms such as “mob justice, xenophobia, homophobia, black undermining and even harassing other black persons.”¹⁵ This self-hatred negatively impacts the youth, promotes poverty, exposes the poor calibre of our leadership, marginalises others, has pushed many people to migrate and exposes other problems such as the lack of access to land.

The Youth

Nearly 1 in 3 Africans are between the ages of 10 and 24, and approximately 60% of Africa’s total population is below the age of 35.¹⁶ According to the United Nations Population Fund (2019), “youth are more than 1.8 billion in the world and nearly half of this number is in sub-Saharan Africa.”¹⁷ Yet, our current African societies seem to heavily rely on the knowledge and the wisdom of the adult community (age group from 35 and above) and marginalise the youth for its lack of experience. Local churches in poor communities such as where this author lives seem to be a perfect sample of this systemic marginalisation of the youth. The majority of church leaders across denominations are adults. The youth is noticeably leaving local churches because they *cannot breathe* in them. The middle age and

senior members of the church seem to constantly have their knee on the neck of the youth telling them that they have no adequate experience to participate in leading. Youth unemployment is also very high on the continent. Ziyanda Stuurman stresses that “youth unemployment figures are an important indicator of the status of any economy and society.”¹⁸ Unemployment is a reality of the distressed; it affects a person’s self-esteem and self-confidence. According to the World Bank, the youth account for more than 60% of unemployment. This leads to youth poverty, which also does not allow people to breathe.

Poverty

According to the United Nations, more than 700 million people live in extreme poverty around the world. The majority of them are in sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁹ In the context of South Africa where the population is multi-racial, “poverty” affects black people the most.²⁰ In March 2018, the World Bank in partnership with Statistics South Africa released a report stating that “South Africa is the most unequal country in the world, on every scale and measure in modern economics.”²¹ Mostly black people are at the receiving hand of this inequality. The poverty and inequality are enabled by fellow Africans who are leaders in their respective countries.

Failing Leaders

Baloyi stresses that negative forms of leadership that characterise Africa have suffocated many ordinary people and many others have succumbed to them.²² Many of them have to tame ethnocentrism and nepotism.²³ It was ironic to hear the head of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat condemn discriminatory practices against black people in the United States. This is the head of an institution that did nothing to perpetrators of genocides in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan. The African Union also never holds African heads of state accountable for killing many of their own citizens.²⁴ This is an institution that has been communi-

cating that black lives don't matter because it gives the benefit of a doubt to heads of states who are known for undermining the lives of their fellow citizens. Failing leadership is also seen at the local church level. In the context the author lives in, church leadership has become a family business. This nepotism disempowers other church members and undermines their ability to participate in expanding "the impact of the church beyond the borders of its walls."²⁵ We also see failing leadership in local communities where many black people are marginalised by their fellows.

Marginalisation

In some communities, the elderly, especially women as marginalised as witches. Many of them have lost their lives because they were accused of witchcraft. Friday Eboiyehi points that "the persecution of elderly women suspected to be witches is ... widespread" and many of them have been murdered by their neighbours.²⁶ Such actions should be understood as part of the general marginalisation of women in African societies. Mensah Adinkrah describes this brutal killing of elderly women as "a form of gender discrimination."²⁷ The latter is also a normalised reality in the African church. For instance, many denominations restrict women participation in leadership. Some do not allow women to be ordained as ministers while others do not allow women to go to church when they are menstruating because they are unclean, among many other things. Gender-based discrimination sometimes translates into gender-based violence. In South Africa, for instance, discrimination against women overwhelms media headlines regularly.²⁸ It has reached crisis levels. The government acknowledges the crisis and has been mobilising the general population to collaborate with it in order to curb the crisis. Many women have been killed, raped or physically injured. And in most cases, the perpetrators are known to the victims.

