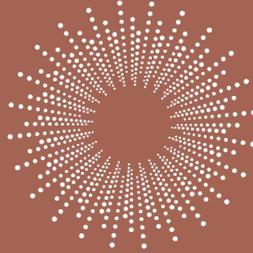


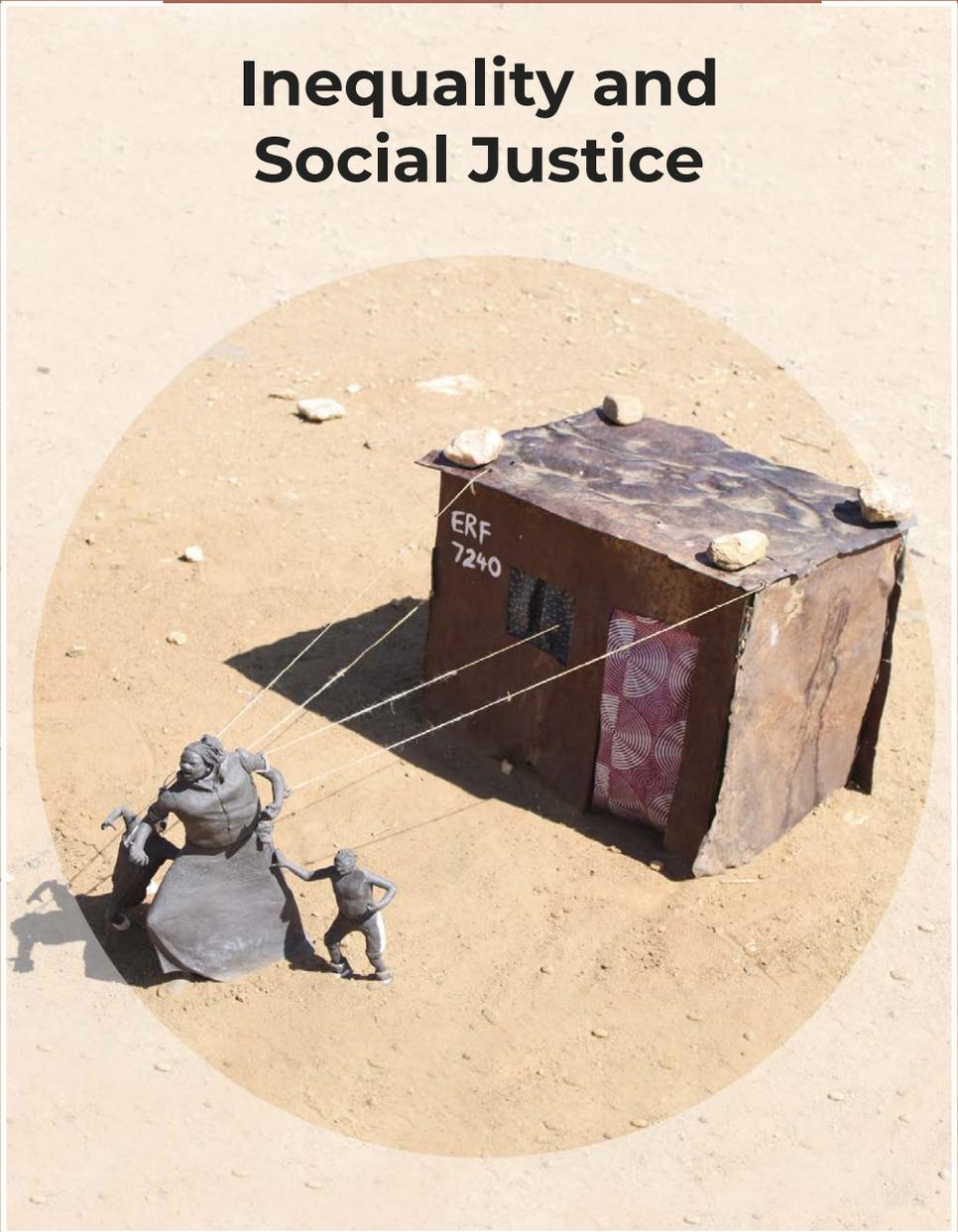
Volume 2

November 2022



Namibian  
Journal  
of Social  
Justice

# Inequality and Social Justice



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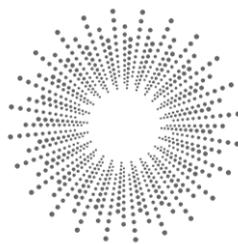
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**FRIEDRICH  
EBERT  
STIFTUNG**  
Namibia Office

## Acronyms and Initialisms

AMCU	Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union
BEPS	base-erosion profit shifting
BIEN	Basic Income Earth Network
BIG	basic income grant
CCN	Council of Churches in Namibia
CEDAW	UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CSOs	civil society organisations
DSD	Differences of Sexual Development
ELCN	Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia
ELCRN	Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia
ESOP	Employee Share Ownership Plan
FMS	Finnish Missionary Society
GBV	gender-based violence
GDP	gross domestic product
GEWE	gender equality and women's empowerment
GRB	gender-responsive budgeting
GRN	Government of the Republic of Namibia
HDI	Human Development Index
HTA	Hai  om Traditional Authority
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
ICT	information and communication technology
IFFs	illicit financial flows
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMR	International Mineral Resources
IOC	International Olympic Committee

