

# THE PROPHETIC VOICE OF THE CHURCH IN A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH AFRICA—A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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## Abstract

This article is a reflection on the role and contribution of the church in a democratic South Africa. The involvement of the church in the struggle against apartheid is revisited briefly. The church has played a pivotal and prominent role in bringing about democracy by being a prophetic voice that could not be silenced even in the face of death. It is in this time of democracy when real transformation is needed to take its course in a realistic way, where the presence of the church has probably been latent and where it has assumed an observer status. A look is taken at the dilemmas facing the church. The church should not be bound and taken captive by any form of loyalty to any political organisation at the expense of the poor and the voiceless. A need for cooperation and partnership between the church and the state is crucial at this time. This paper strives to address the role of the church as a prophetic voice in a democratic South Africa. Radical economic transformation, inequality, corruption, and moral decadence—all these challenges hold the potential to thwart our young democracy and its ideals. Black liberation theology concepts are employed to explore how the church can become prophetically relevant in democracy. Suggestions are made about how the church and the state can best form partnerships. In avoiding taking only a critical stance, the church could fulfil its mandate “in season and out of season” and continue to be a prophetic voice on behalf of ordinary South Africans.

**Keywords:** church; moral decadence; inequality; prophetic voice; church-state relationship

## INTRODUCTION

The oppressive regime of the past was not worried about inter-political opposition: its main worry was the voice of the church<sup>1</sup> through the South African Council of Churches (SACC) and other faith formations (Resane 2017, 2). Resane argues that the mentality of “we have arrived” and the armchair theology that is practised by the church make the church forget its critical role in addressing the injustices of the apartheid era before 1994. During apartheid, the SACC and other faith formations were at the forefront of the struggle—strong and fearless. This paper argues that the church has been a crucial catalyst in the struggle against apartheid and in bringing about democracy in South Africa. However, now, 24 years into democracy, the church’s silence is very loud and this causes a huge concern considering the state of affairs this country is faced with at present.

The state of affairs in South Africa calls for a reflection on the role of the church and its engagement in the country’s democracy as a prophetic voice. To do that, it is crucial to first define what a prophetic voice is. In biblical terms, a prophet is a person who is a messenger between God and the people—a person who speaks on behalf of God. Prophets speak on behalf of God, commenting, critiquing and instructing leadership and society on issues of spirituality, governance and justice (Bentley 2013). Prophets were chosen by God from among people and sent to speak on everything and to everyone about what the LORD commanded them. It is not an easy task to fulfil because sometimes prophets speak what people are not ready to hear. Evidence of this is found in the Bible (Jeremiah 1:4–8)<sup>2</sup> where Jeremiah proclaims:

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” “Ah Sovereign LORD,” I said, “I do not know how to speak; I am too young.” But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

Bentley (2013), in drawing a comparison between the biblical prophets and the prophets of today who live in a democratic country, argues that modern society no longer functions in the same way as the world we encounter in the Scriptures, and that the function of being prophetic witnesses as exercised by the prophets of old would not be acknowledged or received positively in today’s world, a world that is characterised by diversity, complexity and tolerance.

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1 The word church as used in this article refers to the body of Christ (as in the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:18): “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of death will not overcome it.” The word church is also used with reference to the South African Council of Churches as well as other Christian formations and the role between them and the state.

2 All citations from Scripture are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

Prophets in biblical times were concerned about the moral fibre of the society; there was no way a prophet would be quiet in times of despondency. Nyiawung (2010, 4) is certainly right when he states that:

The role of prophets as teachers of moral instruction cannot be belaboured. A prophet is primarily a teacher of conscience—a counsellor. It may not be an overstatement to affirm that most problems faced by African societies are related to issues of moral crisis.

In looking at the prophetic role of the church in African societies, Nyiawung (2010) mentions that despite the independence that African countries obtained, many of them also inherited indelible scars of exploitation, injustice and misery from colonial rule. During times of moral decadence, theological reflection is called for. Morality, values, behaviour and ethics work symbiotically and synchronically to articulate and form a just society governed by just laws (Resane 2017, 5).