People living with albinism and disabilities are also marginalised in many African communities. For people living with albinism, for instance, their "skin colour leads to negative social constructions

amongst Africans, including beliefs that they are evil, cannibals or cursed.”²⁹ In countries such as Namibia, people living with albinism have to hide for fear of being killed for their body parts to be used in traditional medicine rituals.³⁰ In East Africa, especially in Tanzania, traditional healers think that people with albinism are immortal and that their genitals bring wealth.³¹ In South Africa, many people think that they are a “curse.”³²

In many African communities, the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) community is also marginalised and many of them have been killed by their fellows. Anti-LGBT rhetoric is the norm in many countries across Africa. The former president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, once said, “Homosexuals are worse than pigs and dogs.”³³ Some African countries such as Uganda and Zimbabwe have laws that have declared LGBT relationships illegal. Many black lives have been lost as a result of these laws. Even in countries like South Africa where it is legal to be a LGBT, many people still see it as evil and kill known LGBT, especially women. Some church denominations are also vocal about the evil nature of LGBT and they do not want to be associated with someone from the LGBT community. Many people from this community have migrated outside of local churches like many other fellow Africans who migrate because they can’t breathe in their homes, be it a local church, a local community or their country of origin.

Migration

The United Nations (2020) estimates that “3.4% of the world inhabitants are migrants. This percentage is on the increase annually.”³⁴ The migration of massive numbers of Africans to the West, East and South Africa is increasingly becoming problematic. Migrants face numerous hostilities from their hosts; from political leaders to local communities. The church sometimes gets to play the role of a servant leader in welcoming and caring for vulnerable migrants. However, in South Africa, sometimes both the church and migrants are rejected by local community members who see immigra-

tion as a liability. Many of these migrants would have loved to remain in their places of origin if they could breathe there.³⁵ Their leaders who are Black like them do not allow them to breathe the shared air God provided for them. They are known for being greedy and reign over their fellows through terror and tyranny. They have dispossessed their fellow citizens of their collective wealth and treasure such as land.

Lack of Access To Land

The lack of access to land is still a painful reality for many Africans. Many of them have been killed for trying to have access to the land of their ancestors. The colonial history of Africa created a problem of access to land that indigenous Africans are still at pains with. Maathai states that “across much of Africa, land ownership and distribution remain volatile issues.”³⁶ The colonisers brought the concept of the title deed that has been an alien concept for many Africans. This is because land “is tightly connected to life as a whole ... [it] is seen as a natural endowment that can neither be bought nor sold. Its tenure is based...on use and access. Every community member has common rights to the land because it is a communal good.”³⁷ Because land is viewed as a birthright for all, “all members of the community are expected to share its resources.”³⁸

The Consequences of Self-Hatred

All the above-mentioned factors demonstrate some of the ways black lives do not matter to many Africans as well. They form a paradox both to the love admonition of John 13:35 and the solidarity which *ubuntu* philosophy preaches. Frantz Fanon wrote, “Negro symbolizes sin because one catches oneself hating the Negro.”³⁹ Malcolm X concurs with this sad reality through these questions: “Who taught you to hate yourself, from the top of your head to the soles of your feet? Who taught you to hate your own kind? Who taught you to hate the race you belong to – so much so

that you don't want to be around each other?"⁴⁰ These questions point out the many ethnic, tribal or inter-country conflicts we regularly see in Africa. In many African contexts, it seems like distinctiveness has always been a reason for *othering* fellow human beings. The author is of the view that distinctiveness is an accident of history. Yet, in the day-to-day lives, it is used to justify hatred for a certain family, tribe, clan, and nationality amongst Africans. It is used to negate the value of *ubuntu* and the human rights of fellow creatures. It is used to maintain a status quo in the faces of power in many African countries. Few faces have been postured as the messiahs of their fellow citizens. However, reality shows us that they are self-centred and serve their own interests at the expenses of the majority of their fellow citizens. In South Africa, for instance, it can be said that the president of the country prioritises the governing party's interest over the country's. President Cyril Ramaphosa has once said that he would rather be seen as a weak president than split the governing party, the African National Congress (ANC).⁴¹ According to him, his primary mission is to unite the ANC which currently suffers factionalism. His predecessor also shared this same sentiment. However, in their oath of office, the presidents of South Africa commit to protect and promote the rights of all citizens above anything else.