LMS	London Missionary Society
MAWLR	Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform
MGEPEWSW	Ministry of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare
MGEPEWSW	Ministry of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Index
MPUCT	Madhya Pradesh Unconditional Cash Transfer
MTEF	Medium-Term Expenditure Framework
NLF	Namibia Labour Force
NNSCH	Namibian Senior Secondary Certificate Higher-level
NPC	National Planning Commission
NSA	Namibia Statistics Agency
NSSCH	Namibian Senior Secondary Certificate Higher
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PDS	Public Distribution System
PIT	personal income tax
RMS	Rhenish Missionary Society
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SEM	structural equation modelling
SEWA	Self-Employed Women’s Association
TAA	Traditional Authorities Act (No. 25 of 2000)
TVUCT	Tribal Village Unconditional Cash Transfer
UCT	unconditional cash transfer
VAT	value added tax
WHO	World Health Organization
WMMS	Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society
WSWB	willing-seller-willing-buyer

## The Church and Social Justice in Contemporary Namibia

*Emma N. Nangolo*

### **Abstract:**

*As Namibia celebrates thirty-two years of independence, social problems have become more pronounced, and many community members are denied social justice. Mindful of the fact that issues of social justice are not marginal to the mission of the Christian church, this article examines the role of the church in addressing social concerns of Namibian people, more than 90 per cent of whom identify as Christian. This article considers it important to conceptualise social justice and analyse the engagement of the church in social concerns in pre- and post-independence Namibia. Methodologically, it uses qualitative discourse analysis based on secondary sources. The church has been criticised for not taking a clear and firm public stand when it comes to gross inequalities and injustices that bedevil modern day Namibian society. It is concluded that the churches need to reclaim their prophetic voice and walk in solidarity with the suffering masses and to publicly denounce all forces that perpetuate inequality and injustice. They need to take a clear stand on a plethora of societal issues such as inequity, unfairness, injustice,*

*human dignity, human rights, gender equality, poverty, redistribution of wealth, unemployment, land allocation, adequate and sufficient shelter, adequate education and health care, alcoholism, drug addiction, orphans, street children, and social outcasts.*



*Photo: Dirk Haarmann*

**Key terms: Social justice; church; prophetic voice; advocacy; inequality; poverty**

## Introduction

Although Namibia has been politically independent for thirty-two years, the state has not yet fully complied with its social obligations. Contemporary Namibian society is therefore faced with a myriad of social, economic, environmental and religious challenges. It is also bewildering to note that a country blessed with enormous resources can be in a precarious state marked by discrepancies and gross inequalities, wherein social justice is denied. While some may still be blaming the situation on colonialism, unfair international trade practices and the processes of globalisation (Melber, 2017), some Christians and people from other faith traditions opine that some blame should also go to the Christian church for having fallen short of societal expectations (Nangolo, 2022). Already in 2009, Shejavali (2009, p. 2) wrote: “Namibian churches are in the midst of an ‘identity crisis’, questioning their relevance and role in an independent Namibia where poverty and economic inequalities continue to plague the nation.” In reference to a public lecture held by Dr Joseph Diescho on 28 January 2009 in Windhoek, Shejavali commented that while the church remains relevant to society, it has nevertheless failed

to address the social concerns of the Namibian people, more than 90 per cent of whom identify as Christians (ibid.).

Before independence, the Namibian churches acted powerfully as a moral and social voice against human rights violations, discrimination and inequality (Isaak, 2013; Nangolo, 2022). Soon after independence, however, the churches retreated from the public space, seemingly avoiding confrontation with the government and avoiding social responsibilities. They have remained silent, expressing no opinion on several integral issues affecting Namibian society, including the ever-growing gap between the wealthy and the poor, gross inequality, Namibia’s deteriorating education and health systems, and political intolerance.

There are only two possible attitudes which the Christian church can adopt towards social inequalities and injustice: either to escape, or to engage. To escape is to turn their backs on communities and society in rejection (Stott, 1999). In contrast, to engage is to turn their faces towards communities and society in compassion, getting their hands sore and worn in solidarity with the people (ibid.). The mission of the Christian church requires it to be immersed in the life of the world, not to be withdrawn. Jesus taught this truth

in his vivid metaphor of the salt and the light (Mat. 5:13-16). By implication, what this means for the church is that, if it is to do any good, then it must penetrate into communities and society at large. After all, the church is called to be a predominantly social ministry. If the Namibian churches are to fulfil their mission, they must recognise that social injustice brings the lives of many people into crisis, and that it is a crisis which churches must face. The relevance of the churches will be determined by their responses. The crisis also challenges the churches to reclaim their prophetic voice, walk in solidarity with the suffering masses, and publicly denounce all such ill forces that perpetuate inequality and injustice.

This article is guided by a qualitative discourse analysis approach based on secondary data from various sources to understand the prophetic voice of the church before and since independence, as well as challenges facing the church today. The article approaches the issue of church and social justice from different perspectives: the social economic context; social justice; theology; the church as healing communities; and pastoral care. All these aspects are interlinked and cannot be completely separated from one another. Specific aspects, however, are identifiable within the article.

