

# Light of Life Christian Group as a New Branch on Zimbabwe's Ecumenical Tree

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## Abstract

This article examines the impact and implications of the Light of Life Christian Group's new theology of the Inner Church (Inner Circle) in southern Africa. The new religious movement's theology of the Inner Church shall be examined particularly in the light of Zimbabwe's heavily polarised Christian landscape. The Light of Life Christian Group (LLCG) is a new religious movement in Zimbabwe that is composed largely of members from mainline churches such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Salvation Army, Methodist, Baptist and Lutheran, among others. Fundamentally, the movement clings resolutely to the belief that the Inner Church or Inner Circle is the only true church and there is no other. For them, being a member of the Inner Church/Inner Circle implies Christ consciousness. It implies being perfect, as the heavenly Father is perfect. Thus, the movement roundly downplays and rejects the outward forums of religion and underlines that members of the Inner Church are the true disciples and representatives of Christ on earth, regardless of their ethnic or denominational backgrounds. The main argument developed in this article is that, even though the LLCG as a new branch on Zimbabwe's ecumenical tree is currently under constant scrutiny and perpetual stigmatisation, particularly from the Catholic and Anglican Churches (among others), the ecumenically composed movement suggests and advances a theology that is tailor made to minimise denominational parochialism and prevents churches from monopolising God, whose intricate and multifaceted nature is present in all religions, cultures and denominations *ad infinitum*.

**Keywords:** Light of Life Christian Group; ecumenism; Inner Church; stigmatisation; impact; implications



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## Introduction

Christianity is perhaps the most fragmented of all religions of the world. Johnson (2019) underscores that contemporary religious scholars and historians have estimated that there are over 45 000 Christian denominations in the world. Apparently, day by day, several new denominations are added to this number from a global perspective. These denominations range from those with millions of followers to those with fewer than 50 members. While multiple expressions of Christianity have existed from the earliest days of the church (1 Corinthians 1:12), the most serious disagreements in the 16th century resulted in splits that propelled different traditions of Christianity in different directions. Franzen (1969) observed that the 16th century Protestant Reformation divided and subdivided the Body of Christ (church) into countless fragments and almost shattered the common foundation of Christianity. Ever since the historic and monumental explosion of Protestant denominations and its ramifications, the issue of true and false churches, legitimacy, authenticity and genuineness has always been a hotly contested one (Algermissen 1957). Brockman and Pescantini (1991, 192) also concur that with the spread of world missions into continents like Asia and Africa, among others, denominationalism flooded the world with the spectacle of separated Christians, theologies and perspectives.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) and the *Code of Canon Law* (1983) stipulate that the Catholic Church is the only true church that can be traced back to the time of Christ. For that reason, from the perspective of the establishment of the World Council of Churches (1948), the Catholic Church insisted that all churches of the Reformation should return into the womb of the true Mother Church for any meaningful ecumenism to take place (Akerboom 2002, 6). Apparently, the same position has been implicitly maintained by the Mother Church through the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and into the new millennium (Abrahams 2002). Many other denominations such as the Mormons, Jehovah's witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists, among many others, have also adopted a similar position and continue to claim that they are the only true representatives of Christ. Most Protestants, however, reject such a claim and underline that all who have faith in Jesus constitute the church. Yet, among them, to date, hundreds of their creeds also claim to be the true dispensers of religious truth and representatives of Christ, the first (creed) destroying what the second adores, and the third proclaiming as simon-pure truth what the fourth condemns as abominable heresy (Greber 1970, 6–7). But is it possible that every denomination is right? Does a true church exist today? If so, is it Catholic, Baptist, Episcopian, Anglican or Pentecostal? In any case, does it really matter to which church one belongs? If a true church exists, how then can one find it? The list of such questions is endless. However, for centuries, answers to these and many other similar questions have always been remote.

