

Shared Conversations 3: Gender, Theologies and COVID-19

28th May 2020, [Link to Recording](#) / [Link to Slides](#)

Context:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many faith actors are on the frontline. The crisis does not operate in a vacuum and, as a result, the pandemic is increasing pre-existing gender inequalities. Women and girls are experiencing intersecting injustices in political, social and economic spheres.

Faith communities have a strong base from which to promote social distancing (to reduce transmission of the virus causing COVID-19), while also practicing solidarity. Many religious actors hold significant power and trust, sometimes more than the government. Thus, religious institutions can play a vital role in distributing accurate key public health information to their communities. Religious leaders can play a positive role in promoting messages of gender justice, challenging stigma and harmful gender norms.

In our third shared conversation, we aimed to explore some of the theologies and scriptures that are being promoted during this time. In this event, speakers shared why and how faith leaders are responding to COVID-19, including addressing the spiritual and theological needs of faith communities.

Gender, Theologies and COVID-19, Rev. Dr. Lydia Mwaniki

Biography: Rev. Dr. Lydia Mwaniki is the Director of Gender, Women and Youth at the All Africa Conference of Churches. Before this, she worked as a lecturer in the Faculty of Theology at St Paul's University Kenya, where she taught New Testament and gender related units (2010-2015). Lydia graduated with a PhD in Theology (New Testament Studies) and Gender from the University of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa in April 2011 and is an ordained priest in the Anglican Church, Diocese of Nairobi, Kenya. Lydia's research interests are in using postcolonial feminist theory to read and appropriate gendered Biblical texts in life-affirming ways for women and men, in the context of changing gender roles in Africa and gender justice.

1. Theology is God-talk.

2. Introduction

The Ten Theological theses on the Covid-19 pandemic just about to be published by the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), rightly state that, "How we speak about God in relation to every aspect of life determines whether or not we live and act according to our faith... in every situation".

At this difficult time of COVID- 19 Pandemic, the Church as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, has a responsibility to counter misleading theologies (God-talk) and messages by promoting accurate and clear information, that is life-giving in accordance to relevant Scripture, in order to resist panic, and prevent stigma.

3. In this brief presentation, I will:

Explore some of the (misleading) theologies and scriptures that are being promoted during this time.

Ways in which faith leaders are responding to COVID-19, including addressing the spiritual and theological needs of the faith communities.

Finally, I will propose 3 theologies that need to be strengthened to enhance human co-existence including gender justice.

(i) Misleading theologies on Coronavirus

A. Apocalyptic interpretations that COVID-19 points to the end of the world and Jesus' return

The Bible counters this claim. Mark 13:32 for example states, 'But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.'

B. COVID-19 pandemic was and is the biblically prophesied 666 number mentioned in Revelations 13:18

This can be countered by the fact that interpretation of symbolisms in each phrase in the Book of Revelation has been quite complex and cannot be concluded by such a narrow view.

C. "COVID-19 has been sent by God as a punishment for world sins, and that the only way is to repent and pray day and night because even medicine will not be found

It is a fact that sin attracts God's judgement, hence the need to repent. Nevertheless, not every form of suffering can be attributed to sin e.g. in the case of Job and the man who was born blind in John 9:1-3

(ii) Addressing issues of GBV and child abuse through member churches

On 19th May, 2020 I hosted a zoom meeting on GBV and Child Abuse during Covid-19 Pandemic: Response of the Church in Africa. The conference brought together over 30 church leaders heading the gender and children's programs from the entire continent.

Each of them highlighted powerful interventions that are being put in place to mitigate forms of GBV, child abuse and hunger during the forced quarantine period.

(iii) Defending the dignity of Africans by issuing statements e.g.

To condemn the French researchers who implied the tests for vaccines should be done in Africa, Condemning the racist, xenophobic discrimination of Africans in China.

(iv) AACC has also been involved a lot with the AU Youth Envoy webinars on COVID -19

Interventions by other Faith Actors

Streaming services live, offering humanitarian support, leading national prayer days and teaching people the importance of obeying regulations from the Ministry of Health

Online theological, pastoral and religious materials have been published by different religious organizations and churches including the "10 Commandments for Responsible Pastoral Reactions to the Corona-Crisis Ten Commandments"; Bread for the World, WCC, Tearfund, Religions for Peace, Act Alliance and many others.