## **Conceptualising Social Justice**

Amissah (2020) identified three main views of social justice. Firstly, there is the traditio-cultural view, which focuses on communal living and responsibility. This approach to social justice is based on the traditional African practise of communal living, where privileges and responsibilities of belonging to a community are enclosed in the sharing of resources. Each member of the community is expected to exercise piety towards the community and respect for the environment. According to Paris (1994), such a community-focused social justice requires a basic structure of inclusive equality, wherein the well-being of all the community's members is assured. Secondly, there is the religious view, which sees social justice as a divine responsibility for the welfare of communities and societies at large. Mbiti (1989) emphasised the importance of religion as a unifying element in the African context. He points to the worth ascribed to the individual within the community, and the solidarity that exists between family members, their extended families, their clans or tribes, the ancestors, nature, and God. Thirdly, there is the socioeconomic view, which looks at social justice in the light of the equitable distribution of resources, human rights and equality (Amissah, 2020).

For the purposes of this article, social justice refers to situations in which the resources of the community (or society at large), legal systems, and power structures in all their forms are consciously and systematically distributed for the well-being of all members of the community or society, without any form of discrimination (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2012). The aim is to ensure fairness and equality and the protection of fundamental human rights and dignity, and to empower the vulnerable to become self-sufficient. In the scope of this understanding, social injustice exists when there are some community members whose social conditions are below acceptable standards as far as human welfare is concerned. Or as Adeyemo (2012, p. 9) expresses it, social injustice amounts to a state of being inferior in quality or insufficient and being denied access to those material things that ensure basic human survival and justice for all.

Chapters 3 and 11 of the Namibian Constitution directly address fundamental human rights and freedoms of the people of Namibia, and the promotion of the welfare of the people. These constitutional provisions are the yardstick for measuring whether social justice is provided or denied for the people (Constitution of the Republic of Namibia).

## **Advocacy and the Mission of the Church**

Advocacy is an expression of the prophetic ministry of the church, largely modelled by the Old Testament prophets who openly criticised their religious and political leaders for the way in which they ignored their duty to protect the rights of the destitute. Through Jesus' ministry, the New Testament also manifests an advocacy role, especially in the way Jesus defended the dignity of marginalised people, liberating them from bonds of stigmatisation and shame, and including them in the new society that his disciples represented. As followers of Jesus, the Christian church is called to have a prophetic voice. Advocacy, the public voice of churches in defence of victims of injustice, is an integral element of the church's mission for the healing of communities or, as Nordstokke (2016, p. 35) puts it: "Mission as advocacy for justice denotes the church's praxis in the public arena as affirmation and reaffirmation of the dignity of human life, both as individual and as community, as well as a widened sense of justice, encompassing the economic, social and ecological spheres."

It should, however, be noted that advocacy is different from lobbying,

which seeks to influence governments or other leaders for one's own benefit. Advocacy is primarily concerned with the situation of others, in the first place, marginalised groups in church and society (Ndaikwila, 2017), those who are unable to defend their own interests, or for various reasons are discriminated against or silenced in society. Good advocacy presupposes listening and solidarity. A good example of advocacy in recent years is the voice that many churches have given to people affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic. From the day that the churches gave space to people living with HIV and AIDS to air their stories and struggle for justice, their advocacy role grew in importance.

According to Nordstokke (2016), many people only came to trust the churches during the time of Namibian colonialism when they declared apartheid to be a heresy and advocated for independence. Not all churches raised their voice against apartheid, as some considered apartheid to be a political issue that fell under the authority of secular powers. After apartheid was dismantled, a number of churches under the Lutheran World Federation admitted that they had failed to take sides in the apartheid conflict, or that they had wrongly supported the racist government (*ibid.*). In the words of Nordstokke (2016, p. 36) “this leads one to reflect on why it is easier to confess sins committed in the past than

to respond to the social and political challenges of the present.”

## **Church History in the Context of Namibia**

Several stories from the Bible serve as evidence that the continent of Africa played a major role in early Christianity. For example, Mat. 2:13-15 talks about Jesus and his parents as refugees in Africa due to persecution by King Herod. Acts 2:10 tells the story of Pentecost, where many Africans from Egypt and regions of Libya were present, and Acts 8:27-28 the story of the Ethiopian official. Although Christianity was not born out of Africa, its presence since its infancy period never disappeared from the continent. Thus, Africa also came to play a role in the shaping of Christian theology and administration (Buys & Nambala, 2003).