The LLCG theology of the Inner Church makes an effort to shed more light on these fundamental metaphysical questions. As a new religious movement of Christian

derivation in Zimbabwe, the new religious movement cleaves resolutely to the belief that the Inner Church or Inner Circle is the only true church and there is no other. While it may be critical to gauge and measure the LLCG impact on Zimbabwean Christianity in general, particularly against the African Independent Churches (AICs) to determine if there are no similarities with the LLCG—or at least possibilities of belonging to the same kraal—acute attention shall, however, be given to the Catholic Church for three main reasons. First, it is within the Roman Catholic Church where the LLCG originated. Second, whilst the LLCG is interdenominational, it is within the Roman Catholic Church that the movement is more pronounced. Thirdly, and most importantly, it is within the same Roman Catholic Church where Fr Augustine Urayai, the LLCG protagonist, belonged (Mudyiwa 2016, 156). While particular attention may be given to the Catholic Church, it is still critical within the scope of this article to underline the ongoing debates around *notae ecclesiae* in order to gauge the LLCG impact on Zimbabwe's Christian landscape. However, before making an examination of the LLCG theology of the Inner Church, for which the new religious movement is particularly famous, it is critical to first explore the history of the movement's founder, Fr Augustine Urayai (Catholic priest cum exorcist). The history of the clergyman, particularly his healing ministry, is prerequisite and basic to the understanding of the foundation and context within which the LLCG emerged and developed.

### Fr Augustine Urayai (1931–2003)

The history of Fr Augustine Urayai is well documented by Sibanda (1999), Shoko (2006) and Mudyiwa (2014). Augustine Paradza Urayai, the first born child of David Urayai and Veronica Pfumbatidza, was born on 10 August in 1931 at Holy Cross in Chirumanzu District (formerly Chilimanzi) in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. Following his ordination to the priesthood in 1964 at Gokomere Mission in Masvingo province, Augustine was posted to various mission stations where he developed a passion for exorcism, for which he became particularly famous. From 1964 up to 2003, when he died, he had worked at the following mission stations: Serima Mission (1965–1966), Mutero Mission (1967–1971), Mashava Mission (1972–1974), Matibi Mission (1975), St Kizito Zhombe (1976–1977), Serima Mission (1978–1979), Mutero Mission (1980–1990), and Chinyuni Mission (1991–1999). In 1999, he was diagnosed with diabetes and after three years of battling the disease, the clergyman died at the age of 72 (Shoko 2006).

Fr Urayai had his inaugural case of exorcism back in 1969, about five years after his priestly ordination. As he matured in the ministry of deliverance, he developed a spectacular healing method comprising six stages, namely: exhortations; blessing of water and salt; drinking of blessed water; tying the victim with cords; exorcism/deliverance; and finally counselling the victim after the deliverance exercise (Mudyiwa 2016, 34). It is within the context of his repeated healing sessions within Gweru Diocese that Fr Urayai's healing ministry was later secretly transformed into a vibrant ecumenical movement of unforeseen and unpredicted impact.

## Encounter with an Angel and Subsequent Developments

Fr Urayai's healing ministry was dynamic. Following his inaugural case of healing, back in 1969, his personal encounter with an angel—who identified himself as Archangel Cherubim on 12 June 1970—is highly associated with the immediate cause and transformation of his healing ministry into an interdenominational Christian movement that subsequently came to be referred to as the Light of Life Christian Group.<sup>1</sup> On that day in question, Archangel Cherubim, who introduced himself as one of the Seven Archangels of God, communicated through Sylvester Madanhire, Fr Urayai's long serving catechist during one of his many exorcisms at Chinyika parish in Gutu District.<sup>2</sup>

The call and commission of Fr Urayai were critical in a number of ways (Patrick Chagwiza Interview, 20 October 2018). First, the Archangel who comes third in the order and hierarchy of Creation called and commissioned Fr Urayai to champion the formation of a new religious movement that would cut across denominational boundaries in its objectives. Second, among many other things, Eucharistic intercommunion (common sharing of Holy Communion) was to be one of the movement's defining features and recruitment technique as a sign of Christian unity, fellowship and re-engagement. Third, the angel did not just call and commission Fr Urayai to yet another vocation and ministry (other than healing), but rather altered his entire metaphysical thought and awakened him from the slumber of dogmatic patriotism, as the new religious movement would also challenge his own conservative Catholic theology, as well as the traditional and celebrated constitutive marks of a true church. Fourth, on the same occasion, Fr Urayai was promised more teachings that would reveal the most basic and fundamental teachings underlying all knowledge of the beyond. The same teachings would, among many other things, galvanise the interdenominational movement and eventually lead to the establishment of the Inner Church that would be a true reflection of the model of the church as one Family of God,

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1 The name Light of Life was probably taken from the Gospel of John (8:12) where Jesus underlined that he is the Light of Life. Whoever follows him shall, therefore, have the light of life. Thus, in essence, the name Light of Life implies being a true follower of Christ and a role model. It implies an imitation of Christ. To date, the LLCG also operates as a private voluntary organisation that addresses the plight of orphans and other vulnerable children within Kwekwe District. It was registered as a PVO in 2007.