Proposal for 3 Theologies and Scriptures that need to be strengthened to enhance solidarity and human coexistence including promoting gender justice during COVID-19 and Beyond

1. Creation of human beings in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27)

This theology promotes respect for the dignity and God's image in every human being, thus protecting Human Rights for all.

Biblically, and also theologically, the concepts of "human dignity" and the "image of God in human beings" are inseparable. Human dignity is derived from the image and likeness of God in every human being. On the other hand, human rights are based on the concept of human dignity (Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948).

Human beings are called upon by God to fulfil God's purpose for human dignity. The church therefore needs to confront any form of violation of human rights especially the escalating violation of the dignity and rights of women, girls, children and the most vulnerable in the light of Genesis 1:27.

2. Theology of Jesus' self-emptying (Kenosis) in line with the Philosophy of African Ubuntu (Philippians 2:1-11)

Theology of Jesus' self-emptying (Kenosis) i.e. Jesus as God assuming a human body in order to save human beings, denotes the highest level of humility and self-sacrifice for the sake of others. In Philippians 2: 3-4, Paul exhorts the Philippians to imitate Jesus Christ in humility and selflessness in these words:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition... Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Vs 3-4).

At this time of COVID-19, humility and self-emptying (i.e. considering other people's interests above one's own according to Phil 2:3-4), rekindle our African Philosophy of Ubuntu, that communicates our oneness as humanity, "I am because we are".

Jesus' example of self-emptying and African Ubuntu can be achieved during this pandemic through any form of selfless acts that contribute to the welfare of others including:

- Following regulations of hygiene measures recommended by the Ministry of Health, in order to protect oneself and others.
- Communicating accurate information in these times of crisis
- Care i.e. offering humanitarian support and other necessary support
- Not taking advantage of the situation to exploit others by misappropriating community resources and abusing their rights and dignity.

3. Strengthening of Paul's Image of the Church as the Body of Christ i.e. Celebrating our unity in diversity as God's gift (1 Corinthians 12)

In I Corinthians 12, Paul images the Church as the body of Christ. The body has different parts and all are united into the one body. Each part is important and cannot work in isolation but functions for the common good. Any mistake or carelessness done by one part of the body affects the entire body.

During this difficult time of COVID-19, this illustration of the church as a human body is powerful in reminding us how interconnected we are globally. Each Nation, and each Continent is dependent on the other. Each human being is dependent on the other, hence the indispensable need for solidarity and unity called upon by the UN Secretary General in his speech on 18th May in Geneva when he said that, "A 'massive' and combined effort by all countries is needed to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic".

Consequently, for example:

Failure to implement the recommendations of WHO to minimise the spread of the virus.

The Xenophobic attacks, racism and any form of discrimination

The Surging of domestic violence and child abuse; are violations directed against the body and should be highly condemned because they are a threat to the entire body.

Covid-19 is the time when we can best celebrate our unity in diversity as a gift from God. Each member of the body has a role to play to eradicate the pandemic.

Finally, Psalm 127: 1 points to human fragility and vulnerability apart from God. In the fight against COVID-19 pandemic, churches, governments, the health sector and the entire human race need to be dependent on God and collaborate with God in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Gender, Theologies and COVID-19, Niclas Lindgren, Director of PMU.

Overview of PMU: The Swedish Pentecostal churches have been working with social development in Sweden and internationally since the beginning of the 20th century.

Pentecostal World Fellowship

- When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, we were already in discussions on how we can work more closely together, how we can raise our voice, and how we can work together.
- There is a community within the fellowship where relief and development organisations come together. PMU proposed to this group, about how we can respond to the COVID-19 pandemic together.

Belief in the Church

- We believe that the church has a very important role of play.
- When the church is quiet, that is also a very clear message.
- This pandemic is global, the north-south divide is not there, we are all in this together.

Developed COVID-19 Resource

- Recently, PMU has contributed to the development of new materials to respond to COVID-19.
- Resource link: <https://pmu.se/covid19>
- The purpose of the material is to encourage local churches to communicate accurate information in these times of crisis. As a complement to the information provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) and national authorities, the Pentecostal World Fellowship (PWF) has developed informational material with recommendations to churches, pastors and development workers.
- The material is currently being spread by Pentecostal movements in roughly 100 different countries, as well as by mission organizations and through the partner networks of 11 Pentecostal development organizations.
- First time that the network had decided to act together, to respond to a crisis like this.
- Materials created for social media sharing, additional resources, World Health Organization links.
- We also conducted a webinar with participants from 50+ countries.

