AOSIS

The agency of the church during COVID-19 and beyond: *Koinonia* and *ubuntu* in the context of poverty and unemployment in South Africa

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The spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) disrupted, affected and changed human lives in many ways, namely: physically, emotionally, financially, psychologically and spiritually. Apart from people losing their lives and the lives of loved ones, others lost their jobs in numbers. Poverty levels and unemployment increased during this period. In order to mitigate the devastating effects of COVID-19, the South African government introduced a relief grant. As we welcome this gesture of goodwill by government, it is argued in this article that the church in every given locality and from every denomination should serve as the agency of change in order to alleviate poverty and unemployment in South Africa. The research question that this article seeks to address is: What role can the church play as a change agent in the context of poverty and unemployment in South Africa? Whilst qualitative literature study is undertaken to unpack issues of COVID-19, poverty, unemployment and church agency, this article is also approached from a broader missiological framework. Tapping into the resourcefulness of the early Christian church *koinonia* and the African concept of *ubuntu*, the article locates the church as an agent of change not only as a way of ending poverty and unemployment in South Africa, but also as a way meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 1 (UN SDG1).

Contribution: It is therefore the aim of this article not only to call for the agency of the church but to also demonstrate that Christian *koinonia* as a lived experience of the early Christian church and African *ubuntu* philosophy can serve as tools for the church to bring about transformation.

Keywords: church; change; agency; COVID-19; *koinonia*; *ubuntu*.

Introduction

The outbreak and spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which was first detected in late December 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, became one of the most devastating pandemics in human history (Marco et al. 2020:365). With the world being a global village, the pandemic could not be confined to China where it started. It quickly spread to the rest of the world at an alarming rate, thus becoming a global pandemic with no respect for human boundaries. Whilst in the past humanity has had to deal with pandemics, pestilences, and diseases such as smallpox, the plague, Ebola, HIV and AIDS, influenza and polio, amongst others, the spread of COVID-19 and its aftermath had devastating effects on humanity globally (Janssen 2021:15–18; Kanu 2020:29). Some of the effects included the abrupt halting of people's movements, health challenges, loss of life and the inability of people to grieve properly, amongst others (Khosa-Nkatini & White 2021; Makumbang et al. 2020; Naidu 2020). We have also witnessed the rise of gender-based violence (GBV) to an epidemic proportion during this period (Dlamini 2021).

With people's movements restricted in South Africa except for essential workers and services, the standard of living amongst thousands of South Africans drastically dropped and many were left in abject poverty because of job loss and unemployment (Young 2020:331). It is within the context of rising numbers of job losses and unemployment that this article seeks to locate the church as a change agent and investigate how it can respond through its transformation agenda to issues of poverty and unemployment, especially in the context where the church itself is also struggling to make ends meet because of COVID-19. Methodologically, this is a qualitative literature study which is undertaken from a broader missiological framework. It is qualitative because of the readily available literature on issues of COVID-19, poverty,

unemployment and church agency. It is missiological because it seeks to locate the church as a missional body of Christ in every given locality but at the same time define it as an instrument of the *missio Dei* [mission of God] in driving the transformation agenda in the context of poverty and unemployment, in the case of this article. In defining the agency of church in this context, this article seeks to make a missiological contribution in terms of poverty alleviation as also reflected in the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 1 (SDG1). This is critical because COVID-19 posed a serious threat to the realisation of SDG1.

In light of the foregoing, this article is structured as follows:

1. introduction
2. setting the tone: a missiological framework
3. literature review on COVID-19, poverty and unemployment and church agency in South Africa
4. COVID-19's impact on South Africa and its effect on poverty
5. poverty, unemployment and *koinonia* in the early Christian community
6. poverty, unemployment and *ubuntu* in the African culture
7. church agency through *koinonia* and *ubuntu*: concluding remarks
8. conclusion.