Prophets in the Bible were given authority by God to speak directly to everyone, also to those in authority or those with governing powers. God used the prophets to speak to the authorities of the time; for instance, during the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah, the word of the Lord came upon Jeremiah after the king and the people had disobeyed the covenant of freedom for the slaves:

Therefore, this is what the LORD says: you have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom for your fellow countrymen. So I now proclaim “freedom” for you, declares the LORD—freedom to fall by the sword, plague and famine. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth. (Jeremiah 34:17)

In speaking of the prophets who followed later in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, Bentley (2013) supports this idea when he says that their socio-religious practices were mostly directed at government powers, religious powers and/or societal powers so as to instil in their audiences an alternative consciousness and to remind them of the direction which God sought for God’s people, but which they had strayed from.

This article, which reflects on the prophetic voice of the church in a democratic South Africa, was researched methodologically by means of a literature review. It was first presented as a paper at the South African Association of Political Studies (SAAPS) regional colloquium held in Polokwane in September 2017, after which it was reworked and finalised. The reflection in the current article proceeds by exploring the following aspects:

- Firstly, the role of the church during apartheid and its catalytic engagements with the state
- Secondly, the challenges facing the church and the ways these hinder the church from being a prophetic voice
- Thirdly, possible ways in which the church can engage with the state on matters of democracy

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH DURING APARTHEID

The Christian religion in South Africa has a rich history of engaging with the state and society on a variety of issues. These issues range from matters relating to governance, moral problems and becoming the voice of the voiceless to speaking for the welfare of ordinary South Africans. The church sees this as its Christian mission and commitment. The church made resolutions and wrote statements to demonstrate its commitment to the struggle against apartheid. In 1968, the SACC published a pamphlet called the Message in which it attempted to show how apartheid and separate development were contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ:

Taking as its starting point the conviction that, in Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself and therefore made reconciliation between people both possible and essential to the Christian faith, the Message proceeded to draw out the implications of this atoning work of Christ in terms of South African society. (De Gruchy 1979, 119)

The year 1985 saw the issuing of the Kairos document (Kairos Theologians 1985), and the furore over the “prayers to end unjust rule” (Storey 1998). The Kairos document was compiled mainly by the Institute for Contextual Theology, and it critiqued not only those churches supporting the apartheid ideology but also the “liberal” multi-racial churches for their failure to offer a more radical resistance.<sup>3</sup> Storey (1998, 191) highlights the importance of the Kairos document as the most significant black theological initiative of those days. According to him, the Kairos document was seen as providing theological reinforcement for the use of violence to overthrow the regime—whatever criticism there was of the theology set out in the Kairos document and of some of its conclusions, it was heard as a clarion call for more committed action by Christians against the regime.

The Kairos document (1986) highlights the plight of the oppressed people in South Africa and the calls for a response from Christians that is biblical, spiritual, pastoral and above all prophetic. This document speaks of a theology that is grounded in the Bible and impels the church to return to searching the Word of God in order to become relevant to the experiences of the people in South Africa. In my view it is the duty of the church to not only become reactive in its response, but to also become proactive in the sense that it proclaims a message of exhortation at all times. In order to fulfil this mandate, the church should stand together and speak in one voice. Without this type of oneness in the church, where it is able to overcome barriers of denominationalism, the church’s prophetic voice will remain silent.

The effectiveness of the church’s struggle against apartheid in South Africa was shaped by its ecumenical character and by the strong bonds forged between the anti-apartheid churches in South Africa and the world church community.<sup>4</sup> Storey (1998, 188) asserts that “Had we sought to take on the regime as separate denominations, or

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3 Storey, P. 1998. “Remembering the Ecumenical Struggle against Apartheid.”

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if we had not had the support of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the world communions, the collapse of apartheid might still be years away.”

