

Using ecumenical experiences to respond to new public life challenges



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The description of the history of the church in Zimbabwe highlights the presence of a visibly united church that has been actively involved in supporting public life since the colonial era. The division within the Christian community is not a recent phenomenon but has existed throughout colonial history. The Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) serves as an umbrella organisation that aims at re-uniting Christian efforts of Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and Indigenous traditions, in order to have a collective influence on democratic processes in Zimbabwe. The ZHOCD takes a combative approach towards state tyranny and is proactive in seeking solutions for public life challenges. This active engagement is beneficial for national agendas, that allow citizens to freely choose and join political parties of their preferences. The individual actions and activities of the ZHOCD members contribute towards the overall work of the churches in Zimbabwe. This demonstrates religious confidence in addressing the political and economic impacts on human well-being. By fulfilling its mission and tasks, the ZHOCD actively participates in the shaping public life in Zimbabwe.

Contribution: The article contributes towards alternative ecumenical responses to national crises, using the case of the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations. These responses can be used by any ecumenical Christian bodies to deal with challenges arising in a state due to political differences and challenges.

Keywords: Christian unity; Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations; public life; civil society; political violence; democracy; ecumenism.

Introduction

This article acknowledges the existence and significance of Christian opposition and division within Zimbabwean churches. The Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) primarily consists of mainline denominations that are actively engaged in addressing public life challenges, while the Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe (ACCZ), the defunct Destiny of Africa Network (DANet), and the Zimbabwe Indigenous Interdenominational Council of Churches (ZIICC) work closely with the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF). The article argues that Christian division and opposition is a positive sign of internal democracy. Negatively, disunity may be caused by the external influences of foreign or state funders. External influences compromise the Christian agenda and mission in public life, leading to divergences in supposedly common objectives. Therefore, the ZHOCD has a significant task in navigating the life of the church and ensuring the achievement of its mission and work.

Interpreting historical Christian participation in public life

During the colonial era, the church played a significant role in public life, particularly against white minority rule under the Rhodesia Front Party (RFP). The RFP, led by Ian Douglas Smith, established a de-facto one-party state, and passed the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in defiance of the British authority. This became opposed by Sir Reginald Stephen Garfield Todd, a leader of the Democrats and the former Prime Minister, who wielded a lot of political influence in Zimbabwe (Masengwe & Dube 2021).

Black Protestants then operated under the Christian Council of Southern Rhodesia (CCSR), which served as an alternative to the white dominated Southern Rhodesia Christian Conference (SRCC) that supported the RFP's UDI project until 1980, when it was disbanded.

The Rhodesia Catholic Bishops' Conference (RCBC) also collaborated closely with the CCSR, working together to advocate for common sense, integrity, honesty, and the protection of people's

freedom and interests (Nhema 2002). The RCBC and the CCSR both condemned the UDI regime's actions, speaking out against its oppressive nature.

In their efforts to address humanitarian needs, these church bodies relied on faith-based organisations (FBOs) such as the Christian Care for the CCSR, as well as Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) for the RCBC. These FBOs provided vital relief services to refugees, detainees, and victims of war, aiming to alleviate suffering and support those affected by the political and social challenges of the time.

The political landscape in post-independence Zimbabwe led churches to organise and deal with public life issues through their ecumenical bodies. Zanu-PF attempted to revive the colonial ideology of minority rule, seeking to establish itself as the only legitimate political party and government. Ecumenical councils such as the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), the Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa (UDACIZA), the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC), and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), resisted this tendency and formed the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) to promote voter enfranchisement and expand civilian participation in politics.

In comprising these ecumenical councils, the ZHOCD, played a crucial role in advocating for good policies, nurturing freedoms, and representing the social, economic, and political interests of the Zimbabwean people. The ACCZ also unites apostolic churches to combat isolationism within the religious landscape, to may become a member of the ZHOCD in the future.

The ZHOCD stood with the citizens during challenging times, such as the difficult years in 2007 and the constitutional referendum of 2013. Their identity and collective efforts contributed to their success in pursuing public life goals.

Overall, the emphasis on post-independence engagement in politics and religion led the church to advocate for democratic principles, social justice, and the welfare of the people, through the establishment of organisations like the ZHOCD.