COVID-19 Content

- What is COVID-19?
- Basic protective measures
- Why should responders respond?
- How can churches respond?
 - Reduce spread at Church*
 - Modify worship and fellowship
 - Correct and Clear messages
 - Care for Church Members*
 - Prepare people for a period of isolation
 - Ways to stay in touch
 - Address spiritual / theological questions.

- Mobilise church to care for community
- Pray and intercede

Learnings from a faith leader in Kenya

- It was very timely, it came when people were asking whether they should trust the government. As well as questioning if this is real, or whether this is the devil. There were many misleading theologies.
- How can we as church respond, this resource, was very clear and helped the church reach out to the community. It helped the community understand why they needed to act.
- Without this material, the faith leader feared that they may not have acted the way that they did.
- It was important that this message came from the global church family. It would have been different if it came from the UN.
- Due to the trust in religious leaders, when they speak, people listen. They have a huge reach, when governments cannot reach. Religious leaders also have very good communication skills.
- Theology and language matters. We need a language that brings theology and other perspectives together. We need to deal with the mistrust that people have of governments and UN systems during this time.

Resources

- Using and translating the materials produced by Restored, and to conduct webinars, to focus on domestic violence and the role of the church.
- There is increased violence during this time, in the footsteps of this crisis, we must encourage others to act on this.
- PMU have also developed a resource, Church and Gender Equality, which you can access here: <https://pmu.se/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PMU-Bok-Gender-Equality-171215-lowres.pdf>

Questions and Answers

Q: How do we enable conversations between people who disagree?

Niclas: Not only in COVID-19 do we experience misleading theologies, we need to discuss this all the time. One of our most important learnings is that, as a relief and development agency based in the church, we have to invest in digging deeper into theology and bringing theologians into the dialogue. When we discuss difficult topics with partners, especially with church leaders, we always need to start with theology. Not human rights or a UN Convention. We need to bring good theology and good development theory together. We should develop our theory of change, being faith based and rights based.

Rev. Dr. Lydia: We are bringing theologians together into the dialogue. We will discuss with theologians next week, to discuss our thesis, before finalising our publication. We try to bring in many theological voices.

Q: What for you has been the biggest challenges of addressing the theology of gender? How you engage people, and bring people along to engage with gender theology and gender justice?

Rev. Dr. Lydia: The greatest problem that I have found is the reading of text. The biblical text that subordinate women to man, these texts are interpreted and applied literally. We engage those different voices, slowly, with contextualised bible readings together. When we read together, texts such of Tamar. We have to bring in those voices that are dissenting. I have published a book that uses postcolonial theory to discuss 1 Corinthians 11: 1-16.

Gender & Imago Dei: A Postcolonial African Reading of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 ([link to book on website](#))

Niclas: There are many challenges. I think the benefit we have as PMU and in our network, is that we have been together for a very long time (from 1920, 1930, 1940) and some churches have been planted by Swedish missionaries. We need to create safe space, so that we can have a dialogue, and that its ok to change your mind. When you read the scriptures together, we can really discuss the difficult subjects. I was in a meeting last year with church leaders, who reflected, it is not theology that is the most difficult thing for us, it is culture. Another thing that we have been doing is bring pastors from different cultures, to have a dialogue. Trying to help foster interesting new ideas and angles.

Q: What extent are Churches and faith actors working to engage with the government? To ensure that governments and other agencies are incorporating faith actors into their national covid-19 responses.

Niclas: We always encourage our partners to work with other faith based actors and with governments. We find it extremely important to work with governments, to make sure that the governments ensure that churches and FBOs in responding to the COVID-19 crisis, and other development issues. *We cannot let the church be an island, and not connected to others.*

Rev. Dr. Lydia: I appreciate what Niclas has said. To add, for sure, the church is the salt of the earth and the light of the world. If our impact is not being felt nationally, globally or continentally, then our church is not fulfilling our purpose. At

AACC, we collaborate with National Christian councils, and World Council of Churches, to run workshops and disseminate the [Out of the Shadows report](#). In these workshops we have governments and faith leaders, to ensure people are connected. We also participated in the Commission On Population And Development, and at the African Union, to advocate for gender justice, issues of peace, representing the voices of the churches. We bring our church leaders to these spaces, to represent their constituency. We, as AACC, encourage churches in Africa to collaborate with their governments.