Setting the tone: A missiological framework

This qualitative literature study is undertaken from a broader missiological framework (Wright 2006:25). This approach is grounded on the *missio Dei* paradigm where church is viewed as a missional community that participates in the mission of God in the world (Dreyer 2013:4). In its agency, this missional community serves as an instrument in the hands of the missionary God whose agenda is to transform and change the world to the glory of God's name and advancement of God's kingdom. This approach presupposes a transformational agenda as espoused by the prophet of changing paradigms, David Bosch (Bosch 1991). This agenda seeks to go beyond a traditional understanding of mission and missiology, as the church's mission was limited to evangelism and salvation of souls. It locates the church's mission within a missional agenda of God. The church is a change agent or instrument in the hands of a missionary God (Thinane 2021:2). Mission and missiology are defined, in this context, as encounterology, finding further expressions in different offshoots such as the 'contemplative encounter' (Karecki 2009), 'transformative encounters' (Kritzinger 2011:52), 'pavement encounters' (Mashau & Kritzinger 2014), 'transformative pavement encounters' (Mashau 2018) and 'disruptive pop-up encounters' (Mashau 2021).

When human lives are disrupted by pandemics such as COVID-19, and challenges such as poverty and unemployment rise to greater proportions, a missional role of the church is to seek tangible solutions to address human pain and suffering.

This approach presupposes active participation of the church not only in public discourses around biblical and contextual issues but also in shaping the direction that humanity should take when life is disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and its devastating effects like poverty and unemployment in South Africa. It is also our presupposition in this article, therefore, that church agency on issues of poverty and unemployment will go a long way in providing tangible solutions in alleviating poverty and unemployment. It will also be a positive contribution towards the realisation of UN Sustainable Development Goal 1.

Literature review on COVID-19, poverty and unemployment, and church agency in South Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a 'pandemic agent must be infectious, must be new, must spread easily, and must cause serious illness' (Morens, Folkes & Fauci 2009:1020). Whilst the first cases of COVID-19 outside China were first reported in January 2020 (Ayres 2020:572), it was in March 2020 that COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the WHO. At this point, COVID-19 was spreading fast and wildly with 200 000 confirmed cases and more than 8000 deaths in 160 countries (Spinelli & Pellino 2020:1). It is asserted that, 'for WHO to pronounce a level six pandemic alert there has to be sustained transmission in at least two regions at the same time' (Qui et al. 2017:3). This was the case with COVID-19 at the point of being declared a pandemic.

The word 'pandemic' itself originates from the Greek word *pan* meaning 'all' and *demos* meaning 'the people'. It is commonly used to refer to an epidemic or a contagious disease that has spread to many countries or even continents at the same time (Honigsbaum 2009; Qui et al. 2017:3). Moreover, the largely accepted definition, according to the Dictionary of Epidemiology, is an understanding that an epidemic must be 'occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people' (Harris 2000). Terminologies are becoming more refined because pandemics have always been part of the human lived experience.

The outbreak of COVID-19 and its spread is not the first of its kind in human history. Qui et al. (2017) captured it as follows:

> There have been a number of significant pandemics recorded in human history, including smallpox, cholera, plague, dengue, AIDS, influenza, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), West Nile disease and tuberculosis. … Influenza pandemics have struck about three times every century since the 1500s, or roughly every 10–50 years. In the 20th century, there were 3 influenza pandemics which were named 'Spanish flu' in 1918-1919, 'Asian flu' in 1957–1958, and 'Hong Kong flu' in 1968-1969. Recent years have seen at least six large-scale outbreaks – hantavirus pulmonary syndrome, severe acute respiratory syndrome, H5N1 influenza, H1N1 influenza, Middle East respiratory syndrome, and Ebola virus disease epidemic. (p. 4)