Visible Christian unity through the Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHCOD)

The ZCBC, ZCC, EFZ and UDACIZA aim at recovering Christian unity and identity through interfaith and interreligious dialogue. Ecumenism, which refers to the attempt to present visible Christian unity, 'is a movement towards the recovery of the unity of all believers in Christ, transcending differences of creed, ritual and policy, as well as interdenominational cooperation' (Getui 1997:91) from among different denominations and traditions. It fosters mutual respect, tolerance, and cooperation among believers,

emphasising common purposes that go beyond specific denominational creeds, doctrines, rituals, and politics (Matikiti 2009; 2015).

This pursuit of unity among believers in Christ, has had significant implications for the Zimbabwean society. It has led to social transformation and the acknowledgment of God's sovereignty. The church has played a role in collecting material support for the vulnerable, providing psychosocial counseling for survivors of violence, and empowering marginalised citizens economically (Pobee 1997). The church's efforts affected the way the Zimbabwean society is organised, and especially the quality of life for its citizens (Bosch 1979; Matikiti 2009; 2015).

The church's engagement in social transformation is an evolution in Christian thought, where the application of Christian principles becomes inseparable from the social application of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel is 'nothing but about the total and complete transformation of mankind – in all aspects of life and all facets of humanity's activities' (Banana 1985:12). It promotes the total and complete transformation of individuals and societies in all aspects of life and human activities.

For the church to function effectively and efficiently, it 'needs to be aware of the vast array of social, economic and political issues affecting humankind' (Banana 1996a:334). This understanding enables the church to call for social reconstruction and transformation in the Zimbabwean society (Bosch 1979; Matikiti 2009; 2015).

The subsequent sections, explore the specific work carried out by each of the member organisations of the ZHOCDs, highlighting their contributions to social transformation and the organisation of Zimbabwean society.

The development of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches

The Christian Council of Southern Rhodesia

The formation of the CCSR in 1964 at St. Cuthbert's Hall, Gweru was a response to the refusal of white church leaders in the Southern Rhodesia Council of Churches (SRCC) to collaborate with black church leaders in bringing about inclusive governance in the country (Gundani 2001; Matikiti 2009; 2015). The CCSR was predominantly composed of black Christian leaders, and it aimed to address the concerns of African people in public life during that time.

The division between the SRCC and the CCSR arose from their differing stances on confronting white racist tendencies and supporting African nationalist movements. While African Christian leaders supported these movements, white Christian leaders condemned them, leading to a division in the church along racial, tribal, ethnic, gender, and age lines (Masondo 2018).

The CCSR included both black and white Christian leaders, such as Sir Reginald Stephen Garfield Todd of the Churches of Christ, Bishop Skeleton of the Anglican Diocese of Matabeleland (CCSR's first president), and Bishop Dodge of the United Methodist Church (UMC) (Ruzivo 2009). The council aimed to foster dialogue between the Christian community and the government, and to promote Christian witness to the world, and to encourage reunification among traditionally separated denominations (Ruzivo 2009).

When the Rhodesia Front Party (RFP) declared a state of emergency in 1965, leading to the UDI, the CCSR swiftly responded (Holt 2015). The council issued a pastoral statement condemning the UDI and advocating for a multi-party democracy instead of minority white rule (Meredith 1979). As the nationalist movement gained momentum, the CCSR became increasingly opposed to the RFP on matters of power, positioning itself as a pillar of nationalist dissent (Masengwe & Dube 2021).

The UDI government attempted to exploit tribal and ethnic differences within the country, to divide the nationalist movement (Banana 1996a; eds. Raftopoulos & Mlambo 2009). However, the CCSR remained committed to supporting the liberation struggle and became a strong voice against the government's policies. The council's members, including the white leaders, faced censorship, and were called by the state to focus solely on preaching the gospel, rather than engaging in politics (Masengwe & Dube 2021). Missionaries at mission stations also resisted restrictive laws, like the 1969 Land Tenure Act, and worked in support of African aspirations, contributing to the widening gap between the CCSR and the SRCC (Masengwe & Dube 2021).

Despite political subjugation and class poverty, the black members of the CCSR worked tirelessly to free Zimbabwe. Figures such as Rev. Ndabaningi Sithole, the founder of Zanu-PF and Minister of the Church of Christ, American Board, Rev. Prof. Canaan and Bishop Abel Tendekayi Muzorewa, both Methodist ministers and politicians, spoke out against the UDI and urged Africans to fight for their political rights – 'travesty of justice, bastardization of civilization and an irreclaimable erosion of Christian values and traditions' (Banana 1996a:86).