2 A detailed exposition of Fr Urayai's encounter and his subsequent interactions with celestial beings is contained in the author's Master of Philosophy Thesis (Mudyiwa 2016). To Fr Urayai, who was the first privileged recipient of celestial teachings, it was revealed that there are seven Archangels, namely, Lucifer, Christ, Cherubim, Gabriel, Michael, Raphael and Seraphim. Lucifer (now Satan) and his apostate angels defected and were thrown out of heaven by Archangel Michael (Revelations 12:7–17). The LLCG teaches that humanity is part of the apostate angels that are now participating in God's Plan of Salvation to effect their gradual ascent back to heaven, their original home of bliss. Jesus came to die for these apostate angels, thereby nullifying their sin of apostasy, which is referred to as the actual original sin within the LLCG circles. The LLCG members believe that it is their duty to subtly and methodically reveal this religious truth that has been concealed ever since the material world was created.

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a family that is constantly being called to holiness (Emmanuel Mupure, Interview 27 July 2018).

Thus, with the help of Sylvester the medium, and Archangel Cherubim, subsequently, a small prayer group of interested enthusiasts later formed around Fr Urayai at Chinyika parish in Gutu District. With time, the small group of believers who were initially predominantly Roman Catholics grew like the biblical mustard seed (Luke 13:20–21). From the late-70s, members from other mainline denominations such as Anglican, Methodist, Salvation Army, Baptist, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, among others, secretly affiliated themselves to Fr Urayai's newly established ecumenical prayer group.

Over and above receiving spiritual lessons from the same Archangel through Sylvester (the medium) and many other mediums who were later trained, the prayer group secretly shared the Eucharist as an expression of their unity, fellowship and family bond. Initially, the prayer group met once every week for prayer sessions but their routine meetings later changed to once every month and an annual retreat (Alex Sibanda Interview, 13 October 2018). From 1970 to the year 2000, communication with angels, healing and Eucharistic intercommunion then became the three main pillars upon which the new religious movement was anchored. The new religious movement then added yet another pillar in the new millennium when it was registered as a Kwekwe-based private voluntary organisation in 2007. Thus, to date, the LLCG is firmly anchored on four main pillars, namely communication with angels, healing, Eucharistic intercommunion, and charity work (LLCG Informant, Interview, 12 October 2018).

From an interview conducted by the researcher with one of the earliest survivors of Fr Urayai's acolytes from Gutu District, Sithole underlined that upon joining Fr Urayai's newly founded prayer group, all LLCG new recruits did not lose membership of their various denominations. They were taught never to regard their new prayer group as a (new) church but simply to find a deeper expression of their faith and love of God within their own denominations and to acknowledge and appreciate with joy the really Christian values that are at the very centre of their respective denominations. They were also taught never to openly challenge their church doctrines and authorities, since the information they were getting from the new religious movement was meant to be private and confidential, only to be regarded as extra spiritual/ecumenical lessons (Sithole, Interview, 20 May 2019). Thus, members of the newly founded association were encouraged to fully participate in their church activities. Over and above, they were also tipped to attend all private prayer sessions in order to plan together how they could ecumenically worship and effectively evangelise as God's children. To date, the LLCG now has a membership of around 2 000, drawn from Zimbabwe's mainline denominations, with the full backing of a handful of some Roman Catholic priests mainly from Masvingo, Gweru, Mutare and Harare Catholic Dioceses. For that reason, denominational representation within the new religious movement reveals that Catholics are more pronounced than any other denomination within the new religious movement (Charles Chagwiza, Interview, 15 October 2018).

## The Light of Life Theology of Ecumenism

It is equally critical to underline that the LLCG theology of ecumenism, particularly the theology of the Inner Church, does not bear marks of Fr Urayai's genius but is ostensibly the result of Archangel Cherubim's recitation during the many years the new religious movement interacted with celestial beings through human mediums.<sup>3</sup> Thus, as earlier underlined, in order to minimise denominational parochialism and prevent member churches from monopolising God, whose multifaceted nature is present in all religions and denominations, the LLCG has resolutely stuck like glue to receptive ecumenism that finds its anchorage and leverage on the exaltation and glorification of the Inner Church, Inner Circle or Inner Community.