Buys and Nambala (2003) documented that Christianity came to Namibia in 1806 through the work of the missionaries of the London Missionary Society (LMS). The LMS was an interdenominational organisation that included Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists (Nambala, 2017). In 1834, the English Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) became the second missionary society to reach Namibia with the Christian gospel. In 1840, the LMS discontinued its mission work

in Namibia, leaving everything to the Rhenish Missionary Society (RMS). In 1867, the WMMS also ceased its operation in Namibia, and again requested the RMS to take over its work (ibid.). According to Buys and Nambala (2003), the period between 1867 and 1869 was monopolised by the RMS as the only mission society operating in Namibia. However, realising that the vastness of the country exceeded their capacity, in 1869 the RMS invited the Finnish Missionary Society (FMS) to come to Namibia.<sup>26</sup>

The Roman Catholics established themselves in Namibia after 1888, while the Anglicans only arrived at the beginning of 1924 (Buys & Nambala, 2003). Thereafter, other denominations also started to arrive, albeit at a very slow pace. To date, about 90% of Namibian citizens are registered as Christian, with the following denominations being dominant: Lutheran (60%), Roman Catholic (20%), and Anglican (10%) (Nambala, 2017). The remaining ten percent of Namibian Christians are divided among other denominations, including the Dutch Reformed Church, Seventh Day Adventist, Baptists, Methodists, African Methodist Episcopal Church, and many other small independent churches.

There are three Lutheran churches in Namibia, namely the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia – German Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The ELCRN<sup>27</sup> was established out of the work of the RMS in 1957. The RMS first concentrated its work among the Herero people and set up mission stations at various places in the south of the country. The ELCRN has a tradition of taking on social responsibility, and as such, it still runs several social institutions and programmes across the country. The FMS, which came to Namibia at the invitation of the RMS, proceeded to the north of the country and started their mission activities at Omandongo among the Ondonga tribe in 1870 (Buys & Nambala, 2003). They later spread to the rest of the former Ovamboland and to the area of the Kavango people in the northeast. In 1954, the Finnish field mission constituted an autonomous church and took the name Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church.<sup>28</sup> By 1910, Namibia had already attracted about 13 000 German settlers (ibid.). Under the racially segregated policies of

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26 FMS was later renamed the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission.

27 At that time, the name of the church was the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South West Africa. The name was changed to ELCRN in 1990.

28 ELOC was later renamed to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (ELCIN).

South Africa's apartheid regime, white people enjoyed privileges that were reserved for whites only. However, the Namibian-Germans were served by the Rhenish missionaries alongside the indigenous people. When the RMS established the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South West Africa in 1957, the Namibian-Germans refused to join the new church. Instead, they joined forces and established an exclusive church, The German Lutheran Church in South West Africa.<sup>29</sup>

It is also important to point out that in Namibian Christian church history, there are two distinctive roles played by the mission societies. On the one hand, the RMS was an active participant in the oppression of Namibian people. They used Christianity as an instrument of colonialism, racial oppression and domestication (Buys & Nambala, 2003), whereas the FMS and the Roman Catholic church in Namibia remained neutral as Namibian people were being persecuted and denied basic human rights, freedom and dignity by the colonial masters (ibid.).

## **Namibian Churches and Social Justice before Independence**

The apartheid system imposed by South African rule in Namibia before

independence negatively affected the lives of Namibians. On 21 June 1971, the International Court of Justice declared that South Africa's continued occupation of Namibia was in fact illegal. This announcement inspired the churches to raise their voices against the apartheid regime and its concomitant injustices. To protest, two black Lutheran churches in Namibia, namely ELCRN and ELCIN, sent a joint *Open Letter* to the Prime Minister of South Africa denouncing the injustices of the apartheid regime and calling for self-rule for Namibia. At the same time the church leaderships also sent a joint *Pastoral Letter* to their congregations, asking their members to maintain peace and build bridges between Namibians of all racial groups. After the publication of the *Open Letter*, most other Namibian churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Church agreed to endorse it. In support of the *Open Letter*, the Anglican Bishop, Colin Winter, wrote: "The Christian church, as the conscience of this nation, must speak out with clarity and without fear. Apartheid must be denounced as unacceptable before God. Who else but the leaders of the church can do this?" (Winter, 1977, p. 116).

Upon receiving a copy of the *Open Letter*, the South African government

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<sup>29</sup> German ELCSWA was later renamed to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia – German Evangelical Lutheran Church.

reacted with disbelief and indignation. In his speech, South African Prime Minister Vorster raged against religious involvement in political affairs. He said “I want to say to these people, to these bishops and ministers of the religion: Your job is to teach religion, to teach the word of Christ. Your job is not to turn your pulpits into political platforms” (Auala, 1973, cited in Amweelo, 2022, p. 17).

Following their endorsement of the *Open Letter*, all major churches in Namibia, publicly and unequivocally, became an important and active part of the struggle against oppressive systems and injustices. From that point on, in solidarity with the masses who were suffering discrimination, the churches continued to express their opinion on social and political matters. They ascribed to a liberation theology which sought to foster black consciousness (Isaak, 2013) and to close the gap of racial inequality (Kobe, 2018). They preached liberation theology as part of their message of hope in a dehumanised society (Nambala, 1994). Liberation theology argues that all persons have equal significance, irrespective of colour, race or gender, and that they should receive equal consideration, respect and treatment. In a meeting held on 18 August 1971 between the Namibian Lutheran church leaders and Prime Minister Vorster, Bishop Auala refused to apologise for the churches’

actions to stand with the suffering people. Instead, he elucidated the church’s position and its duty to speak out against the apartheid regime of South Africa (Auala, 1973).