## CHALLENGES TO THE PROPHETIC VOICE

### Christian or Secular State

In 1994 when South Africa’s system of government was radically transformed away from minority domination to full participatory democracy, most citizens rightly rejoiced to see the old system die, but many made the mistake of assuming that because a system had changed, the *essential nature* of the state, therefore its relationship with the church, had also changed (Storey 2012). These words by Storey indicate that the change of the system of government does not change anything about the government.

In South Africa, which is a constitutional democracy, the government has its own way of functioning. Bentley (2012) correctly asserts that the South African Constitution has paved the way for the democracy, but also for it to be a secular democracy and not to give any preference to a particular religion or belief, but to structure society on the understanding that the Constitution itself would safeguard the rights of each individual or group falling under its authority. He further indicates that the church is no longer in the privileged position it was during the colonial and apartheid eras, a position that enabled it to speak with a voice that seemed to have as much power and authority as the political powers. The prophetic voice of the church of today seems to be having serious challenges with a democratic government. This is unlike the situation in the past under the previous government when the church could speak against social ills without fear and prejudice. Resane (2017, 6–7) correctly points out the following:

South Africa transitioned from apartheid to democracy. This muzzled the prophetic voice of the church as God was pushed to [the] periphery and/or to obscurity. Since 1994 when South Africa became a secular state, the worship escalated into being syncretic, and morals became decadent.

Even when the government could be Christian, challenges would still be there. Even among Christian formations there are many differences that are not overcome. Furthermore, it would be naïve to think that if the ruling party or grouping in a nation shared the same broad religious convictions (e.g. that of Christianity), there would be agreement on all matters of faith and life (Forster 2012). Forster (2012, 83) further argues that a secular state is rather good because of the following reasons:

First, that the State in question should be just, seeking the good of its citizens. Second that the Church, and not the State, has the responsibility for religious matters in society. It is not the responsibility of the State to further the aims of any religion—evangelism and mission are functions of the Church. One of the great hindrances to the proper functioning of the Secular State is a weak and ineffective Church. Where the Church fulfils its mission effectively and consistently it will not only evangelise the population of the nation, thus bringing about spiritual

and moral transformation, it will also hold the State accountable for just and ethical governance for the good of all of the citizens of the nation.

The above words give rise to a number of questions. Should the prophetic voice of the church become audible and more authoritative under one type of government than under another type of government? Was the church expecting a democratic government to create a Christian or a religious state? To answer these questions and deal with them in a just way may need separate enquiries and separate essays, but suffice it to say that each state, be it Christian or secular, has its own advantages and disadvantages, and these are not supposed to threaten the church or cause it to cease to practise being the church.

I concur with Forster's assertion that an ineffective church is a great hindrance to the proper functioning of the secular state. The mentality of the church that "we have arrived" (Resane 2017, 2) indicates its latent posture in responding to the plight of the people. It is my view that the church's social responsibility should be timeless; it should be there in both the religious state and the secular state. If the church continues to pray for this beautiful country, it should also continue with its prophetic ministry in the sustenance of this young democracy.

## Relationship between Church and State

When church leaders became part of the democratic government or the ruling party, it posed a threat to the prophetic voice of the church and it compromised the prophetic ministry of the church. When that happens, the church loses its grip and its authority to speak in one voice without any fear of division from inside. How can the church stand and declare, "thus says the LORD" if it is in the employ of the government and if it would be more comfortable and show its loyalty if it says, "thus says the ruling party or the government." The words of Jesus attest to the consequences of a situation such as this:

Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub. (Luke 11:17-18)

Jesus also said:

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. (Matthew 6:24)

This kind of an identity crisis that is being experienced in the church, a church that fought against apartheid and now serves the democratic government, is cause for concern. In referring to the identity crisis of the church, Bentley (2013, 263) cites the words of Storey (2012) that "the identity crisis was the fact that so many of those in the church who fought gallantly against apartheid moved to occupy seats in government or

became so close to the new ruling powers that it was difficult for the church to see the wood for the trees.” Storey (2012, 15) further indicates that:

Three of the strongest Church voices of the struggle era were silenced in different ways: one partly muted by being appointed to the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, another sadly compromised by scandal and jailed for theft and fraud, and a third abdicating his prophetic authority by signing on to Caesar’s payroll.

