

“Be Spiritual and Employ Technology in your Ministry”: An Experience of Sermons Amid COVID-19 by Bishop Harrison Sakala of Tabernacle of David Assembly of God in Zambia

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Abstract

Pentecostal preachers in Zambia, like Bishop Harrison Sakala of the Tabernacle of David Assembly of God, reoriented their sermons during online worship services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in its early stages. The article shows that the outbreak of COVID-19 reshaped the sermons and the role of the “men of God” therein. They blended their sermons with an emphasis on embracing science as opposed to being overly spiritual, adhering to prevention and control measures stipulated by the health authorities and the state, and instilling hope in the masses. The article concludes that the sermons not only pointed to the media as sites for communicating shifts within Pentecostal circles on tackling the pandemic but also signified the collaborative role played by Pentecostal preachers in mitigating the pandemic through the media.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; media; mediatisation; COVID-19; sermons; Zambia

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Introduction

The interaction between Pentecostalism and the media is not new. In fact, Pentecostalism has dominated studies on public religion and the mediatisation of religion in Africa.¹ More recently, Benyah (2019) has analysed the public manifestation of religion in Ghana, focusing on how the synergy of the mass media and democracy precipitated new forms of religious expression. Khanyile (2016) also studied how church performances and practices of the controversial South African Neo-Pentecostal church (End Time Disciples Ministries led by Prophet Penuel) were represented on Facebook. Additionally, Togaresi (2012) has explored the appropriation of new media technologies by modern Pentecostal Christians in Botswana and Zimbabwe. Accordingly, it is widely acknowledged that the increasing use of communication devices has helped religious actors to take advantage of the prevalence and accessibility of mass media in Africa to continue spreading religious messages across the continent (Faimau, Lesitaokana and Behrens 2018, 2). Thus, the outbreak of COVID-19 could only entail reshaping the interaction between Pentecostals and the media.

The outbreak of COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan, China and in Zambia on 18 March 2020 (Ministry of Health (MoH) 27 July 2020). To curb the spread of the virus, measures such as social distancing and lockdowns in certain towns were implemented and these were supported by the Public Health Act Cap 295 of the Laws of Zambia. The prevention and control measures had an impact on different spheres of life, including religious communities. Different religious groups responded to the crisis in different ways, including reorienting their worship services. Of interest, are the religious actors, precisely the Pentecostal preachers, and how the pandemic reshaped the message conveyed in their sermons.

Aware of the complexities surrounding the categorisation and typologies of Pentecostalism in Zambia as discussed by Lumbe (2008) and Munshya (2015), the article takes the view that Pentecostals could be more defined by their beliefs and practices. Therefore, the notion of Pentecostalism is informed by Asamoah-Gyadu's (2005,389) observation that Pentecostalism is that stream of Christianity that emphasises personal salvation in Christ as a transformative experience brought about by the Holy Spirit. Pneumatic phenomena such as speaking in tongues, prophecies, visions, healing, miracles, and signs and wonders in general, are sought, accepted, valued, and consciously encouraged among members.

1 Examples of scholars who have long engaged with the subject in Africa: Hackett, R.I. 1998. "Charismatic/Pentecostal Appropriation of Media Technologies in Nigeria and Ghana." *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 258–277. Marshall-Fratani, R. 1998. "Mediating the Global and Local in Nigerian Pentecostalism." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28:278–315; Meyer, B. 2002. "Pentecostalism, Prosperity and Popular Cinema in Ghana." *Culture and Religion* 3(1): 67–87.

Since deliverance services were halted during the pandemic, the focus was only on online worship services. Thus, the article explores the impact of the pandemic on Pentecostal churches and how the Pentecostal preachers responded to the pandemic in the media. It specifically addresses the following research question: “How did COVID-19 reshape the messages communicated by Pentecostal preachers in their streamed sermons during the pandemic as exemplified by Bishop Harrison Sakala of Tabernacle of David Assembly of God in Zambia?”