### Universality of the Inner Church

Belief in the universality of the Inner Church or Inner Circle does not simply guide the LLCG's ecumenical policy but also constitutes the movement's central ethical and moral fundamentals. Among the LLCG members, the Inner Church or Inner Circle is referred to as *Sangano reMukati* in the Shona vernacular. The implication behind the principle is that the Inner Church involves the meeting between the heart of Christianity and the heart of every other world religion, so that universal holiness becomes the principle of animation to generate a new church (Inner Church), a hybrid culture and a new creation. Thus, the LLCG often uses the concept "Inner Church" interchangeably with "Inner Circle" and "Inner Community" (LLCG Member, Interview, 20 November 2018). This universal circle, church or community is often referred to as the "circle within the circle, church within the church or community within the community"; yet the three concepts (circle, church, community) basically mean one and the same thing.

Within the LLCG circles, Inner Church is above and beyond a mere building or any outward forum of religion such as dogma or theology. It is also above and beyond a mere worshipping congregation or church in the ordinary sense. When the movement talks of the Inner Church, reference is made to a community that Jesus gave birth to, a community of the chosen ones, a community of spiritual giants. Not the chosen ones in the sense of predestination or just a core, but the chosen ones in the sense of those who live the "Christ Conscious Way," those who live like Christ. Thus, by Inner Church, reference is therefore made to "a church within the church," a "community within the community" or a "circle within another circle." For the LLCG, any community, church or congregation that is built on Christ, who himself is the Rock of the Ages, shall, therefore, not be prevailed against by the powers and principalities of darkness (LLCG Informant, Interview, 12 October 2018).

The LLCG understanding and interpretation of the word "church" has nothing in common with the worldly churches and religious denominations which Greber (1970,

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3 In its theoretical thrust and interpretation of the Inner Church, the LLCG closely follows the ideas of the late German Catholic priest, Fr Johannes Greber who in the early 20th century was also a privileged recipient of communicating with God's angels.

2) says are the work of man, conceived in human error, and like all of man's handwork, ephemeral and dubious guides in matters religious. Thus, the Inner Church, the church of the heart, the universal church, is that which expresses itself in the imitation of Jesus, particularly through unconditional love and forgiveness. Members of the Inner Church or Inner Circle, therefore, are the true disciples of Jesus, those who do the will of the universal Father and Supreme Being in Heaven (Matthew 7:21–23) regardless of religious or denominational affiliation. Members of the Inner Circle/Church are those who pledge their allegiance to the rule of Christ (Greber 1970, 270). The true church of Christ has no human founder, no hierarchy, no popes, bishops or priests. It has no buildings, temples or shrines, no sacraments or scriptures, ecclesiastical authority, no dogmas or doctrines and no uniforms or vestments. In short, the Inner Church can be referred to as the church of love or *Chechi yerudo* in Shona. In this true church of Christ, unconditional love cuts across all cultural, religious or denominational boundaries in search of the essence and quiddity of religion (LLCG Informant, 20 October 2018).

The LLCG believes that the Christ-conscious way is the way of the Nazarene (Christ) because he alone stands as a timeless and universal role model, not just for all Christian denominations but humanity as a whole. Those who live the Christ-conscious way are those who do not just say “Lord” without doing what He commands them. Members who live the Christ-way become members of the church that Christ made reference to when he said: “On this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Thus, the Inner Church is a community of those who worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:3–4), a community where members become members by their own-self, without being chosen or appointed. It is a community that exists beyond the boundary of material things, a community of Christ's true representatives on earth, not just mere theorists, pretenders and hypocrites.<sup>4</sup>

Entering into the Inner Church is tantamount to discovering oneself and apprehending one's unity with the Creator or “what devotees regard as the unrestricted value” (Cox 1992, 96). Becoming a member of the Inner Church/Circle is tantamount to discovering or experiencing a consciousness that is beyond the ordinary physical consciousness. It could be likened to moksha, nirvana and holiness in Vedantic Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism and Christianity respectively. Once attained, the Inner Circle is an experience or a state which the adherent or devotee enjoys and into which he/she seeks to lead others by simply leading a holy life. For one who has attained the Inner-Circle stage, denominational boundaries, Eucharistic exclusivity and discriminations fall away. More importantly, a seemingly divisive history of the Reformation that keeps members of different denominations and religions in “separate camps” due to inherited theological disputes also becomes trivial and insignificant. Those who manage to attain the Inner-Circle status concentrate on the substance and essence of religion, namely, the call to universal holiness (LLCG Informant, Interview, 10 October 2018). It is a general