The same sentiments are shared by Masuku (2014, 164) concerning the close relationship between church leaders and the state when he asserts that “another point that silenced the prophetic voice of the church is the close relationship that exists between individual religious leaders and the post-1994 democratic government, occupying senior positions ... this trend silenced them and they became recipients of petitions from victims of oppression during protest marches.” Storey (2012) reinforces this point when he states that proximity and praise lead to silence—you cannot dine with Caesar on the Friday and prophesy to him on the Sunday.

Many clergy went into politics, probably out of compassion for the suffering masses; however, the decision to do so excluded them from the prophetic ministry into which they were called (Nyawung 2010). Nyawung rightly asserts that although the presence of the clergy in politics might have had some positive effects, the frustration thereof has seemed to be traumatic both to the church and to the clergy as individuals. Some of these prophets joined the civil service, some retired, some became managers of academic institutions and others joined black economic empowerment companies (Buffel 2017). Buffel’s (2017, 10) argument is that the SAAC’s prophetic voice which used to be very audible is now blunt, and that is so because they are pursuing a relationship of partnership with the governing party, the ANC.

The other concern is when political leaders use the church, more especially the Pentecostal churches, for canvassing in order to be elected into office. Storey (2012) refers to the statement of Bentley that even the National Inter-Faith Council under the leadership of Pastor Ray McCauley began to show signs of the blurring of lines between state and church as it became so close to the government that it even gave political parties a platform at their church services to canvass for votes before elections (Bentley 2013). Common in the current state of affairs is the promotion, elevation and commendation of the country’s president and some cabinet ministers by the leaders of African Initiated Churches, especially those of charismatic inclinations (Resane 2017, 4). In most of these churches, when politicians visit they are given a platform to address the masses; they are also prayed for and given the assurance that God is on their side. Bentley (2013) expresses the view that this is not only affecting the Pentecostals but even mainline denominations that belonged to the SACC, causing congregations to pray more about social problems than become actively involved in tackling social needs. If politicians visit church services with “fat offerings,” the church should be able to stand its ground and rebuke and call to order the hand that wants to feed it.

## Divisions in the Church

The dividing lines of race, colour, creed, class and gender in the church seem not to be getting any shorter: they seem to be getting so long that it is going to be hard to reconcile these divisions or do anything at all about them. This reminds one about the prayer that Jesus offered for the church:

Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. ... My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:11, 20–21)

The prayer that Jesus offered speaks to all generations of all times, and to people of all races, classes, tongues and gender. This prayer will always serve as a reminder to the church that we can overcome our differences and are able to embrace the understanding of our unity in diversity. It is this oneness that denotes equality of persons before God.

In order for the church to be for all the peoples of the land, it has to rediscover its unity in Christ—it must recognise that “the middle wall of partition” has been torn down through Christ and that above all else this means that Christ has destroyed the barriers between black and white, Englishman and Afrikaner, rich and poor (De Gruchy 1979, 235). Nyiawung (2010) rightly observes that the behaviour of the church and its ministers has failed to substantiate their accompanying testimonies where cases of hatred, racism, sexism, corruption, moral decadence, mismanagement and poor leadership have eroded the very fabric of the church.

## Black Liberation Theology

Black Theology was conceived in South Africa in the mid-1960s and flourished from the 1970s when white supremacy perpetuated by the apartheid state was at its zenith (Dolamo 2016). According to Dolamo, South African liberation movements had their eyes fixed almost exclusively on national political liberation prior to 1994 and not on other forms of freedom. He argues that together with its secular ally, which is Black Consciousness, Black Theology in South Africa (BTSA) has principles and values that could still be brought to bear on the way in which theology is currently practised in South Africa and in Africa, and it responds well to its challenges, hopes and aspirations. He makes mention of five values, namely, black identity, education and research, development projects, leadership and governance, and gender justice as values that are crucial if the Black Conscious Movement, BTSA and the church want to respond relevantly to the seriousness of the challenges of democracy. Taking, for instance, the value of leadership and governance, Dolamo (2016, 54) rightly observes that BTSA and its collective, together with the SACC, have been quiet about the corrupt practices in South Africa, and he asserts that:



This is the political environment in which BTSA must do theology nationally, continentally and globally. As an African theology, BTSA should partner with other African theologies and ecumenical churches and organisations as well as other religions in Africa in order to help address Africa's critical challenges. (Dolamo 2016, 55)

Lack of theologies of liberation contributes to the lack or minimal involvement of prophetic voices in democracy in South Africa, and this leads to bad governance. Black Theology was not only a resistance movement but also a movement of positive empowerment, a precept that has been a fundamental one underlying Black Theology from the time of its inception in the USA in 1966 and beyond its introduction into South Africa during the 1980s by young scholars such as Simon Maimela (Landman 2010). There is a need for Black Theology to be part of the curriculum in the institutions of higher learning today. This will resurrect and unleash the sleeping prophets, thus making liberation theology part of the societal realities of the masses. Though our post-liberation context has drawn many of our productive black theologians into governmental and educational leadership, the trajectories established by Black Theology remain intact, though the capacity to develop them has been somewhat diminished (West 2010, 12). Since many Black Liberation theologians moved into government, Liberation Theology has now degenerated into nepotism, and has spawned a recreated "state theology" that is simply a correlate of "white theology" (Landman 2010).

Manala (2010, 527) correctly acknowledges the importance of Black Theology when he argues that one of the important tasks of the black church even today is to continue the task of liberation which can best be achieved through promoting Black Theology. I concur with Manala that the black church has in the past successfully employed Black Theology during the struggle against apartheid and it should continue to be the black church's instrument for intervention in crises and social ills such as corruption, domestic violence, unemployment, poor service delivery and racism facing black people.

## THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN DEMOCRACY

The church has a role to play in helping the state fulfil God's expectations: this role is to remind the state about those expectations, and to hold it accountable for its task (Storey 2012, 8). One of the promises that the South African government made is that human settlement issues would be given priority. Nevertheless, there are many protests around the country about the provision of places to live and about the building of houses to ensure a better life for all. The state does not deliver as expected and it is unable to meet the demand: the more promises it makes before elections, the more people expect—yet less is delivered. To address this dilemma, the church's prophetic voice should give direction to the nation by warning, advising, rebuking and correcting where necessary. However, the church should continue to advocate meeting the needs of the poor and the voiceless.

De Gruchy (1979, 225–227) outlines the role of the church as a prophetic witness in respect of the state as follows:

1. The church has to support the state in its task of maintaining order.

De Gruchy states that the church should remind the state that justice is the only basis for true order: those who do good, who love and serve their fellowman, care for the poor and seek the welfare of the downtrodden and the liberty of the oppressed, should have no reason to fear the authority of the state. If in some way the state is no longer able to do its task in the maintenance of order, the church should not become the state and try to maintain order. What it should do is to call the state to task and ensure that there is no partiality when it comes to justice.

2. The church has to continually remind the state of its boundaries.

De Gruchy calls this task the greatest service the church can render to the state. In essence it is the task of the church to prevent politics from becoming religion and to prevent state policies from becoming idolatrous. There should be boundaries between religion and politics. The church too should not lose sight of its boundary and should prevent ending up sounding like a political party.

3. The church must not expect too much of the state.

De Gruchy reiterates the point about the fallen nature of the state—it is not the kingdom of God, neither is it run by saints. Keeping this in mind, the church should encourage the state to take steps in the right direction, no matter how small these steps may be.

4. The church dare not expect too little from the state.

The role of the church is to ensure that there is justice and furtherance of peace. The church is the advocate of the voiceless, powerless, marginalised and poor, and as such the church cannot rest until justice is done.

5. The church cannot expect of the state what it cannot achieve in its own life.

The church's behaviour should not compromise the message it proclaims. The church has no right to be heard when it speaks without competence, or when it says nothing worth saying.