This research question is situated in the early stages of the pandemic. It employs the mediatisation of religion as an analytical lens and draws on content analysis of online worship services, supplemented by commentaries in the media. It is also purposively situated in the narrative of one Pentecostal preacher in Zambia, namely Bishop Harrison Sakala of the Tabernacle of David Assembly of God in Lusaka. The article focuses on Bishop Sakala not only because of his position in Pentecostal circles in the country but also his popularity in Zambian public life. For example, besides serving as General Secretary and Treasurer of the Pentecostal Assembly of God (PAOG) and as chairperson of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia (EFZ), he also served as the Chief Bishop of the whole Pentecostal Assemblies of God in Zambia and President of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Africa (PAOA). Prior to the pandemic, Bishop Sakala was also renowned for public engagement on numerous topical issues of national interest, including political commentary. The article begins by highlighting the analytical lens and situating the inquiry in existing literature. It then discusses the methods and gives a brief biographical account of Bishop Sakala. Next, it explores how a Pentecostal preacher reoriented his message to respond to the pandemic and ends by drawing a conclusion.

Analytical Lens

The article employs mediatisation as a framework to aid the understanding of the intersection between Pentecostal preachers and their message to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mediatisation is a social and cultural process through which the mass media influences the social changes that occur in any given society (Hjarvard 2017; Faimau, Lesitaokana and Behrens 2018). It can also be said that mediatisation can be influenced by changes in society. Accordingly, the presence of new media has changed the ways in which religious beliefs are practised as religious meanings are now also expressed through new media. Schulz (2004) identifies four kinds of processes in which the media can change human communication and interaction, namely:

- extending human communication abilities in both time and space;
- substituting social activities that previously took place face-to-face;
- instigating an amalgamation of activities; and
- making actors in many different sectors adapt their behaviour to accommodate the media’s valuations, formats, and routines.

Based on these processes, mediatisation theory as a framework has been linked to religion by aiding the understanding of how the media works as a channel for conveying sermons. For example, as conduits of communication, the media is the primary source of religious ideas. As language and cultural environments, the media shapes religious imagination in accordance with the genres of popular culture and takes over many of the social functions of the institutionalised structures by providing both moral and spiritual guidance and a sense of community, respectively. Given the way the media intersects with religion, the article takes the view that Pentecostalism would intersect with the media in similar ways. It is also assumed that this interaction would not be shaped by media availability only, but also by repackaging the content based on real-world circumstances. Based on this understanding of media processes, the article focuses on media as conduits of communication as the interest was to understand how Pentecostal preachers used the media to convey religious ideas during the pandemic in the early weeks of the pandemic in the country, as well as the nature of the religious ideas which were conveyed.

Pentecostalism and COVID-19 in Existing Literature

The review of literature is related to the impact of COVID-19 on Pentecostalism, the role of Pentecostalism in the pandemic, and the intersection of Pentecostalism and the media. To begin with, studies on African Pentecostalism and the pandemic have focused on prosperity gospel. For example, Ukah (2020) critiqued the self-image of African Pentecostalism in the context of African economic indices and the ravaging coronavirus pandemic. Ukah argued that the COVID-19 pandemic presented an important challenge and opportunity to test Pentecostal leaders' doctrines and claims. However, Pentecostal responses to the pandemic were uncoordinated and failed to adequately mobilise resources to serve its members and the larger society in moments of need. Similarly, Asamoah-Gyadu (2021) problematised the message of health and wealth among Pentecostals. He observed that the negative effects of the coronavirus on people proved a theologically challenging endeavour for contemporary Pentecostalism (a religion that preaches and teaches a theology of human flourishing through the principles of prosperity). He argued that during the pandemic, the monolithic understanding of flourishing preached by some Pentecostals was challenged by the reality of evil and that a more holistic response was needed.

This focus on the impact of the pandemic on Pentecostalism, especially the prosperity gospel could be understood in relation to the expectations that it could be employed during the crisis. On the contrary, with the advent of the pandemic, many prosperity gospel preachers were silent. Leo Igwe (*Zambian Eye Newspaper* 28 March 2020) also wonders why individuals and institutions in Africa that claimed to possess faith healing powers had been silent during the pandemic, refused to make any direct or indirect claim to heal any infected person, but instead complied with the ban on religious gatherings.