What Qui et al. stated above is not a matter of sentiments or opinion. They are stating facts about various pandemics and epidemics. Gostin et al. (2016) correctly states the same facts regarding pandemics and epidemics that are stated by Qui et al. In the history of all pandemics, COVID-19 is proving to be one of the worst, only outdone by the Spanish flu, which led to the deaths of about 50 million people and 500 million infections. COVID-19 has spread like wildfire across the world, and as early as 20 May 2020, it had already infected 4 806 299 people and caused 318 599 deaths (Marco et al. 2020:365). According to the WHO, by January 2021, the virus had already infected 94 124 612 people worldwide and caused 2 034 527 deaths. As of 08 May 2022, cumulative cases of COVID-19 had risen to 517 099 288 and have caused 6 250 662 deaths globally. Although the influenza H1N1 2009 virus (A/2009/H1N1) was the first influenza pandemic of the 21st century, it was not as hard-hitting as COVID-19; even though it affected the whole world, it caused (in comparison), just more than 18 000 deaths (Qui et al. 2017:4; Rewar, Mirdha & Rewar 2015). Another 21st century disease, Ebola, killed more than 11 000 people and cost the world more than USD2 billion, according to World Bank calculations (Maurice 2016; Qui et al. 2017:4). By the look of things, COVID-19 is the pandemic of pandemics, only exceeded by the Spanish flu at this stage. However, at the time of reviewing this article, the death toll in the South African context had gone down (including rates of infection) to the extent that the National State of Disaster had been reviewed and terminated.

COVID-19 transmission and prevention

Human bodies are understood to be both hosts and carriers of SARS-CoV-2. Breath and saliva are the most active components of transmission. However, it has also been detected on inanimate surfaces such as door handles, the surfaces of cellphones and in residential sites of patients with confirmed COVID-19; that is, individuals who have come into contact with infected surfaces could be infected if they touch their eyes, mouth or nose (Marco et al. 2020:367). Da Silveira et al. (2020) adds:

> The main mode of transmission is contact with droplets containing viral particles eliminated through the cough or sneeze of an infected person, and the incubation period usually varies from 2 to 14 days. Approximately 80% of the cases are asymptomatic or with mild symptoms, and the others can be severe or critical and can lead to death. (p. 1)

Most people who become infected experience mild disease, whereas a subset of individuals progress to severe or critical disease: 'these severe and critical cases are driven by the host response to the infection, thus resulting in multisystem dysfunction and pathology' (Ayres 2020:572).

As with other respiratory viruses, the transmission of COVID-19 occurs mainly through the respiratory route (Marco et al. 2020:367):

> According to the infection prevention and control strategies from the WHO, standard precautions for all patients, which are also appropriate for public prevention, include hand and respiratory hygiene, the use of appropriate personal protective equipment, safe injection practices, safe waste management, clean linen, environmental cleaning, and sterilization of patient-care equipment. (Marco et al. 2020:377–378)

Ayres (2020) puts it as follows:

> Self and government-initiated avoidance mechanisms have been essential for combating the COVID-19 pandemic. These include hand washing, avoiding touching the face, moving away from people who are sick, and wearing masks and other personal protective equipment. For COVID-19, avoidance mechanisms including quarantines and physical distancing have also been essential public-health measures to prevent the infection of naïve individuals and in the movement to 'flatten the curve', aiming to decrease the amount of infection and to distribute the occurrence of infection over a greater time period to prevent the healthcare system from being overwhelmed. (p. 576)

Although COVID-19 affects all age groups, people above the age of 65 years are more vulnerable to the infection than the younger population. It also infects all people, regardless of whether they are naïve or not. However, obesity and smoking habits amongst the younger population make them equally vulnerable to COVID-19 (Haldar & Sethi 2020:1). However, as this article seeks to investigate how the church can serve as a change agent to mitigate the devastating spread of COVID-19, it is important to note that there are events such as church gatherings, religious pilgrimages and observance of certain religious rituals like Holy Communion and marriage, including funeral attendance and conducting of burial rites, amongst others, which were considered to be not only risky but super-spreader events (Bentley 2021:1; Khosa-Nkatini & White 2021:1).