In addition to advocacy, the churches also performed a variety of humanitarian works in an effort to promote economic and social development in afflicted communities. They understood well that education is probably the shortest route to social justice. They worked among exiled Namibians and gave assistance to political prisoners by contracting lawyers to defend them (de Vries, 1996). By and large, the churches operated from a theological position directed against the prevailing fundamental injustice. With actions such as these, the church was soon recognised as the open and fearless voice of the voiceless.

However, the more the churches supported oppressed Namibians, the more the South African colonial authorities tried to sabotage their efforts. For example, in 1972 they expelled Anglican Bishop Colin Winter because of his support for the labour strike during which Namibian contract workers put down their tools and stopped working in protest against the contract labour system. Three years later, another Anglican Bishop, Richard Wood, was also expelled because he openly condemned the brutal flogging of civilians at Ondangwa. In

1973 and 1980, the printing press of the Evangelical Lutheran Ovambo-Kavango Church at Oniipa was blown up in an act of sabotage. Nevertheless, the churches did not abandon their mission for social justice.

In 1978, the Namibian churches formed the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) in order to work together. Ndaikwila (2017) noted that through the CCN, the churches cooperation was strengthened, which made their influence in society even stronger. They continued to identify with the suffering of the peasants and contract workers.

### **The Church and the New Social Justice in an Independent Namibia**

According to Angula (2022), the agenda for the creation of the state at Namibia's independence was shaped by the idealism of the liberation struggle. In fact, the framers of Namibia's Constitution believed in progress, development, and the transformation of state institutions to serve the interests of the broad masses of Namibian people who had previously been excluded from equal opportunities and participation. State institutions were created with the expectation of transforming the new society into a progressive and peaceful nation (*ibid.*). To this end, health services, education provision, rural water and road infrastructure and other

amenities were provided. Social safety nets were expanded, and employment opportunities were created.

Soon, however, economic management and fairness became a challenge, and people became less able to guard against malfeasance, mismanagement and self-enrichment (Angula, 2022). New terms, such as 'tenderpreneurs', 'fat cats', 'sight holders', 'middle men' and similar strange notions entered public discourse. Some previously disadvantaged Namibians started attaining political and economic power and more control over resources than ever before. A small group of Namibians, either occupying formal positions of authority in governmental structures or in associational structures,<sup>30</sup> started becoming wealthy beyond any reasonable need for a good life. In this way, a number of black Namibians joined the white elite (Nangolo, 2020).

On the other hand, even more people became extremely poor and vulnerable below any conceivable definition of decency (Melber, 2017). This situation led to a huge income discrepancy between the "haves" and the "have-nots". The gap between the wealthy and the poor is now so obvious that at the extremes, people of the same country

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<sup>30</sup> For example, comrades connected to the ruling party or individuals with close ties to the inner circles of governance.

seem to be living in different worlds. As Joseph Diescho once jokingly said, “What would God say arriving in the informal settlements of Gibeon or Nkurenkuru, after just having dined at the State House?” (Shejavali, 2009, p. 2). Peripheral populations have become marginalised and have dropped out of the formal economy altogether. They are becoming economically redundant and, as a result, politicians take them less than seriously, even referring to them as indolent, improvident, or fatalistic.

Basically, it did not take long for many of the hopes of earlier decades to start fading away unrealised. The visions of the 1960s to 1980s for a better Namibia brimming with employment opportunities, decent incomes, education and health for all, safe water supplies, fair terms of trade and much more either seemed no longer conceivable or difficult to realise. Year by year, we have watched and heard about deteriorating services in health and education, mounting civil disorder, decaying social fabric, lower expectations of life, dishonesty and corruption, gender-based violence and increased social vulnerability. We have seen how much of international aid and the national budget has either financed the wrong things (e.g., prestigious buildings instead of genuine development which creates jobs and helps the poor) or has been squandered

by incompetence or corruption. In view of all of these, social justice has become a burning and sensitive issue since Namibia gained its independence.

While Namibia is rich in natural resources, more and more people remain impoverished. The country is currently faced with a high level of unemployment,<sup>31</sup> especially among the youth; income inequality, generalized poverty and the challenges of pandemics are the order of the day. Some people are compelled to live under bridges and to search in dumps for their daily bread. In nearly every situation of impoverishment, the burden borne by women, who groan in constant travail, is overwhelming. Many women are forced to prostitute themselves to put bread on the table, and a growing number of children have nobody to rely on to survive except themselves (Nangolo, 2020). Heads of families and bread winners suffer from mental illnesses due to economic stress (ibid.). The poor are isolated from the mainstream economy and political dialogue. They are pushed further to the peripheries of cities and into socioeconomic underdevelopment. As the country celebrates thirty-two years of independence, social problems have become more pronounced, and many community members are denied social justice. Overall levels of economic and

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<sup>31</sup> Namibia has an unemployment rate of over 33% (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2019).

social development remain insufficient to ensure better living conditions for the people. The country can only achieve cohesion or at least convergence of core interests through the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including the church. Failure in any category undermines success in the others.