Several scholars have studied Pentecostal worship during the pandemic. For example, Addo (2020) conducted digital ethnographic research on African Pentecostal communities in Northern Italy by analysing how offline liturgical practices were translated into online platforms such as Zoom and Free Conference Call during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The approach taken by Addo tended to preoccupy many scholars writing on the intersection of religion and the pandemic by paying attention to the mediatisation of worship. For example, Aluko (2020) used the Nigerian context to analyse the various responses of the Christian denominations to the emergence of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown of the whole country. He observed that some churches devised a means that enabled congregants to worship together through the services provided over the Internet, such as streaming their services online, using Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Zoom, and Vimeo.

Wildman et al. (2020) also concluded that most religious groups were innovating their means of worship in response to opposing demands of collective worship and social distancing. They conducted online services by streaming live videos of suitably modified rituals, sermons, and prayers, including disseminating practical health information and offering urgent financial help in the wake of rapidly degrading economic conditions. Parish (2020) further drew similar conclusions that churches of all denominations were swift to exploit the capacity of social media, websites, and online communities. He argues that they used these as a conduit for religious belief, liturgy, and pastoral support during periods of social distancing in which the doors of places of public worship were closed.

Other studies have addressed the contributions made by Pentecostal churches during the pandemic. For example, Frahm-Arp (2020) concluded that although the Prophetic Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity (PPCC) had been shown to include abusive practices and theologies that undermined the equality of all believers, the online church services streamed by three PPCC churches on their Facebook pages during the first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis in South Africa offered people a message of empowerment in a time of helplessness. Similarly, Pavari (2021) studied the role of Pentecostal church leadership in COVID-19 in Zimbabwe and showed that leaders used biblical and encouragement messages, prayers, and counselling to help members overcome fear at the onset of the pandemic. From the Ghanaian context, Animante, Akussah and Darko-Adjei (2021) examined the use of social media platforms by leaders of the charismatic churches in Ghana during the COVID-19 era. They concluded that there was a positive perception towards the adopted social media platforms as the church leaders found the social media platforms very useful.

In Zambia, specific studies on Pentecostal practices during the COVID-19 pandemic were yet to emerge as the focus tended to be on Christianity's responses to the pandemic in general. For example, Kroesbergen-Kamps (2020) studied religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Reformed Church in Zambia (RCZ). She observed that the pastors in Zambia acknowledged the need for communal action while their live-

streamed services showed an emphasis on the vertical dimension (the relationship with God). She concluded that there was evidence that the initial vertical dimension of the services shifted to more horizontal concerns (relationship with people) as the pandemic progressed.

The foregoing studies form a foundation for the current inquiry. It is also clear that emerging scholarship on Pentecostalism on COVID-19 has yet to deal adequately with the specific ways in which the pandemic reoriented the sermons of Pentecostal preachers during the pandemic. It was therefore deemed imperative to explore the representations of the impact of the pandemic on Pentecostal churches and how Pentecostal pastors reshaped their messages in their online worship services during the pandemic. This article is significant for contributing to emerging scholarship on Pentecostalism and the pandemic from the Zambian context.

Methods

The article examines how the pandemic changed the Pentecostal preacher's sermons in Zambia during the early stages of COVID-19. It uses insights from a narrative research design study. The primary method of data collection was content analysis in the form of online worship services and interviews in the media. One Zambian Pentecostal preacher namely, Bishop Harrison Sakala of the Tabernacle of David Assembly of God, was purposively selected. The Bishop and the Tabernacle of David Assembly of God were purposively selected following Creswell's recommendation (2007) that narrative researchers select one or more individuals whose stories are to be told. Kothari (2004) also recommends nonprobability sampling for narrative qualitative studies. Similarly, online services in the initial stages of the pandemic (from 29 March to 7 June 2020) were purposively selected for analysis. Social media was also used as a source of data because as observed by Hackett et al. (2014), social media was an area of research just as religious websites were dynamic archives of religious worlds.