COVID-19, poverty and unemployment, and church agency

According to Jamieson and Van Blerk (2021):

> Lockdown measures confined people to their homes in the hope of curbing the spread of the virus and saving lives, and this has led to joblessness, poverty and isolation from protective social networks. (p. 1)

With limited economic activities, companies were forced to shed jobs because they were not able to sustain their workforce without optimal production and profit. This actually worsened or exacerbated the loss of employment and poverty, not only in South Africa but globally as well (Khambule 2021:380). To elucidate this point, Khambule (2021:386) noted that 'the closure of other economic sectors such as tourism and hospitality industry meant that over 800 000 jobs were in jeopardy, potentially increasing the country's already high unemployment rate'. Therefore, it is correctly concluded that 'the COVID-19 pandemic has brought South Africa to the brink of the proverbial poverty abyss' (Van der Merwe 2020:1). Writing in the context of the South African government's restrictions during alert level 5, Thinane (2021:4) shares the same view that the entire country's economy was brought 'to a near-freeze, and this

resulted in multiple job losses and business closures'. Now that we have reached the end of the National State of Disaster, the economy still has to show signs of recovery with the rate of unemployment standing around 65.5% amongst youths aged between 15 and 24, as reported by the World Bank in South Africa as of 14 April 2022.

In order to contribute towards poverty alleviation as recorded in the UN Sustainable Development Goal 1, and in the efforts to create jobs for unemployed citizens, the church in every locality must make efforts to serve as a change agency. The notion of the church as a change agency is well recorded (Pillay 2017:1; Van der Merwe 2020:3). Mashau and Mangoedi (2015) assert that:

> [T]he church should serve as an agent of transformation, seeking to provide relief where it is needed but also empowering those in the margins to move to the mainstream of society. (p. 8)

It is, however, the aim of this article to tap into the resourcefulness of the early Christian concept of *koinonia* [fellowship] and the African concept of *ubuntu* [humanity] to mitigate the devastating effects of COVID-19 on issues of poverty and unemployment. Tapping into the resourcefulness of the African philosophy of life, as a critical element of being church in the African context, is captured by Jentile (2020) as follows:

> It is suggested that for the church to be relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, it must 'adopt the African worldview', 'redefine itself as a "who" rather than a "what"', and 'reconsider the incarnation principle'. (p. 1)

Therefore, the efforts to use the two concepts (namely, the Christian *koinonia* and the African philosophy of *ubuntu*) together is not aimed at a contextualisation exercise but a critical engagement between the two terms, where each provides its own meaningful contribution.

There is a need, in the context of the foregoing, for the church to serve as a change agency to mitigate some of the devastating challenges and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Javed and Chattu (2020:32) opine that there is a need for humanity to tap into the resourcefulness of their beliefs and communities of faith (mosque, church, temple or synagogue) in the efforts to mitigate some of the devastating effects of COVID-19. Sharing the same sentiments, Tomlie and Venter (2021:1) assert that 'as usually happens in times of crisis, millions of people all over the world turned to religion for guidance and spiritual comfort during the pandemic'. In this article, the biblical term *koinonia* and the African term *ubuntu* are used as empowering tools in the hands of a church as a change agency. This is not a contextualisation exercise but a critical engagement between the two terms, where each provides its own meaningful contribution to the discourse. The objective is to ensure that the church in Southern Africa realises that cultures and traditions have much to contribute to theology.