The government has tended to focus on formal frameworks and institutions to solve the problems of poverty, discrepancy and inequality in the country. However, too little attention has been paid to the interests, incentives and informal interactions of implementing parties. When not in the interest of elites, reforms are implemented partially or not at all, and are frequently circumvented (Melber, 2017). This causes deep concern and should be a formidable challenge to the government. But to turn the situation around, humanity must want to do so. As it is, there is a lack of responsibility among the most powerful role players, and there is insufficient political will to turn the system around (ibid.).

The watchdog institutions such as the Ombudsman, the Auditor General and the Anti-Corruption Commission that should scrutinise government performance are to a large extent ineffectual. The ACC, in particular, has repeatedly been criticised for being a “toothless giant” doing nearly nothing to fulfil its mandate of combatting

corruption in the country (Nangolo, 2020). The commission is accused of keeping itself busy only with petty theft. They act swiftly to arrest ordinary people with no political connections, but drag their feet when it comes to investigating high profile corruption cases involving high-ranking government officials and politicians.

Youth unemployment in Namibia is the highest in southern Africa, standing at 46.1 per cent in 2019 (Government Republic of Namibia, 2019).<sup>32</sup> The situation is of grave concern, with the highest impact being in the rural areas where employment opportunities are close to non-existent, and this is one of the major economic downfalls in the country. This is a primary reason why the recent years have witnessed many young people migrating from rural areas to urban centres in search of better opportunities, which often evade them once they are there. When one closely investigates this problem, one sees that rural livelihood options are limited for young people. Mostly, rural livelihoods depend on farming (as the main choice) and petty trading such as hairdressing and meat sales by the roadside. One big challenge for young farmers in the rural areas is the lack of access to equipment (e.g. machinery) that would allow them to ease their workload and possibly move

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<sup>32</sup> The youth are defined as those aged from 15 – 34 years old.

beyond subsistence farming. Access to a tractor, for example, is impossible for a young rural person because of its high cost. Compounded with limited access to land for young people, this constitutes a profound threat to their livelihoods.

Although youth unemployment haunts Namibia, there are no immediate solutions to the problem on offer from the government. If anything, young people suffer exclusion in the labour market due to their lack of sufficient education and supposed lack of experience. Consequently, youth unemployment has proved to have a significant impact on poverty and other social concerns, such as crime, violence, suicide, alcoholism and prostitution.

Amid such crushing conditions of disparity and inequality, voices calling for the renewal of the church are heard in a rising crescendo. There is public anger, disappointment, denunciation and lament directed at the churches. The common outcry is that the churches have failed to criticise the new SWAPO Party government for its shortcomings, in marked contrast to the position they took against the colonial government. More specifically, the churches have not shown visible enthusiasm for denouncing the abuse of power, the mismanagement of resources, social and economic injustice, corruption,

and environmental problems. It is noted, however, that Kameeta (2006) criticised certain deficiencies in the Namibian social fabric, at the same time drawing comparisons with the evils of the colonial period. He tackled issues of nepotism, corruption, racism and dishonesty.

Social justice demands equality of opportunities (Stott, 1999). Unfortunately, this is exactly where the problem lies. Contemporary Namibian society is faced with inequality of privilege, and most people find themselves unable to develop and exercise their human potential. Sadly, the church has kept silent (Isaak et al., 2020). The prophetic voice of the church is today hardly heard in public discourse concerning the most pressing issues endangering individuals' lives, whole communities, and the environment. On the rare occasions that it is heard, it appears that for many people, it has lost its compelling and convincing power. For example, the church<sup>33</sup> was one of the key actors in the Basic Income Grant (BIG) pilot project initiated by a coalition of non-state actors in 2005. The coalition raised funds mainly from church-affiliated donor institutions and piloted the project in the much-impooverished community of Otjivero-Omitara in Omaheke Region. The pilot paid a monthly cash

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<sup>33</sup> The Lutheran church in particular.

allowance of N\$100 during 2008/9 to each individual resident there. The campaign, mostly championed by the churches, had hoped to convince the government that, in the absence of any other form of income security, BIG is a meaningful alternative to implement as a universal grant. According to Kameeta (2016, p. 100), “BIG will stimulate and inspire economic activity, growth and prosperity, not only for the poor, but for the country at large. It will furthermore uplift and bring life to the rural areas and this, in turn, will gradually remove the burden of supplying water and electricity to the urban areas, because as a result of economic activities in the rural areas, people will be attracted to move back there.” In their reluctance to commit to the core idea of BIG, the government argued that giving money to the poor is like putting water in a bottomless container. To this, Kameeta stressed further that BIG “is not an unrealistic dream or utopia, but an attainable reality for which many suffered and sacrificed their lives. What we need to achieve now is the political will of unselfish leaders who carry the needs of the poor and of the whole country in their hearts. We equally need courageous and committed women and men in the footsteps of the prophets and apostles, confronting the gods of capital and greed, challenging them with the good news of liberation, justice

and peace for the poor” (ibid., p. 100). Melber (2017) recalled that at the 25<sup>th</sup> synod of ELCRN at the end of August 2013, the retiring bishop Zephania Kameeta, as one of the initiators of the pilot project, bemoaned the growing discrepancies between the rich and the poor and the lack of political will to change this trend. He warned that egoism is dividing the nation.