This selection was not for generalisation but for providing depth into how COVID-19 affected the sermons conveyed by Pentecostal preachers in the early stages of the pandemic. Similarly, the context of the Pentecostal preachers in the media sphere was shaped by the lockdown measures. This required the adoption of data collection methods suitable during a pandemic.

Common themes were identified and analysed in the data. The analysis largely drew on the narrative research restorying approach in which the narratives about phenomena are reorganised into some general type of framework which consists of gathering stories, analysing them for key elements of the story, and then rewriting the narratives to place them within a chronological sequence (Ollerenshaw and Creswell 2002, 329–347). The data collection and analysis also adhered to the guidelines for handling documentary sources centred on credibility, authenticity, representativeness, and meaning (Scott 1990,6).

A Brief Biography of Bishop Harrison Sakala and His Place in Zambian Pentecostal Circles

This brief biography draws on accounts that have been written about Bishop Sakala.

Harrison was brought up in the Ndeke compound of Kitwe. After completing his primary school education in Ndeke, he progressed to Kitwe High School for his secondary education. He went to Trans-Africa Theological for his ministerial training. Briefly, he pastored Peniel Assembly of God Church in Chambishi town before moving to Kasama. He insisted that the Pentecostal Church in Kasama also be called Peniel. He led this congregation for about eleven years, during which time he planted more than twenty-seven churches in the area surrounding Kasama, before going to the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (Zambia) (PAOG-Z) headquarters to serve as full-time General Superintendent (Chalwe 2008, 70).

Bishop Sakala founded the Tabernacle of David Assembly of God, a church of Pentecostal persuasion that emphasises evangelism, discipleship, and missions. It began in January 2004 and was officially launched on 15 April 2005. Since then, the church has grown and contributed to the work of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God in Zambia. The Tabernacle of David Assembly of God is an associate member of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God churches in Zambia. The PAOG-Z defines itself not as a denomination, but as a fellowship of “self-supporting, self-governing, and propagating Assemblies which believe, obey and propagate the full gospel message” (PAOG-Z no date, 1) in Kaunda (2017, 25). It is acknowledged that PAOG-Z’s autonomous nature has forced it to uphold a variety of worship systems, from the classical to the neo-Pentecostal type of spirituality (Mandryk 2010, 892–893).

Bishop Sakala is also described as an apostle and teacher in the Pentecostal circles. Mentored by Fraited Banda and Winstone Broomes, Bishop Sakala is also considered a peacemaker.

Harrison has always ensured that unity prevailed whenever the Pentecostal Church went through turbulent times. During the ten years he has served as General Superintendent, Harrison focused largely on good relationships among PAOG-Z pastors; making unity the watchword for the Church. He has also earnestly encouraged young people to consider full-time service (Chalwe 2008,71).

Bishop Sakala also served in different positions within the Pentecostal circles. For example, he served as Chief Bishop of PAOG-Z and chairperson of the Pentecostal Alliance of Africa of the World Pentecostal Alliance. He was also the president of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zambia for six years. Currently, he is serving as a senior minister at the Tabernacle of David Assembly of God and lecturer at the Rhema Bible Training Centre. Bishop Sakala was married to Pastor Elizabeth Chileshe Mutale Sakala (who died on 19 January 2021) and has five children. In the wake of the pandemic, Bishop Sakala was one of the Pentecostal preachers who shared his reflections on COVID-19 with the public in the media and live-streamed church services. Hence, his

narrative fitted well in the aspirations of the inquiry whose interest was to explore how Pentecostal preachers reoriented their religious message during the early stages of the pandemic.

A Pentecostal Preacher's Message in a Pandemic

The messages about COVID-19's impact on the church and a Pentecostal preacher's message focused on rethinking the idea of the church, following prevention guidelines, sharing accurate information, and instilling hope.

Rethinking the Notion of the Church and Call to Adherence to Prevention Message

In relation to rethinking the notion of the church, it was emphasised that the church is not a building, but people. In this regard, the church needed to find ways to reach people in the absence of physical contact.