COVID-19's impact on South Africa and poverty

South Africa officially 'entered the fight against COVID-19 in March 2020, with the first declared positive case on March 5th' (Stiegler & Bouchard 2020:697). South Africa recorded its first death as a result of COVID-19 virus on 27 March 2020. The rising numbers of those infected by the COVID-19 virus 'prompted the President of the Republic of South Africa to declare a national state of disaster to mitigate the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic' (Mbunge 2020:1810). The government moved swiftly and imposed a strict lockdown on the population for three weeks starting on 26 March 2020 at midnight (Stiegler & Bouchard 2020:697). These efforts were also made to prepare the inadequate health systems to cope with the consequences of the pandemic and accompanying challenges that threatened lives and livelihoods. Consequently, 'South Africa has been widely lauded for its swift and decisive COVID-19 action' (Battersby 2020:543). However, that did not stop the spread of the virus but only reduced the speed of infections. As a result, the government had to extend the lockdown and its regulations (Stiegler & Bouchard 2020:697). With further extensions of lockdown by the government and further strict regulations, the impact and effect of COVID-19 on South Africans became dire on many fronts. These included, amongst others, people's movements, infringements of human rights, the rise of GBV and closure of schools and churches.

For the scope of this research, this section will mostly focus on poverty. It was in 2015 that the member states of the United Nations agreed to end poverty in all its forms and from everywhere as part of the agenda for 2030, and this was captured in their SDG1. The spread of COVID-19 slowed down any strategic efforts to fight against poverty, especially the financial support (Mukarram 2020:256). It was under COVID-19 that the economic conditions of South Africans worsened (Khambule 2021:386). With increasing lockdown measures and regulations, many South Africans lost their jobs and could not go out to hustle and access new job opportunities. Upon realisation of this impact, on the 21st of April 2020, President Ramaphosa announced that:

> Poverty and food insecurity have deepened dramatically in the course of just a few weeks. To reach the most vulnerable families in the country, we have decided on a temporary 6 months coronavirus grant. We will direct R50 billion towards relieving the plight of those who are most desperately affected by the coronavirus. This means that child support grant beneficiaries will receive an extra R300 in May and from June to October they will receive an additional R500 each month. All other grant beneficiaries will receive an extra R250 per month for the next six months. In addition, a special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress grant of R350 a month for the next 6 months will be paid to individuals who are currently unemployed and do not receive any other form of social grant or UIF payment. (n.p.)

This R50 billion was believed to be able to relieve the plight of the poverty-stricken, especially because every unemployed

person who was not already a recipient of a government grant would now receive an amount of R350 monthly. This was to assist citizens in their plight as many were suffering and starving. However, this money is less than an average 2 days' wage. As much as the government tried to assist people, the reality remained that even with the R350 grant, people were still starving. Evidence is shown in the latest report from Stats SA which claims that on 23 February 2021, 'the official unemployment rate increased by 1.7 percentage points to 32.5% in Q4: 2020 compared to Q3: 2020' (Stats SA 2021:13). The official unemployment rate in South Africa has increased to 35.3% in the fourth quarter of 2021, as reported by Stats SA in their media release statement of 29 March 2022. It is evident to note that poverty and unemployment in South Africa are too big for us to rely on the government alone. It requires different stakeholders, including businesses, churches, faith-based organisations and nongovernmental organisations to play their roles. As a result, if more players could help in restoring the livelihoods of the people, it might make a difference. However, for the purpose of this research, the following section will be limited to the church's role in the fight against poverty and unemployment in the context of COVID-19 and beyond. The following section will critically investigate activities of the early Christian community to learn from them regarding how they lived with each other during times of poverty and unemployment.

Poverty, unemployment and *koinonia* in the early Christian community

The author of the Book of Acts is the only New Testament author who attempted to narrate the story of a Jerusalem Christian community (Sterling 1994:679). He was inspired to give the perspective of believers and pay tribute to the nuances that contributed to their communal life and church growth. One of the main contributors to church growth was the distribution of possessions amongst the believers. However, Harrill (2011:531) describes this moment as a 'utopian scene of the earliest believers sharing all goods in common'.