Guided Discussion

Question 1: How can theology be engaged to inspire and empower action for gender justice in our world?

Nicole Ashwood: Using the exegetical tools as demonstrated by Rev Dr Lydia Mwaniki in her presentation, affords lay persons to see ways in which faith informs or is informed by scripture

Buy reading the Bible as a whole not selectively. there are several texts that can serve as Biblical foundations for gender justice e.g. Genesis 1:27, Jesus's treatment of women, among others

Rev Jyoti: Gender Justice is Human Right. making image of God complete.

Niclas Lindgren: We need to deepen our understanding on how culture and theology interplays. And develop the way good theology and good development theory forms our theory of change.

Mercy: Faith Leaders are trusted in the communities and amongst their social groups. Their opinions are highly respected and sought after. Therefore, when they are supported with the right knowledge, they are able to pass those on to their social groups. In Nigeria, selected Faith Leaders were supported to develop a Faith Leaders Toolkit; which is a catalogue of scriptures in support of gender justice and they were further supported to use this manual to reach out to their congregations and other Faith Leaders within their cycle

Rev Jyoti: contextualise the scriptures and re reading it from local understanding

Gladys: Using theological texts in safe spaces for communities of faith guided by sensitivity to divergent views (and steer clear of particular phrases such as re-interpretation because this creates more suspicions and mistrust.

Mercy: This manual was further translated into the local language to ease understanding.

Niclas Lindgren: Faith leaders need to understand their very important role, and get support in how to convey the right messages. We need to invest in Bible school/theological trainings, so that leaders that leave them, enter into communities with an understanding that they are there to transform the society, not to (just) build a church.

Rev Jyoti: We have built a local network of volunteers to support victims of GBV.

Dionne: by reading and unpacking scripture as a holistic framework for people and planet, so human rights and outworking of scripture should not be presented as competing rights, but complimentary together. We have examples in both OT and NT to expand this thinking

Mandy: Absolutely Dionne - I agree. The entry point may differ, maybe focussing on relationships and working out to rights but they do go together

Sikhonzile 2: The church is a key institution for agenda and tone for gender just relationships, not just during COVID-19. Use that socialising role to change mindsets and point the community in the right direction.

Ulrich Nitschke: I do believe we need some concrete investment into more feminist reading and contextualisation of the bible!

Caroline Lubale-Buluba: By exploring more on the voices theology of gender

Question 2: What is the role of theology during the COVID-19 pandemic to tackle inequalities (including gender)?

Ulrich Nitschke: identify myth and false religious narratives and promote strong contextual analysis and sermons to win hearts and minds of people to really check Covid-19 adequate response.

Bob Kikuyu: Theology needs to speak out in stating the inherent value of every individuals' worth as a starting point.

Ulrich Nitschke: Also to campaign and lobby for civil spaces and make the voice of the thousands of lockdown children and most vulnerable heard to the public in respective countries

Nicole Ashwood: liturgy after the liturgy must be reinstated, especially with the church living beyond walls

Ulrich Nitschke: we collected some of the good practises in our Faith in Development Monitor and will do it again - end of June: <https://www.piron.global/en/fidm-04-2020-cover-story>

Nicole Ashwood: offer spaces for reflection and action as response to what we see

Bob Kikuyu: Theology needs to be active. It needs to become a tool for tackling inequality. It therefore needs to be made usable and transferable into the hands of people. Theology needs to help the "word become flesh".

Clare Morgan: feminist and postcolonial feminist theology can help challenge stigmatising views rooted in our colonial and patriarchal histories - such as the way particular groups are being blamed for the pandemic or further victimised

Gladys: reaffirmation of equality and justice and counter the notions that the pandemic is upon us because we are a sinful world which has been fronted by some communities of faith/ faith leaders - reaffirm social justice as a faith principle

Mercy: Faith Leaders must be given opportunities to support government effort and given the platform to engage widely (virtually), this way they can widely speak against all forms of inequalities during this time. They are also able to provide support and advice on effective strategies for addressing inequalities

Sikhonzile 2: Theology should provide a safe space for those experiencing gender based violence. During this time theology should be a reflection of the love of Christ and offer hope to everyone.