COVID-19 has brought innovation and calling the church to be dynamic and innovative because church is not building, church is people. It is possible to minister to the church even when you, the minister of the gospel is not [physically] present. We have technology which gives us a better footing. We can take advantage of technology and still reach people because we have to fight this battle together and not be an impediment to what others are doing in order to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 (Bishop Sakala, interview with Lungu, 11 April 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=19G_cBUVT0M).

Many religious communities used the media during the pandemic to reach out to members by rethinking what it meant to be a church. The realisation that the pandemic entailed a shift in what it meant to be a church was also in line with the observation (with reference to the Catholic Church in the Philippines) by Mendoza (2020, 218) that in so many ways, the lockdown unintentionally made the church question what it meant to engage in mission. In this case, methods of serving people were redirected to virtual spaces, thereby affirming how the media became conduits for conveying religious ideas during the pandemic.

The sermons also demonstrated the reality of the pandemic. For example, in all the observed online sermons, Bishop Sakala always started with a reflection on the pandemic as reflected in the following:

Hope you are keeping safe and obeying what our leaders are telling us- putting on a face mask to shield self and neighbours. And not forgetting to stay home. We have been told to stay home. And when you stay home, we will help mitigate the spread of coronavirus which has harmed most countries in the world...let us work together to join hands with our leaders to avoid going into a disaster in the country (26 April 2020)

We should not be careless; we still maintain the aspect of methods they have given us to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Lives have changed, we are not doing things like before, a number of restrictions, and we still have to observe that (7 June 2020).

Besides bringing a shift in the utilisation of media technologies, the pandemic also reflected how the media became an avenue for conveying sermons blended with COVID-19-related messages. In this case, while Bishop Sakala was using the media prior to the pandemic as an alternative means of reaching out to the public, the onset of the pandemic meant that this became the sole avenue for engaging with the public. This is in line with the conclusion drawn among Ghanaian charismatic churches that the use of social media platforms by the churches was more compelling during the COVID-19 pandemic, where social gathering was discouraged (Animante, Akussah and Darko-Adjei 2021, 26). Pandemics made religion more visible in public life through the media and technology.

Advocating for Listening to the Official Voice and Disseminating the Right Information

People were also called to listen to the official voice regarding the pandemic. For instance, the beginning of sermons which were often centred on the pandemic specially appealed to the public to adhere to the health guidelines:

There are many things being thrown on the internet regarding the coronavirus, others have taken it to be an opportunity to sell their merchandise, their herbal concoctions, they are trying to sell them now by saying this is the way you can prevent this and that but I want to say now and echo the words which our leaders have said, don't listen to any other source, listen from the official voice (26 April 2020).

The remedies prescribed by the medical personnel were also encouraged:

Stay at home, stay home we are being told, don't try to look for other remedies. When you trust in God, be assured God will sustain you. People are saying forget about praying, forget about God, this has everything to do with science, I say again, there are two principles we need to adhere to in this situation: the principle of faith in God and embracing knowledge (29 March 2020).

While the insistence on using remedies prescribed by the medical personnel could be situated in the context of so many remedies in the media, this could also be tied to the stance taken by the preacher on the integration of religion and science. Other religious leaders also shared the same sentiments by instructing their members to adhere to messages that encouraged prevention.

Adhere and follow all instructions and guidelines being shared by the government and other authentic stakeholders and pray for God's intervention. It was time that science and the gospel worked together to save the world from calamity. Encourage people to go for medical attention while you pray for them. Avoid telling your members to depend on prayer alone. Let them get both prayer and medical attention from health facilities.

The Church must avoid being an obstacle in the fight against the spread of the coronavirus disease (Church Mother Bodies Statement, 28 March 2020).

Aware of this official position on the pandemic, the possibility of people using different remedies could not be ignored. What was significant perhaps was the religious leaders' efforts to encourage people to pray and adhere to the medical methods of dealing with the disease.

Additionally, the pandemic gave the church a central role in disseminating the right information.

At this point, my message to the church and community is that let us minimise conjecture, mostly the men of the collar. People have so much faith in us, so much respect for us so what we say at times can be paddled as gospel truth. It's time to be spiritual but not over spiritual, we must be factual in the sense that we must also embrace science because science at the moment is guiding the entire human race on how to fight against COVID-19 (Bishop Sakala, interview with Lungu, 11 April 2020).