Nevertheless, the silence of the church cannot be overstated. It is as if the church suddenly regards its role as merely spiritual. It is as if it has abandoned its prophetic calling to participate in the world and to speak for all those who struggle for justice, to strengthen and amplify their voices in their struggle to better their conditions and contexts. Suffice it to point out that the chosen silence of the church today has contributed to its loss of prestige and intellectual influence in society. Töttemeyer is right when he comments: “The impact the Namibian churches may have on State decisions will depend on the extent to which they are still trusted in the Namibian society. What guidance do they provide, do Christian norms still remain influential and how credible is the mission the churches stand for? Losing the trust of society can bring about a schism between Church and society and can put the Church in a vulnerable position” (Töttemeyer, 2017, p. 121).

## A Church in Crisis

The country's independence has brought about new dimensions and challenges for both the Namibian churches and the state. For SWAPO Party, which headed the liberation struggle, independence became a liberating experience, and the party had to reposition itself as the ruling party. Unfortunately, the churches, under the umbrella body of the CCN, fell into somnolence after independence. They are still in a state of drowsiness from which they have not yet fully awoken. Luther's command of constant reformation challenges them.

Today the problem facing the masses is no longer an oppressive racist government as in the past. The country is now independent and has a democratic constitution as supreme law. Nevertheless, social and economic injustices also occur in this democratic country, where some people continue to feel left out or discriminated against and where many have neither hope nor purpose.

In the face of all forms of social and economic injustice, mismanagement, corruption and bad leadership, which are busy wrecking the lives of Namibian people, it appears that the political leadership has become immune to the cries of the suffering masses. While more concerned with their personal ambitions, the leaders

have no problem burying their heads in the sand and forgetting the suffering of the people. After all, it is bad leadership, mismanagement, incompetence and corruption that are at the heart of the problem (Nangolo, 2020; Angula, 2022). For example, most of the corrupt activities are taking place due to a lack of transparency and accountability on the part of those in positions of authority. If the leadership was indeed accountable and the system of governance transparent enough, there would not be such alarming cases of corruption and its concomitant inequalities. Those in positions of power have tended to ignore and even change or amend the laws that ensure efficiency, accountability and transparency.<sup>34</sup>

The Christian church cannot and should not be expected to do the same, to also disregard the cries of the suffering masses, if it is to remain faithful to its calling. What justifiable reason could there be for the churches to neglect the plight of the destitute and vulnerable in our midst? Why would the church see it best to remain silent instead of speaking the truth and confronting the policies, structures and powers perpetuating injustice and

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<sup>34</sup> For example, in the Fishrot Scandal, the (then) Minister of Fisheries, Bernhard Esau, and the (then) Minister of Justice, Sackeus Shanghala, played pivotal roles in ensuring guaranteed access fishing quotas. For this to happen, they changed and amended the laws, which allowed the minister sole rights to allocate the quotas at will.

imposing suffering on the masses? Is it that the church has become too weak to make a difference? Or has it become too timid to raise its voice in protest? Or is it that current church leaders are just not ready to grapple with difficult social, economic and political issues? The churches need to reclaim their prophetic voice and walk in solidarity with their suffering flock, and to publicly denounce all such ill forces that perpetuate inequality and injustice. These actions should not be modest, but radical, as is said in Proverbs (31:8-9): “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

As the body of Christ in the world today, the church does not exist for itself, but for the world. In the words Töttemeyer (2017, p. 120), “the church must be an active partner in the socialisation and empowering process of a society.” It is empowered through the Holy Spirit to protest, resist and seek to change whatever compounds injustice. Isaak (2013, p. 74) refers to Luther’s definition of the relationship between spirituality and socio-political-economic involvement. According to him, the *Open Letter* of 1971 already reflects what he refers to as “faith-inspired theology that is linked to social and political activism”. This argument is still valid as much as it was before Namibia’s independence.

The Lord Jesus Christ confronted real life issues. He felt the pangs of the hungry, and the alienation of the poor. The early church went out to the people and grappled with their real issues. Luther and Calvin were both involved in the toils and tribulations of the real-life issues of their time. In fact, Luther began many of his theological reflections with lament. The Namibian church today has very little in common with the New Testament church. Too often, church leaders do not talk about the real-life issues people are facing. This could be one of the reasons why people run from one church to another seeking to be heard and to be answered. It could also be the reason why “prosperity gospel” is popular among the vulnerable and marginalised.

Our churches today are big, beautiful buildings decorated with comfortable pews, stained glass windows, and air conditioners. Jesus and the New Testament church invested in people, but the churches today are more concerned with putting up big physical structures rather than focusing on the masses who are struggling.<sup>35</sup> The main quest for people today is for a gracious church, to be there for them as a watchdog, representing the interests of those who are excluded, dealing

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<sup>35</sup> Although this description of the church today is not intended to be a representation of all churches or parishes, it reflects a reality of many, and should help us to understand how the church has gone from the very clear instructions of service.

with pluralism, and serving their needs. Asamoah-Gyadu (2012) argued that ultimately, social inequalities are neither political nor economic, but are moral problems. Thus, until the church feels moral indignation over social injustices, and compassion for human suffering, it is not likely to act.