Bishop Muzorewa 'urged Africans to set their sights high, warning against apathy and despair, advising them to fight for their political rights' (Matikiti 2009:97 ff; 2015). The CCSR's experience with the UDI positioned it as an organisation capable of confronting post-independence tyranny.

Overall, the CCSR played a significant role in challenging oppressive policies, supporting the liberation struggle, and advocating for democratic governance in Southern Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe).

The Zimbabwe Council of Churches

The ZCC was established in 1980 as a successor to the CCSR, with a new role of supporting the newly independent government in rebuilding the national systems. The ZCC consists of 26 member churches, para-church bodies, and observers, including Anglicans, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, Congregationalists, Restorationists, Calvinists, the Salvation Army, and AICs (African Initiated Churches) (Gundani 2000; Verstraelen 1995:189). Observers include the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), Fambidzano, and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) (Gaga 2021). The ZCC also has affiliate members such as the Zimbabwe Women's Bureau (ZWB), United Theological College (UTC), and Bible Society in Zimbabwe (BSZ), Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and Ecumenical Arts Association (EAA). The ZCC is associated with the Ecumenical Documentation and Information Centre for Eastern and Southern Africa (EDICESA), the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), and is also an associate member of the World Council of Churches (WCC) (Ruzivo 2009).

The ZCC's diverse membership from Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal traditions, as well as its engagement with service institutions, enables it to address grassroots-level issues. However, some 'established Churches faced widespread suspicion due to their association with the former colonial regime' (Maxwell 1995:109). Certain churches, including those that supported the RFP Internal Settlement of 1978, were viewed with suspicion, and tried to appease the ruling ZANU PF government (Matikiti 2009; 2015). This resulted in the failure of these churches to effectively address state repression and provide meaningful advice to the government and citizens on public life. The government attempted to establish a one-party state and restrict political participation. This was challenged by the ZCC and the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC) in 1992, through the formation of the Forum for Democratic Reform (FDR) (Shaw 1986). The FDR, led by former Chief Justice Enoch Dumbutshena, was critical of the ruling ZANU PF party's dictatorship. The church, along with other civil society organisations, played a crucial role in inspiring and supporting the movement towards true democracy and the development of a civil society that could counteract and change a monopolising one-party political system (Maxwell 1995:118–119). According to Verstraelen (1998), the church was critical because:

[W]here democracy is limited, and civil society is underdeveloped, the churches are sometimes the only civil organizations that can inspire and support a movement towards true democracy and the development of a civil society which can counteract and change a monopolizing one-party political system which usually abuses its power. (p. 75)

Mugabe was consistently challenged by Ndabaningi Sithole (Ndonga), the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) by Edgra Tekere and the FDR, forcing him to relegate the idea of a one-party state in the 1990s (Shaw 1986).

In 1996, the ZCC approved the creation of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), which aimed to initiate efforts around constitutional reform. The NCA played a significant role in widening the constitutional reform debate, encouraging the citizen participation, and criticising the government-initiated constitution (Kagoro 1999). Although the government took over the project of the NCA in 2000, which was rejected and later re-engaged by the Government of National Unity (GNU) of 2009 – 2013, it eventually culminated in the 2013 campaigns and initiatives that led to the eventual adoption of a new constitution. The ZCC, along with the EFZ and ZCBC, also collaborated on the 2006 document 'The Zimbabwe We Want', which further broadened political participation and human rights demands in the country (ZCBC, EFZ & ZCC, 2006).

Overall, the ZCC brings a diverse range of experiences and initiatives to the ZHOCD, contributing to the broadening of political participation in post-independent Zimbabwe.

The journey of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference

The Rhodesia Catholic Bishops Conference

The RCBC was established in 1969 as an association of local ordinaries, coadjutors, auxiliaries, and titular bishops who perform special tasks assigned by the Apostolic See and the RCC conference (Randolph 1978:12). The RCC conference consists of 12 commissions, each chaired by a bishop, including the CCJP. The CCJP was formed in 1967 during the Second Vatican Council of Pope Paul IV. In Zimbabwe, it was launched in 1972 to serve as the voice of the RCBC, focusing on issues of peace, justice, Catholic social teaching, and reform of social, economic, and political structures (Zvobgo 2005).