Nonetheless, possessions, money, resources and justice are themes that occur frequently in the New Testament (Gregson 2014:1). According to Wallis (1981:58–59), the New Testament is centralised within wealth and poverty, as he points out that:

> One out of every 16 verses in the NT; one out of every 10 verses in the synoptic gospels and one out of every 5 verses in James addresses the theme. (Gregson 2014:1)

As a result, this theme cannot be simply wished away. In an actual sense, the whole ministry of Jesus is centralised around wealth and poverty. According to Ngcobo (2020):

> Thus, it is important to note that food eating and sharing was very important in the whole ministry of Jesus, in his teachings as well as in practice (e.g. Jn 2:1–11; 12:2, Mt 9:10, 11; 22:2–14, Lk 7:36–50; 10:40; 11:37–42; 15ff. 19:6 and other passages). (p. 3)

Gregson (2014:19–22) argues that during the ministry of Jesus, there was what he describes as a 'common purse' (in Jn 4.8, 12:4–8 and 13:28–29).

One of the striking events in one of these passages is the ethical confrontation when Jesus was anointed by Mary in Bethany with the alabaster jar of oil. Looking at the value of the oil, Judas was moved and said, 'why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages' (Jn 12:5). The author of the Gospel of John suggests that Judas said these words not because he cared about the poor, but because he used to steal from the purse. However, this does not diminish the validity of the purpose of the purse. Gregson (2014) explains:

> Judas' comment about the poor suggests that there were instances where items were donated to the group of disciples and then sold, with the money then being added to the common purse, and that money in the common purse could be used to give to the poor. In response to Judas' comments, Jesus does not identify Judas as misusing the money, but does say that Mary is preparing him for the day of his burial and notes that the disciples will always have the poor with them, but will not always have him. (p. 19)

With this understanding, it is imperative for us to look at the two passages on how the early Christian community practically related with each other. Acts 2 and 4 provide some insights that point to the unity of the church and *koinonia*. The first passage is from Acts 2:42–47, which speaks to liturgical acts of the early Christian church. What is distinct about their community is that they had unity of purpose in terms of serving God and humanity. They devoted their time to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer, but they also (in a pastoral way) were able to cater for the needs of those who were poor in their midst.

There are three critical elements that deserve special mention for their ecclesiology and the praxis thereof. Firstly, the agency of the church is embraced by all. All people who became members of the early Christian church were captured by the vision of communality and common purpose. Secondly, in their agency and efforts to impact and transform their surroundings, they embraced an ecclesial praxis that sought to engage their liturgical acts in a more visible and tangible way in their day-to-day lives. In fellowship with one another, they gladly sold their properties and possessions to meet the needs of the poor in their midst. However, this should not be confused with an early form of communism (Gregson 2014:58) but what is defined by Jeon (2013:1) as 'commitment to Christ … demonstrated especially by the voluntary outpouring of resources and free distribution to all in need'. Thirdly, their liturgical acts as a community that found expression in their diaconal ministry became a missional tool. Like the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, although it had negative effects, the acts of all (*pan*) people (*demos*) in the early Christian church became contagious and a point of missional invitation to all. This is captured by Jeffress (2017) as follows:

> This model of church in Acts 2:42-47 is not about having a church building or having a budget; it is about the work of welcome; it

is about being church with our lives – the extension of hospitality to those who day by day the Lord was adding was the church. All at once, this model of church given in Acts is both political activism, because of the proclamation that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord, and devotion to God in the form of radical welcome. These things are not separate. (p. 470)

To show the importance of this ecclesial praxis and to demonstrate the kind of example regarding the agency of a church that has embraced a transformational agenda, the author of Acts revisited and reiterated the significance of Christian communality and fellowship as something that also warrants sharing of resources with the poor (Ac 4:32–35). This is what is described by Jeffress (2017:468) as radical hospitality. This is the kind of missional ecclesiology that does not only seek to be incarnational or be present where challenges are (Jentile 2020:11) but to be a church on and with the margins (Mpofu 2020), one that stands in solidarity with God and the poor in their pursuit for justice (Mashau 2018). This does not only require a paradigm shift in ecclesial praxes but also the need to disrupt and unsettle traditional beliefs and practices (Mpofu 2021:4). In order to achive this, the church must embrace and advance the 'social transformation' agenda (Mpofu 2021:3). The church must journey with the poor and unemployed in the efforts to be a compassionate community, something described as *missio hominum* [compassionate mission of the church in and with their community] (Thinane 2021).