There has been many cases of corruption from the South African governing party's members that have gone unpunished for the sake of its unity. The preservation of this unity practically means that many black lives continue to be undermined by the people who supposedly liberated them. This is why the majority of South Africans still wonder why the face of poverty remains black when the government of the day is predominantly black.⁴² Many Africans share this sentiment. Poverty is a tangible sign of the lack of love. Many people are poor because someone else is rich and making sure there is not a fair distribution of resources. In many African countries, the face of wealth is political leadership. Therefore, those who aspire to being wealthy get involved in politics. African politicians seem to be faithful ambassadors of the colonial system they fought against to liberate

their fellow citizens. Their actions reflect their being “good students of oppressive, exploitative and corrupt colonial regimes.”⁴³

Self-hatred seems like a pandemic in many local communities. It is seen through the destruction of assets such as healthcare centres, libraries, schools, municipal offices, cars of innocent people when there is a service delivery protest or a strike action. Frank Chikane stresses that “citizens of a democratic country have the right to protest but should refrain from stoning innocent motorists, or looting shops, or destroying goods of ordinary street traders who have nothing to do with the things they are protesting about.”⁴⁴ Their right to protest should always take into consideration their duty to be law-abiding citizens who respect the right and dignity of other citizens. Self-hatred acts are seen regularly when ordinary people pollute their own environment. In many neighbourhoods, many people litter their own environment and relegate the responsibility of the maintenance of a clean environment to their governors.

Self-hatred contrast our aspiration to live in shalom communities which Linthicum defines as “an environment where socio-economic justice is available to all and community’s problems and their resolve is a concern for all.”⁴⁵ Such communities are characterised by “order and harmony, fruitfulness and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy and well-being.”⁴⁶ These communities are desirable because, in them, Black lives matter. They are places where the quality of life is at its best. This is the kind of community the church is called to foster and catalyse as a way of it to be known by the way it loves.

The Role of the Church

The church has a challenging task to demonstrate that black lives matter in the face of growing inequalities and the worsening of the living conditions of the majority of Africans. It would do so by being a tangible sign of love and practise *ubuntu* in working in solidarity with the vulnerable and the marginalised, which is the majority of the African population. It has done so in many places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo where it catalysed the advent of democracy

through a national conference and multiple discussions between political actors. It helped facilitate “the building of a new society” where the lives of all its citizens matter.⁴⁷ In South Africa during apartheid, the Black Church sided with liberation movements to defeat an oppressive political system. This institutional legacy needs to be revived and contextualised so that the church can continue to be an advocate of life, and good quality of life for every African.

Nowadays, it seems like the church’s prophetic voice is either weak or silent. It is faced with an independent Africa that seems to undermine black lives more than to promote and improve them. It, therefore, has to *pick a side* which cares for the common good.⁴⁸ Such a choice would raise its prophetic voice in society by speaking into national challenges.⁴⁹ It would call out the former liberation movements, now governing parties, that destroy black lives like we see them happening in many African countries.⁵⁰ It would collaborate with political powers without alienating its identity. It would not be silenced in its partnership with the powerful but would camp in its side to contend for socio-economic justice that would uplift the marginalised of our society.⁵¹

In South African, Kelebogile Resane points out that after the advent of democracy in 1994, many church leaders who were vocal against apartheid became allies of the new democratic government. From that time, the church “prophetic voice started being weak.”⁵² It would be advisable that “the church be vigilant against the disruptive influences of ideological allegiances in its midst.”⁵³ Additionally “the identification with the interests and views of one’s own political party, cultural group, class or gender has a way of inadvertently colouring one’s moral views...on global problems.”⁵⁴ In the global problems that matter to ordinary Africans, the church should “learn to make its contribution, not on the basis of its strong Christian morality, but on the basis of the cultural values shared by all members of the society in their diversity.”⁵⁵

The church is called to promote an inclusive society where all the generations matter. Jesus was unto something when he equated the kingdom of God to people such as children (Mark 10:13-16). In many

African societies, however, children's voices are not listened to. The youth voices are also not listened to. Local churches in the community the author lives in seem to be a microcosm of such a societal lack of consideration of the youth and children. The author reckons that all generations have wisdom to contribute to the building of a society. The church must intentionally source that wisdom. Such an intention would communicate that all lives matter including those of children and the youth.