6. The church has to resist the temptation to regard those in authority as the enemy.

When the church passes judgement on the state, for instance by opposing some of its policies or rejecting some of its programmes, or when the relationship between the church and the state is one of conflict, it does not mean that the state should be regarded as the enemy.

The role of the church is to bring the good news. If the good news does not relate to our existential and historic situation, it would not be good news: if it does not speak to the black South African both as a person and as someone affected by apartheid (the two cannot be separated), then it is bad news (De Gruchy 1979).

The following biblical text can be interpreted as a summary of four theological mandates that can assist the church in being loyal to its prophetic voice:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18–19)

The four theological mandates are:

1. The church is anointed by the Spirit to be a preaching church.

It is the responsibility of the church to become a “speaking church.” It should be able to speak without showing any kind of favours to anybody. It should remember to speak also for those who are not able to speak for themselves, in that way becoming the voice of the voiceless. When the nation is in distress about matters such as unemployment, which the government has promised to address but which they are unable to deliver on, the church should rise up under the power of the Spirit and speak with authority, calling the government to task. Good news to the poor is when the church not only concerns itself with the spiritual well-being but also the physical and social well-being of the people. Good news to the poor, the marginalised, the homeless, the jobless, the sick and the voiceless should be relevant to their circumstances.

2. The church is commissioned to be a liberating church.

When there are many injustices, the prophetic voice of the church cannot be silent. When the rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer, when individuals enrich themselves through the resources of the people, the church cannot fold its arms and watch when the masses eat the crumbs that fall from the state's table. The concept of radical financial transformation is long overdue; it should have been implemented during the very first decade after the ruling party came into power. Actually, the church should rise and take the scroll and discourage corruption, because it is an act of stealing from the masses, who are mostly poor.

3. The church is empowered to empower the powerless.

If South Africa is a country where power is in the hands of one gender only, where women and children are victims of domestic violence and different kinds of abuse, the church should go public and demonstrate that it is empowered to fight for the oppressed and abused. If the church is still struggling within its own structures with the issue of women's position in the leadership of the church, how will it see and hear the cry of the many women and children of South Africa who are abused?

4. The church is mandated to be an encouraging church.

The church should not only be critical of the state and act as a watchman of the state. When the state carries out its mandate and “rises to the occasion,” the church should applaud and encourage the state. The church should be able to declare peace when

indeed it is reflected in the lives of ordinary South Africans. The pronouncements of prophecies that are signals of the presence of the Lord in the nation should be made when they are clearly apparent. The church should not say all is well when this is the case only for a portion of the population while the masses are in misery. If it is well with the ordinary people, the voiceless and the marginalised, then the church can declare “the year of the Lord’s favour.”

The prophetic voice of the church should speak audibly and should lead as it is anointed by the Spirit. The church should lead from the front and by example, not only through the words it speaks but also through its actions; this is in line with the empowerment of the Spirit. To be a prophetic witness in the new South Africa, the witness should maintain a balance between prophetic proclamation and prophetic action. Most importantly, the church’s prophetic role in the South African democracy is to answer the call, through word and action, to speak to the reality of human dignity and justice among its people (Bentley 2012).

## CONCLUSION

The church has been a catalyst in the struggle against apartheid and in bringing about democracy in South Africa. The committed ecumenical action by the church against the old regime yielded good results. If the church had dared to struggle against apartheid through the actions of individual denominations, the results would not have been as satisfactory as they are now. It is in the era of democracy that the church seems to be faced with insuperable challenges that have the potential to thwart the hard-fought-for democracy. With so many ills that are surfacing with democracy, the church needs to rise as a “senior voice” that speaks after all others have spoken to show direction and bring hope to this beautiful country.

The church’s loyalty to the state needs to be revisited in order to see which Master the church is serving, because it is impossible to serve both God and the government. Loyalty to any political party by the church causes the spiritual deprivation of the people because the prophetic voice is silenced and can no longer serve the poor and the voiceless.

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