Bishop Sakala advocated for responsible use of the pulpit.

Be sober in that you don't allow what is flying in the air to be consolidated by a spiritual voice because we represent the Lord here and people seem to have a certain respect for men of God, whatever we say is taken. You know I can stand in church and as a Pentecostal preacher, I can simply say...the first five to come and give an offering, they will receive a blessing and I will not miss clientele, they will come. So, when I say I sense the spirit, this corona thing is not a virus, it's a demon, they will believe. So, speak science now, don't speak spiritual (Bishop Sakala, interview with Lungu, 11 April 2020).

The emphasis on disseminating the right information and looking to science was complemented by prayers for the scientists:

Our prayer goes to the scientific world...Lord this is the time we need you again so that you may open the eyes of those who are working hard to find vaccines to protect the human race from this devastating enemy (Bishop Sakala 26 April 2020).

The focus on cautioning people to heed the advice of the medical personnel points to the shift to complement prayers with science during the pandemic. This was done with an awareness of the influential voice of the clergy. As observed by Marshall and the World Politics Review's observation (2020, Doctrine 53) millions of people worldwide look more to religious authorities than health officials for guidance on how to behave and what to believe during a crisis. Based on this, it could be said that as opposed to popular Pentecostal discourses of miracles of healing of any disease, the narrative of the Bishop depicts a Pentecostal preacher's constructive role during a pandemic. It also appears that while discourses on Pentecostalism and the pandemic were centred on the gospel of prosperity, other typologies of Pentecostalism were making what could be

deemed a positive contribution to Zambian public life, which scholarship needed to capture. As Munshya (*The Mast Newspaper*, 16 April 2020) observes:

Mention Pentecostals, and what comes to the mind of most people, is the excessive lives of its two or three leaders, at most. Their lavish lifestyles. Their mansions. And their unnecessarily many cars...Mention Pentecostals, and “sowing the seed” comes to mind...but [some] Pentecostal clergy are doing great work in their communities... the challenge is upon the Pentecostals themselves to explain the good work they are doing (n.p).

It could be argued that the mediatisation of religion during the pandemic brought to light the constructive contributions of some Pentecostal preachers to the pandemic. Hence scholarship is needed to capture the diverse roles of Pentecostal preachers during the pandemic in different contexts.

Instilling Hope

Additionally, hope was a prominent message conveyed during the pandemic. In this regard, emotional support was conveyed through sermons and prayers centred on hope in the moment of distress. Examples of prayers included:

May your spirit reveal something to someone passing through distress and Lord many a nation we are all under a moment of distress, big and small, we are surrounded by an enemy that we are trying to conquer. And as David was in a situation and found peace in you, help us to look to you in times like these (Bishop Sakala, 29 March 2020).

The religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, especially the mobilisation of prayer against evil, were not new. At the beginning of the 20th century, when the worldwide influenza epidemic broke out, African Pentecostal prayer and spiritual healing groups, mobilised prayer to fight the pandemic. They even resisted the use of modern scientific medicine in the process (Asamoah-Gyadu 2021, 170). The message in the sermons was also centred on the pandemic and delivered in ways that offered hope to the listeners. For example:

Psalm 3 is a Psalm of lament, one that is charged with an emotional plea for divine deliverance from trouble. I can raise that psalm right now, worldwide on this planet, we can raise a psalm of lament unto God because we are seeking divine deliverance from God to intervene in our situation. As we pass through this challenge, the coronavirus, we are in a state of distress and sometimes when passing through trouble like this one, dawn seems far away (29 March 2020).