During the liberation war in Zimbabwe, the CCJP documented numerous cases of human rights violations and played a significant role in advocating for social justice. Bishop Donald Lamont was a prominent critic of the 1969 constitution introduced by Ian Douglas Smith's government (Meredith 1979:232). The constitution strengthened segregation, violence, and terrorism against civilians, and Bishop Lamont vocally opposed it. The RCBC also criticised the LTA, which restricted certain races from entering areas designated for white settlement (Matikiti 2009; 2015). The LTA was seen as interfering with the work of the church, and Bishop Lamont condemned it for arresting and restricting political opponents without trial, viewing it as a step towards communism or 'Nazism' in Zimbabwe (Meredith 1979:234).

The Catholic Church in Zimbabwe actively worked to promote majority rule and denounced racism and its associated injustices. It conveyed its messages through pastoral letters, bulletins, communiqués, and public campaigns, expressing its commitment to social justice and equality.

The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference

During the transition from the colonial era to the independence in Zimbabwe, the ZCBC underwent a name change to reflect the new independent state. During this period, the ZCBC defined its stance on how the church should relate to the state. They strongly criticised Marxist atheism and issued a statement titled 'Socialism and the gospel of Christ'. However, this stance made it difficult for the ZCBC to actively oppose the government in the future.

Under President Robert Mugabe and his ZANU PF party, the government employed suppressive measures borrowed from the colonial regime, such as the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) and the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade (Nhema 2002). The armed forces operated as if they were ZANU PF cadres, leading to the brutal murder of civilians between 1983 and 1987 during the Gukurahundi onslaughts in Midlands and Matabeleland. The government accused Joshua M. Nkomo, the leader of PF ZAPU, of leading dissidents at a time when ZANU PF sought to establish a one-party state. It is estimated that thousands, possibly up to 20 000 civilians, lost their lives during this military incursion (ZCBC & LRF [1997] 2007:33–61).

The ZCBC, in collaboration with the Legal Resources Foundation (LRF), published 'Breaking the silence: Building true peace', which exposed the ethnic massacres of the Matabele people from 1982 to 1987. The publication strained relations between the ZCBC and the state. It offered suggestions on how to address the operation's consequences, promote healing, rehabilitation, and reconstruction for survivors. However, the Mugabe government rejected the proposed measures. 'Breaking the silence' emphasised the cornerstones of nation-building, including humanity (*hunhu*), truth, and justice.

In 1984, the Catholic bishops met President Mugabe, who was then Prime Minister, on Independence Day to issue a statement titled, 'Reconciliation is still possible' (ZCBC & LRF 1997). The ZCBC supported the government's efforts to suppress dissidence but called for restraint in military operations (Matikiti 2009; 2015). Prime Minister Mugabe offered pardon and reconciliation to rebels willing to rejoin the armed forces, which reduced some atrocities. The Chihambakwe Commission was established to investigate the events, but its findings were never published. Nonetheless, the damage caused by the war, including torture and arrests, continued through the 1985 elections, with lasting impacts on the Matabele people. The 1987 Unity Accord, celebrated for ending the war, reintroduced the idea of a one-party state, contrary to the CCJP's advocacy for multiparty democracy (ZCBC & LRF 1997:33–61).

The RCC expressed its concerns through the ZCBC, acting as a watchdog for human freedom, and placed a major daily newspaper advertisement, urging ZANU-PF 'to abandon its plans to establish a legislated one-party state and to seek a mandate to govern from the people, based on real freedom of

participation' (Nhema 2002:139). The RCC played a crucial role in advocating for multiparty democracy, allowing opposition politics and social movements to challenge the tendencies of Robert Mugabe's dictatorship in the early years of independence. The RCC challenged Marxist ideology that violated civil interests and warned against the adoption of the 1990 Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) by the government (Balleis 1992:1–11). However, these warnings were ignored, leading to widespread worker lay-offs, increased unemployment rates, and the destruction of the national economy, as companies closed, and livelihoods were affected (Ruzivo 2000:56–57).