All too frequently, the church is quick to refer the responsibility for strengthening, transforming and uplifting people to the government. If things go wrong, as happens sometimes, the church does not speak up. It has seemingly removed itself from the people. It is afraid to take a clear position on pressing matters and tries to take a neutral stand. However, such an approach is not neutral and obviously does not improve the situation. Instead, it cements the status quo. Even worse, it hampers the cause of justice while crushing the hopes and aspirations of affected communities. The church should be bold enough to state its position, either publicly justifying or denouncing actions, inaction and issues that affect the masses.

Unfortunately, time is running out for the churches in Namibia to accept the prevailing challenges to the fullest. In order to comply with their mission tasks, they have to reconstitute themselves in society. Their task remains to be a prophetic and spiritual

body, but one that is simultaneously committed to action and the practice of social activism. Only then will the churches remain relevant and credible institutions in Namibian society.

The church must denounce mechanisms of exclusion and announce inclusiveness through structures and practices. Although the church has been involved to a certain extent in some national issues, e.g., the land question, the *olufuko* practice and the abortion discourse, its voice is not loud and bold enough to be heard by all. Hence, the question remains: Where is the church today?

In light of the Theology of the Cross, the church should encounter people in their daily suffering and meet their needs. It should focus attention on the suffering masses, “to identify wounds and find ways of healing and dialogue – and even more so to prevent new injustices and new wounds from being created” (Von Wietersheim & Shivute, 2017, p. 110).

This can, however, only be done if the church is indeed ready to enter the world of the people, to listen, to consult and to jointly strategise with them. A prophetic voice stands a better chance of being heard if it starts at, but is not restricted to, the local level. While the government deals with issues at a technical and legal level, the church

should meet the people where the law cannot reach, to restore their fading hope and to foster dignity, because poverty, violence, human rights violations, and injustice often deface people. For sure, the law alone cannot restore justice, cannot heal, cannot console and cannot mend (ibid.).

The voice of the church needs to be heard when the government fails or when its hands are bound, and when there is misinterpretation and misuse. Apart from denouncing, the church can also play a significant role in assisting the government in guiding expectations, dealing with disappointments, and promoting the cause of justice. The fact that Namibia is predominantly Christian is a major advantage that the church needs to use as an opportunity to access the state with ease.

There is an urgent need for the church to introduce new contextual theologies that respond to pressing contemporary issues. For example, what is the theology around homosexuality, or abortion? Theology does not only influence behaviour – it also has a impact on attitudes. There are capable theologians who can produce Christian literature for the church to make the gospel of Jesus Christ relevant to Namibia's current generation. Equally, there is an urgent need for hymnals that reflect the current context of our society to

supplement the hymnal books that were brought by the missionaries in the last century.

## **Conclusion**

It is well documented that throughout the struggle for national independence, Namibian churches served as the conscience of the nation. Namibian churches today have been criticised for not taking clear and firm public stands when it comes to gross inequalities and injustices happening in modern day Namibian society. It is self-evident that the churches need to reflect on self-understanding and their public responsibility. They must be accountable for what they do, adapt themselves, and continuously test whether they are acting in accordance with their mission and the expectations of their flock. It would be to the detriment of the churches if they did not take visible and credible actions related to their prophetic message. The churches need to reclaim their prophetic voice, by taking a definite stand on a plethora of societal issues such as inequity, unfairness, injustice, human dignity, human rights, gender equality, poverty, redistribution of wealth, corruption, unemployment, land allocation, adequate and sufficient shelter, adequate education and health care, alcoholism, drug addiction, orphans, street children, and social outcasts. Such involvement will contribute to the credibility of the

churches and their positions in society. Töttemeyer (2017) advised that, in the Namibian context with its developing society and in the aftermath of its colonial past, prophetic theology must be linked to socioeconomic responsibility.

Furthermore, in complying with and conforming to the mission of the Christian church, individual churches cannot escape their responsibility to heal wounds. Many scars are still visible. Injuries of the past are not easily forgotten. The churches also have the right to test the moral conscience of the state. This includes testing of the legality and legitimacy of state actions and establishing if they comply with Christian ethics, norms and values, and the prophetic mission of the Church.

The church is at the crossroads, where it needs to reflect biblically and theologically on its self-understanding and its public responsibility. It needs to pull itself together in order to remain faithful to its calling. Withdrawing and remaining silent is not an option. Christians and people from other faith traditions in Namibia alike look up to the church and faith-based organisations, expecting to hear a denouncement of the forces that perpetuate poverty, injustice and moral decay. It should be as Bloomquist (2007, p. 66) wrote: “The pulpit must continue shaping all the organs of society, so that

Christians can live out the different mandates, as part of Luther’s doctrine of vocation. We need pious God-fearing rulers, who are human centred, and in this way are serving Christ, politicians who are concerned about the poor and powerless.”

Pope John Paul II said: “In the final analysis we must realize that social injustice and unjust social structures exist only because individuals and groups of individuals deliberately maintain or tolerate them” (Pope John Paul II, 1993, p. 3). It is these personal choices, operating through structures, that breed and propagate situations of poverty, oppression and misery. For this reason, overcoming social sin and reforming the social order itself must begin with the conversion of our hearts.

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