The preacher’s role in instilling hope was pertinent during the distressing period of COVID-19 lockdown and quarantine in which people felt isolated. This also signified how the media as a conduit for conveying religious ideas became the source of hope through the mediatisation of religion. The choice of the Book of Psalms during the period also resonates with the observation made by Hoezee (2020, 88), who states that

“not a few [pastors] discovered that a meaningful way to channel the Good News during the pandemic came through the biblical Book of Psalms... there are the Psalms of Lament, those sometimes raw, often almost bitter complaints about the state of the world and of our lives in it. Laments give voice to what so many people want to say right now”. This application of the Bible verses to the current situation could also be tied to the place of the Bible in Pentecostal/Charismatic churches. Similarly, in a sermon titled, “Have you heard the news?” (centred on 1 Corinthians: 1–20), Bishop Sakala encouraged people to never lose hope when going through problems, but instead look to God during the crisis (Bishop Sakala, 26 April 2020).

In another sermon titled, “When dawn seems too far”, he stressed that:

We ought to apply wisdom in times of distress; we have to look to God when things are no longer at ease and breaking down; we need to look to God when things fall apart; we need to look to God because God is our present help in times of trouble.... In this situation we are going through, calm down, don't be in a panic, lie down your head; the Lord will awake you to victory... It is at this moment that we need to trust in God, there is wisdom in trusting God (Bishop Sakala, 29 March 2020).

Nel (2019,8) also stresses that Pentecostals expect historical biblical accounts to be re-enacted in the contemporary church. During the pandemic, people were in distress, so the message shifted to emphasise hope and comfort. Hoezee (2020,88) affirms that:

the pandemic reoriented preachers to preaching the gospel- the Good News that God came to this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to enter our brokenness, our sickness, our pandemics, our economic meltdowns, our fears and our sorrows to redeem the whole fallen mess from the inside out. And the Good News of the gospel is that Jesus by the Holy Spirit is still here doing exactly that every day. People have longed to hear this message, and preachers everywhere have found themselves returning to the basics of this proclamation during the season of COVID-19.

The foregoing not only reveals how the message in the streamed services shifted to embracing COVID-19 but also how the media acted as conduits for communicating religious ideas during the pandemic. This interaction between religion and the media also points to the role played by the Pentecostal preachers during the pandemic. The reorientation of the religious message was blended with COVID-19-related messages (centred on rethinking the notion of the church, adhering to prevention messages, disseminating the right information, and instilling hope and comfort). The religious message communicated by Bishop Sakala was also in line with what some preachers were doing. This is observed by Hoezee (2020,89), who posits that the pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus brought the preaching mandate back to the forefront for many pastors who centred their sermons on emphasising the abiding presence of God, the ability of God in Christ to heal us, the comfort of knowing that Jesus has experienced hell itself and all else that we could ever experience.

Additionally, this reorientation resonated with conclusions drawn on how online church services streamed by selected PPCC churches on their Facebook pages offered a message of hope, calm, and clarity in South Africa (Frahm-Arp 2020). Pavari (2021) also concluded that the Pentecostal church leaders raised awareness and shared biblical and encouraging messages and prayers to help members overcome fear during the pandemic. Similar roles were recounted in Pentecostal preachers' narratives in other contexts. For example, Osei (27 March 2020), a pastor of the Church of Pentecost-United States of America (a branch of the Church of Pentecost International), recounted how he reminded congregants that God is still in the business of protecting his own and to stay strong until the Lord's delivering power is fully exerted over the coronavirus outbreak.

Conclusion

The article sought to explore the ways in which Pentecostal preachers reshaped their sermons in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic as exemplified by Bishop Sakala of the Tabernacle of David Assembly of God in Zambia. Given that the pandemic entailed leaving the physical worship spaces to virtual platforms, the article concludes that COVID-19 reoriented the notion of church. Since the mediated sermons were blended with COVID-related messages and calls to embrace science, the article also concludes that the outbreak of COVID-19 reshaped the sermons conveyed and the role of the "men of God" therein. This is because the sermons were blended with an emphasis on embracing science as opposed to being overly spiritual, adhering to prevention and control measures stipulated by the health authorities and the state, and instilling hope in the masses. Therefore, the conveyed sermons signified that the media acted as sites for communicating shifts within Pentecostal circles during the pandemic. The sermons also pointed out the constructive and collaborative role played by Pentecostal preachers in mitigating the pandemic.

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