Evangelical fellowship of Rhodesia/ Zimbabwe

The EFZ was established in 1962 in Salisbury (now Harare) during a meeting inspired by Clyde W. Taylor of the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (EFMA) (Verstraelen 1995:192). The fellowship aimed to counter what it perceived as liberalism and ecumenism, which it believed compromised the unity of Christians (Bhebhe 1988:314). Initially, the fellowship envisioned encompassing the entire central Africa but was uncertain about the federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland at that time (Ruzivo 2009).

The primary purpose of the EFZ was to provide evangelical Christians with spiritual fellowship, promote Christian unity, offer Christian education, facilitate prayer, and support the ministry. It sought to cooperate with evangelicals in other African countries to combat the dangers of 'modernism, false cults, and from ecumenicity that is achieved at the expense of vital Christian faith' (Bhebhe 1988:321).

The EFZ opposed ecumenism because it believed that the church should focus solely on spiritual matters and avoid involvement in worldly affairs. As a result, the fellowship preferred that evangelicals remain spiritually focused and refrain from engaging in public life, especially politics and state governance. The fellowship did not criticise the RFP, but strongly condemned the liberation struggle, viewing it as a communist advancement. It presented the RFP government as deserving Christian support, prayers, and the protection of its armed forces (Bhebhe 1988:325).

However, the credibility of the EFZ with nationalists and ecumenical Christians became highly questionable, making it difficult for it to engage in post-independence politics with credibility. The EFZ was haunted by its past, limiting its ability to operate and minister effectively with the black government. Consequently, the EFZ's focus shifted primarily to moral issues and social development until the formation of the ZHOCD, initially a product of the Churches in Manicaland (CiM 2006).

The EFZ eventually became a competent member of the ZHOCD during the formation of the GNU and continued its participation beyond that period.

The union for the development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe, Africa

The UDACIZA was established in 2007 to address neglected issues of public and social life among the Zionist and Apostolic churches in Zimbabwe (UDACIZA 2007). It is considered an ecumenical body representing African Apostolic and Zionist churches in the country, following the formation of the ZHOCD. The late Bishop Xavier Chitanda of Johane Masowe WeChishanu, served as the first President, with Reverend Edison Tsvakai of Makamba Zionist church as the General Secretary (Matikiti 2014:95).

The Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa was formed by members of AICs that were started and led by Africans. African initiated churches constituted 33% of the Zimbabwean population, despite issues of syncretism and multiple church memberships (ZDHS & ICFI 2016; ZNDSA 2017). The Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa's members emphasised traditional values within their faith, seeking to indigenise Christianity and reconcile their spiritual-ancestral beliefs with Christian teachings. They aimed to reclaim religious and cultural identities, challenging the imported Christianity associated with colonialism, elitism, and wealth (Bourdillon 1993:86).

The formation of UDACIZA allowed these churches to have a unified voice on matters of public life, countering the ease with which politicians could sway their members in the past. The Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa focused on various forms of engagement with the state, such as pastoral letters, church bulletins, social media, communiqués, and prayer breakfasts, to conscientise and mobilise members for social transformation. 'The Union became an extremely important tool for forging their life together as a community of faith, a vital and effective instrument for the formation and education of the people' (Matikiti 2014:96). They interpreted Scriptures and aligned them with their beliefs, as a unified body.

The Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa's efforts had an impact on public life, particularly in addressing health and education issues among its members (UDACIZA 2007). They played a significant role in combating HIV and AIDS through awareness campaigns, reducing the spread of the disease, especially among the youth (Matikiti 2014). The Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa also addressed the cholera epidemic in 2008, advocating for improved sanitation and hygiene practices among its members (Matikiti 2014). This union encompassed a growing Christian majority as stated by Pobe and Ositelu II (1998):

AICs by their style represent the spontaneous expansion of the Church. The whole Church, leadership and all, assume that it is the Church's task to multiply, in short to do mission. And they

do so through simplicity of confession and simple Christian witness. (p. 50)

The Union's initiatives extended to promote basic education for girls and empowering women within their churches, challenging practices like child marriage and wife inheritance (Matikiti 2014:105). The Union for the Development of Apostolic Churches in Zimbabwe Africa's gender-sensitive programmes encouraged women to seek leadership roles in the church and business, contributing to social transformation and poverty alleviation through self-reliance and sustenance projects.