Poverty, unemployment and acts of *ubuntu* in the African culture

African people, in times of crisis like COVID-19 and the rise of poverty and unemployment, have always been defined by the need to be 'human' and 'resilient', tapping into the resourcefulness of African culture and knowledge systems to navigate such storms. The same kind of agency and attitude displayed by the early Christian church community in mitigating the scourge of poverty in their midst have always been part of the African philosophy of life, namely *ubuntu*. For the church and its agency to thrive in (South) Africa in the face of COVID-19, poverty and unemployment, there is a need to investigate how *ubuntu* can contribute meaningfully towards the discourse around Christian fellowship (*koinonia*) or radical hospitality as discussed above. This is done in an effort to avoid simple and careless contextualisation of the Bible by disregarding the nuggets that the *ubuntu* concept, as a lived experience of the African people, has to offer to enrich the already acceptable praxis of the early Christian church. Therefore, Kobe (2021) is correct in her assertion that:

> *Ubuntu* must be studied outside Christianity, so that *ubuntu* can manifest itself as it continues to exist in the language, culture and spirituality of the Bantu-speaking people. (p. 5)

There is, therefore, a need for Christianity to learn from *ubuntu* in order to reinterpret its conception of communality, *koinonia* and agency in the context of poverty. It is critical because, in the past, Christianity in South Africa has had a

history of a praxis that dislocates and displaces *ubuntu* ethos through marginalisation of the poor by denying them access to socio-economic resources. Writing in the context of marginalisation of the poor and homeless in South African cities, De Beer (2015:5) concluded that our daily practices that deny ordinary people their right to humanness are to render *ubuntu* homeless. Therefore, it is our take that Christianity without *ubuntu* renders Christian *koinonia* and church agency meaningless and useless. Consequently, *ubuntu* will, in this section, not be studied under the microscope of the biblical text but as an equal contributor to knowledge, because both the concept of *koinonia* in the Bible and *ubuntu* strive to address the lived experiences of the people. This is more practical today because the world faces a deadly crisis as resources are becoming ever scarcer.

Ubuntu, as an African philosophy (Ramose 2005), speaks to the common bond between all people and their environment. According to Ramose (2005:15), the philosophy of *ubuntu* is one of mutual concern, care and sharing that holds out the promise of eradicating the preventable and deadly poverty that currently envelops most of Africa. Therefore, '*Ubuntu* has a lot to contribute to the building of a healthy world community and the development of an "expansive vision" of human well-being and flourishing' (Mashau & Kgatle 2019:5). *Ubuntu*, therefore, enhances the notion of togetherness amongst all people, and at the same time cultivates the spirit of solidarity amongst human beings. It is for this reason that De Beer (2015) opines:

> In new-found solidarities we might indeed recover traces of *Ubuntu*, humanness/humanity, interrelatedness, interdependence, without which the lack of interdependence and common humanity will remain. (p. 5)

Whilst *ubuntu* is known and understood for many of its attributes as also demonstrated in the foregoing, in this research, we will focus chiefly on the attributes of caring and hospitality as we pave pathways out of poverty and unemployment in the context of COVID-19 and beyond. In efforts to redefine and reassert the church's agency in the context of poverty and homelessness in urban space, for example, De Beer (2015:7) encourages us to embrace creative ways of 'acknowledging our interdependence and complementarity and remodelling economic sharing in ways that break from death-dealing hierarchy through circles of hope'. In this way, *ubuntu* values and ethos will surely enhance church agency and the praxis of *koinonia* in any given context.