Unlike politicians who tend to prioritise the well-being of their party or the political class at the expense of the rest of the population, the church must prioritise the common good. It should remain in tune with Jeremiah 29:7 which challenges it to intentionally seek the peace and the prosperity of the context it is in. In Africa, the peace and prosperity are urgently needed for the majority of the population who are poor and need improvement in their quality of life. The church, therefore, needs to be involved in poverty alleviate actions. Many lives of Africans are lost due to poverty. Many more lives are constantly in a survival mode because of poverty. A church that is a tangible sign of love should learn to journey with people out of poverty towards a fulfilling quality of life. It is meant to be a messenger of hope in the African context that is a lot "more interested in what it is doing to transform society so that justice and peace may prevail than in what it believes in."⁵⁶

The church needs to be seen to preferentially serve the marginalised and bring them to the centre of local communities. Many people have normalised the marginalisation of others around them. Within the mainstream society, the rich's voice gets preferential treatment by governors. The church should be seen amplifying the voices of the marginalised because all lives matter. It, therefore, needs to be calling out injustices and demanding responses from "people in power" as well as ordinary people who ill-treat others.⁵⁷ Tutu challenges it to not be "neutral in situations of injustice."⁵⁸ He explains that "if an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate" that neutrality.⁵⁹ The presence of injustice undermines the reign of love Christians are

meant to promote and solidarity *ubuntu* is all about. Martin Luther King also challenges the church to not be neutral in remaining silent to acts of injustice. According to him, “silence is betrayal” and can be a weapon for accomplices.⁶⁰ Silence usually happens when the church collaborates with the powerful who undermine Black lives through their policies and practices as well as when there is the fear of being controversial.

It is mainly because of poverty that there is a lot of migration and internal displacement in Africa. When people realise that their lives don't matter to those who are meant to care for them, they move somewhere else in the quest for a caring environment. African rural communities have increasingly become undesirable environments. Many residents of these communities are moving to urban areas where they hope they would live in a caring environment. Many Africans are also crossing their national borders seeking a good quality of life elsewhere. A crucial role the church could play as a proactive interaction with the issue of migration and displacement is to be involved in initiatives that foster the improvement of good quality of life. It is been proven that the majority of internally displaced people and migrants “would prefer to remain in their places of origin if they can enjoy a good quality of life there.”⁶¹ Migration is seen as a liability in many host communities. This has sometimes resulted in violence against migrants or internally displaced people.

If migration and internal displacement are mainly caused by poverty, it can be argued that poverty and the worsening of the living conditions of Africans are caused by poor governance. This is why the voice of the church is critical to call out governors to act in a way to communicate that the lives of their fellow citizens' matter. Many of these governors accuse the former colonisers and the current biggest economies in the world to be the reason why the majority of their fellow citizens are poor. Ironically, some of these governors are among the richest people in the world. It seems like the most normal leadership model we see in Africa is not servant leadership. Many local churches are a sample of that model.

The African church should portray a leadership that communi-

cates that all Black lives matter. The church leadership seen in many local communities is a microcosm of political leadership. Nepotism is very common in those churches. The author reckons that people need to be elevated to leadership position based on their merit. Nepotism is a loquacious communication that not all lives matter, only a few. This is against the biblical principle of equal worth and dignity of all human beings because they were all created in God's likeness (Gen. 1: 27). Servant leadership would also raise a caring voice and speak truth to power in emotive issues such as access to land. Many Africans are still landless in their motherland. The land is still in the hands of very few people who are title deed holders. In the context of South Africa, the majority of "empty land is owned by the government."⁶² A church whose priority is to love tangibly and live in solidarity with the marginalised would sit on the government neck so that land could be distributed speedily.

Conclusion

This article reflected on the worldwide protests that were sparked by the killing of an African American by 4 police officers. It focused on the realities of discrimination happening on the African continent. It stressed that these discriminations are mostly perpetrated by Africans to Africans. And the church participates in these discriminations directly through the ill-treatment of its members or indirectly by being a silent or weak prophetic voice in society. In other instances, the church is an ally to established powers and institutions that undermine and kill Black lives. This article used the interpretive framework of John 13:35 to remind the church of its calling to strive to be known by the way it loves and cares. The implementation of such a calling would demonstrate that Black lives matter. It would reverse the current trends of self-hatred we see at macro and micro levels of the African society.

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