Overall, UDACIZA provided a platform for AICs in Zimbabwe to address neglected issues, promote social transformation, and improve the lives of their members.

The Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe

The ACCZ was established on 12 September 2010, with the aim of acknowledging, standardising, and regulating all indigenous apostolic churches in Zimbabwe. The launch event was attended by Vice President Joice Mujuru, who also served as the ACCZ matron (Matikiti 2014:97). The political support behind the ACCZ's formation gave it preferential treatment from the government, despite the principle that all churches should be equal before the law (Matikiti 2014:102).

The ACCZ received government backing and managed to register 350 member churches between 2010 and 2012, with an estimated total membership of 7 million people (Nsingo 2012).

However, the ACCZ's affiliation with the ruling ZANU-PF party compromised its status in ecumenical circles (Smith & Nothling 1985:416), with Dr. Levee Kadenge of the Christian Alliance labelling it the 'Apostolic Christian Council of ZANU-PF (ACCZ-PF)' (Matikiti 2014:97). African Initiated churches have historically been associated with revolutionary parties and Pan-Africanist agendas, which condemn imperialism and encourage African participation in governance processes hence a statement by Johannes Ndanga: 'We want to express our solidarity with President Robert Mugabe, and we want to say that we denounce political opportunists' (Masvingo 2012).

The ACCZ openly declared its allegiance to President Robert Mugabe and the ZANU-PF party. It frequently hosted ZANU-PF campaigners at its gatherings and requested government support, such as vehicles and allowances for its leaders, during the 2013 elections (Chadenga 2011). The ACCZ condemned leaders who supported the MDC opposition party and encouraged more leaders to support ZANU-PF. Many of its members joined the government services, such as the police, military, and intelligence, as a show of appreciation for their support during elections. This close association with the ruling elite compromised the

ACCZ's advocacy for marginalised and excluded members of society (Hatendi 1986:283).

Despite its political affiliations, the ACCZ made positive contributions to women's empowerment and public health. It recognised the importance of empowering women because '[a]n empowered woman is able to assert her basic dignity' (Matikiti 2014:101). In many AICs and churches in southern Africa, women often occupy marginalised spaces and '[w]omen tend to fill in the less important spheres (limited roles) and, at times, are mere followers' (Mapuranga 2013:303; Mloi 2008:1–14). However, women have developed coping mechanisms to survive these challenges and find strength in their faith in Jesus Christ (Mapuranga 2014; Togarasei 2007:160).

The ACCZ also played a role in obligating its member churches to vaccinate and immunise their children, even those who may have religious objections to Western medicine (Matikiti 2014:105–106). It also promised to modernise worship centres to protect the environment and the health of its members (Matikiti 2014:106).

Overall, while the ACCZ's political affiliations and associations may have compromised its standing in ecumenical circles, it made some positive contributions in areas such as women's empowerment and public health.

The awakening of (African Initiated) churches on public life

During the period between 2010 and 2018, some Christian leaders in Zimbabwe, including those from AICs, openly began challenging the authority of President Robert Mugabe and his government (Machoko 2013:1). These leaders, such as Pastor Evan Mawarire, Bishop Ancelimo Magaya, Aaron Mhukuta (Madzibaba Wimbo), Prophet T.B. Joshua, Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, and Prophet Walter Magaya, played significant roles in this political awakening (Chitiyo, Vines & Vandome 2016:16; Hove & Chenzi 2017:177).

In some way, as in a 'reminiscent of Zimbabwe's colonial political past whereby Christian leaders founded and spearheaded political movements in an attempt to remove the colonial government' (Hove & Chenzi 2017:174), Christian leaders now founded political movements to challenge the ruling government. They became more conscious of resisting political threats, beatings, false charges, arrests, and torture (Hove & Chenzi 2017:175; Tarusarira 2016:56–77). African Initiated churches, including the larger and more established ones, united against 'human rights violations, election rigging, corruption, economic decay and dictatorship, among other state-driven negative measures' (Hove & Chenzi 2017:176; Machoko 2013:6, 23) imposed by the state. Christian leaders broke their silence by openly challenging state brutality against civilian demonstrators, unemployment, import bans, the lack of service delivery, economic mismanagement, and political misrepresentation (Hove & Chenzi 2017:176–177).