Niclas Lindgren: Theology and the right language is crucial when we want to get church leaders and members active in societal transformation.

Bob Kikuyu: Especially for faith based organisations, theology needs to support the analysis of our programmatic work. We should avoid the temptation of seeing them as separate approaches.

Dionne: to provide pathways of shared understanding on the common problems we face as a whole society, church leaders are trusted figures so need to be engaged on theological interpretations of global events today

Lydia: To inspire, guide, encourage, and help people to respond to the pandemic in line with God's will for human coexistence

Question 3: Suggested theology tools and resources for enabling gender transformative responses.

Of the Same Flesh: exploring a theology of gender, Christian Aid
<https://www.christianaid.org.uk/resources/about-us/same-flesh-exploring-theology-gender-0>

God's Justice: Just Relationships between Women and Men, Girls and Boys, Study Materials for use by Theological Colleges, Seminaries and Training Schemes in the Anglican Communion, Anglican Communion,
<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/348551/TEAC-Just-relationships-women-men.pdf>

Church and Gender Equality, Resource and Tool Box, PMU,
<https://pmu.se/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/PMU-Bok-Gender-Equality-171215-lowres.pdf>

Domestic Abuse and COVID-19: How Churches Can Respond, Anglican Communion and Anglican Alliance,
<http://aco.org/media/415112/201905-da-covid-19-churches.pdf>

Gender, Faith and COVID-19 Resource List, Side by Side, <http://sidebysidegender.org/gender-faith-and-covid-19-resources>

Coping with the Coronavirus, World Council of Churches, <https://wcccoe.recruiterbox.com/jobs/fk0qzpq/>

Advancing a disability-inclusive response to COVID-19, World Council of Churches,
<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/advancing-a-disability-inclusive-response-to-covid-19>

Faith and COVID-19: Resource Repository, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities, World Faiths Development Dialogue, <https://georgetown.us1.list-manage.com/track/click?u=dfcac1bf9a4ccb7126f3d2bc8&id=a372640567&e=f856de7dbe>

SASA! Faith – A guide for faith communities to prevent violence against women and HIV, Trocaire and Raising Voices, <http://raisingvoices.org/sasa-faith>

Improving the Choices and Opportunities for Adolescent Girls, Christian Aid Nigeria, <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-08/Improving-the-choices-and-opportunities-for-adolescent-girls-a-toolkit-for-faith-leaders-English-Jan-2018.pdf>

Gender and Faith perspectives on COVID-19, ACT Alliance, <https://actalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/briefingpaper-gender.pdf>

Gender, Faith and COVID-19 Statement, Faith in Beijing, http://sidebysidegender.org/covid_statement/

Declaración Conjunta: Género, Fe y COVID-19, Creas, http://creas.org/declaracion-conjunta-genero-fe-y-covid-19/?fbclid=IwAR1HSpgJTSUp5MK4Z0OIkEpcWKMdF795I_H5BQfxYNsrZel8YHCkjV_BsXq

Gender Equity and Inclusion in the Time of COVID-19, The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, <https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/gender-equity-and-inclusion-in-the-time-of-covid-19-why-religious-and-traditional-leaders-matter>

Responding to COVID-19 Toolkits, Restored, <https://www.restoredrelationships.org/Covid19>

Thursdays in Black Joint Statement, World Council of Churches, <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/thursdays-in-black-ambassadors-we-must-enable-and-promote-safe-spaces-for-all>

COVID-19: PWF World Missions Commission Recommendations for Churches, Pentecostal World Fellowship and WMC, https://pmu.se/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID19_English_Low.pdf

Suggestions for new resources

Ulrich Nitschke: would love to support an internal theological interfaith group to develop some sound sermons and narratives for services and gatherings. Would be really great to have it interfaith and we should involve the colleagues of Religions for Peace, women interfaith group

Nicole Ashwood: Ulrich, WCC has begun preparing bible studies, let's talk.

Ulrich Nitschke: your resource centre on the Side by Side website is really great!!!! can we make it more interfaith? who would be able to manage that???