Church agency through *koinonia* and *ubuntu*: Concluding remarks

As early as 2014, Gregson (2014:1) argued that the 'use of and attitudes towards possessions and wealth are also important contemporary topics, particularly within a globalising and changing world'. The devastating disruptions of COVID-19 and its ruinous effects on poverty levels and unemployment in South Africa, as reflected in the foregoing discussions, is

a perfect reminder of how *koinonia* and *ubuntu* can be used, both in complementary and enriching ways, to enhance the agency of the church moving forward. Having engaged prosperity gospel and the culture of greed in the postcolonial Africa, Mashau and Kgatle (2019:1) crafted their perspectives on the African Christian theology of *ubuntu* (Ubuntology) and define it as a 'practical theology of life, care, solidarity, economic justice, hope and accompaniment'. Mashau and Kgatle (2019) add:

> Theology of *ubuntu* is an array of theologies that are knitted together like a rainbow. It is a coat of many colours but one that is able to bring warmth to those who are naked, marginalised, exploited and abused. (p. 7)

Accordingly, 'As a theological concept, *ubuntu* holds humanity accountable to one another, whilst honouring the biblical command to love one's neighbour as oneself' (Mashau and Kgatle 2019:5). In this context, Christian fellowship is viewed as an indicator of having a relationship not only with the divine being as the giver of life but also with Christ and with others (Ngcobo 2020:4). The emphasis is once again on 'communality' and standing in human solidarity, and sharing is at the heart of this practice.

In Latin, the word *communis*, with its Greek root *koin*, refers to sharing something with someone. In short, it 'is a term found in Greco-Roman literature to express the mutuality and commitment' (Jeon 2013:2). As a result, 'The *koin-* word group is translated as fellowship, sharing, partnership, participation and communion' (Breed & Semenya 2015:70). Therefore, *koinonia* 'epitomised the lifestyle of the early church (especially in the Book of Acts)' (Ngcobo 2020:4). Moreover, it is the same attributes of sharing and caring that are embedded in *ubuntu*. To elucidate this, Ngcobo (2020) explains it as follows:

> The saying, 'sharing is caring', could be said to be relevant for both Africans and Christians. This sentiment is also reflected in the SeSotho idiom, *bana ba motho ba arolelana tlhoho ya tsie* [children of the same womb would share the head of a locust] and the isiZulu proverb, *isisu somhambi singanso yenyoni* [the stomach of a traveller is of the size of a bird's kidney]. Both proverbs seek to emphasise sharing, specifically that you do not have to have much for you to share. (p. 5)

It is clear from the foregoing that sharing should be exercised even when the resources to be shared are limited. What is needed is human solidarity and efforts to work collectively to fight the scourge of COVID-19, poverty and unemployment. This exercise should be viewed as a mirror of their relationship with the transcendent (1 Jn 4:19–21). Hence, in its agency and involvement in efforts to eradicate poverty and unemployment, the church should serve the mission of God who uses the human agency to fight and eradicate human suffering.

Conclusion

This article conclusively demonstrated that the spread of COVID-19 in South Africa, and by implication the entire global community, disrupted human lives in more than one way, that is, people's movement, health, family life and rise of GBV, education and so on. This article sought to pay attention to disruption around poverty and unemployment. Job losses and an abrupt halt to people's movement to seek new employment did not only increase the unemployment numbers, but COVID-19 disruptions also worsened pain and suffering for humanity, particularly the poor majority. It became clear in this article that the government's efforts to fight the scourge of poverty and unemployment are not enough. Therefore, stakeholders such as businesses, nongovernment organisations and the church should rise and play their part. Drawing from a transformative missional agenda, this article sought to encourage the church, as a church agent, to play its part by tapping into the resourcefulness of the praxis of the early Christian church in Acts 2 and the praxis of *ubuntu* as engendered in African culture. In this way, the church agency will go a long way in the realisation of UN SDG1.

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