Their collective resistance demonstrated a shift in the consciousness of religious leaders and their willingness to address and confront issues of governance and societal well-being.

This political awakening among Christian leaders in Zimbabwe, including those from AICs, represents a significant development in the country's political landscape, as it brought together different religious groups to challenge the government and to advocate for change.

Prospects for an inclusive church work on public life in Zimbabwe

While the church in Zimbabwe struggled with politics since the colonial era, with clergymen treading on both sides of the divide, similarly, the ZHOCD continues to struggle with bishops leaving the fold and colluding with the incumbent (Ruzivo 2009). These collaborations have been used by the state to divide and rule the community along ruling and opposition party lines, particularly infiltrating such churches and using them to weaken the ZHOCD, whose steadfastness and moral integrity has fostered credible electoral processes, and free and fair elections. Members of the ZHOCD have issued statements urging the government and citizens to observe peaceful elections, especially in a deteriorating political and security situation (CCJP 2008). The church has expressed a critical view of ZANU-PF when it was deviating from the ideals of independence, with some individuals within the party being motivated by corrupt gain at the expense of the people of Zimbabwe. The ZHOCD, however, has advocated for social justice, moral integrity and democratic processes through its collective efforts and statements.

The collaboration of the ZHOCD gave it an institutional advantage in challenging unpopular state policies, tyranny, and asserting the agency of church members (Gill 2001: 117–138). The organisation promotes inclusivity by accepting other ecumenical groups as members, allowing them to collectively address national crises. Although relatively young compared to its founding members, the ZHOCD benefits from the experience and expertise of its member churches on issues related to public life in Zimbabwe. In its 2006 visioning document, the ZHOCD expressed concerns that violence, lawlessness, hate speech, and insults against dissent would lead to social rupture (ZCBC, EFZ & ZCC 2006:8). These concerns were realised during the 2017 Operation Restore Legacy (ORL), where the ZHOCD called on the government to mend broken relationships with local and international stakeholders (ZCBC et al. 2006:43). However, the Head of State at that time refused dishonest engagement in nation-building (Gaga 2021). This forced the church, now the ZHOCD, to create platforms that frustrated the government's repressive efforts, division of the church and civil society, and the destruction of a unified prophetic voice (Matikiti 2009; 2015).

The ZHOCD attempted to restore Christian neutrality to politics, and to emphasise its stand for constitutional rights. The ZHOCD believes that an act of voting is a constitutive element of evangelisation and an expression of those rights (Banana 1996b:78). This forces it to play its role in promoting values such as transparency, democracy, the rule of law, constitutional reform, and a fair level playing field during elections, even if political parties themselves did not always practice these principles (Chikwanha-Dzenga, Masunungure & Madzingira n.d.). Prior to 2005, many elections in Zimbabwe lacked these principles and values (Matchaba-Hove & Moyses 2005:17).

Overall, the church's involvement in politics and its efforts to promote democratic values had a significant impact on Zimbabwean society. Despite divisions within the church, it continues to advocate for transparency, democracy, and constitutional rights, playing a role in shaping the country's political landscape and encouraging civil society organisations to work towards peaceful and fair elections.

Conclusion

The article explores the potential for the ZHOCD to make positive contributions to public life in Zimbabwe. It reflects on past experiences and identifies opportunities for future growth and impact. Past successes like the 2013 constitutional referendum serve as a foundation for shaping the church's future role on public affairs. This helps to improve the ZHOCD's interfaith dialogue in promoting Christian unity among denominations and enhancing ecumenical cooperation with religious and civic partners. This leverages the church's collective influence towards social transformation, peace, justice, and the wellbeing of all citizens. The ZHOCD can continue to take a combative approach with the state in engaging materially, economically, psychologically, and socially with survivors of political violence. These initiatives, inclusive of advocacy issues, are taken to promote good policies, Christian actions, and the importance of the church's participation and its commitment to live its faith principles in public life. The ZHOCD provides a leveraging of this collective voice and influence that can be used to improve a just, inclusive, and prosperous society for all Zimbabweans.

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Competing interests

The authors declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

J.G. contributed towards the conceptualisation; investigation; data curation and the writing of the original draft. G.M. did the formal analysis; methodology; review and editing, while B.D. was responsible for project administration, validation, funding acquisition, supervision and final editing.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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