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4 LLCG believes that Christ's true representatives on earth may be found in all Christian denominations and religions of the World who are guided by the universal Law of Love.

understanding amongst LLCG members that the Inner Church/Circle is the most important community that the spirit-world (God) recommends. By spirit-world, reference is made to heaven and celestial beings. For the Inner-Church state to be achieved, the LLCG teaches that denouncing and abandoning the material world and all materialistic pursuits are pre-requisites. While LLCG members strive to be members of the Inner Church, the movement, however, stipulates that for any committed devotee to become a member of the Inner Circle, they must genuinely walk the Inner Path (LLCG Informant, Interview, 15 October 2018).

### **Walking the Inner Path**

Inseparably linked to the Inner Church is the concept of the Inner Path. For the LLCG members to conceive the universal earthly mission and their various specific spiritual missions, they are always urged to walk the Inner Path. The Inner Path is popularly referred to as *Nzira yomukati* in the Shona vernacular (LLCG Informant, Interview, 10 October 2018). In the sacred scriptures, Jesus alludes to the “narrow gate” and “hard road” that leads to life, but only found by a few (Matthew 7:13–14). In its interpretation of the Inner Path, the LLCG draws much of its inspiration and theoretical framework from Fr Augustine Urayai and other spiritual giants and luminaries such as Gabriele Wittek and Anthony De-Mello, who are also among key campaigners of the Universal Life. In the book, *The Inner Path in Universal Life*, Gabriele calls the Inner Path, the path of liberation from the burdens laying on the soul and the path to the heart of God, the heart of love (Wittek 2006, 16). In other words, the Inner Path is viewed as a way of love and a way to complete perfection, which all Christians are separately called to attain, regardless of cultural backgrounds or denominational affiliation.

Articulating the basic teachings and Inner Path instructions, Gabriele underscores the basic and fundamental requirements for beginners. She underlines that the initial step along the Inner Path is to recognise or know oneself. The Inner Path consists of recognising oneself and discarding all human, egotistic attitudes and faults, step by step. Thus the Inner Path is the path of the unfoldment of selfless love (Wittek 2006, 13–15). De-Mello (1998, 75) calls the first step “clearing out” inherited and unnecessary garbage. To recognise and know oneself is to realise one’s strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices and be willing and ready to clear up one’s sinfulness. It is to vanquish one’s base ego, to discard the old sinful self or person and incorporate the new one, to crucify one’s human nature and ego. De-Mello (1998) further underlines that crucifying one’s human nature brings about the cleansing and expansion of consciousness so that one is able to perceive the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal call to holiness and sanctity. By so doing, one becomes divine again. This means that one becomes pure, noble and good in sensations, thoughts, words and actions in everything they do to their neighbour. Through self-recognition and actualisation of God’s universal laws, one grows and matures spiritually, regardless of religious or denominational affiliation. For such a Christian, denominational boundaries and age-old theological disputes do not really matter (Emmanuel Mupure, Interview, 27 July 2018).



Within the LLCG circles, the Inner Path is like a “school” of life in which each student of any denomination recognises their faults and weaknesses and follows the path of heartfelt remorse; of asking for forgiveness, of forgiving, of making amends and then of resolving not to repeat the recognised sins. When a student or devotee reaches that stage of not just making but living up to their resolutions, only then are they cleansed and become potential candidates of the Inner Church. It, therefore, stands to reason that for a student to graduate at the Inner Path School, it takes quite a considerable amount of time and commitment. It may take half or the rest of one’s life. It can as well take several re-incarnations. Thus, among other beliefs such as spiritual creation of all things by God in the beginning, pre-existence of the souls and the fall of angels as the actual original sin of humanity, the LLCG also strongly believes in the doctrine of reincarnation. For the LLCG movement, reincarnation is necessary for the purging and purification of candidates of the Inner Church or Inner Circle. As students of the Inner Church follow the Inner Path of love, the LLCG further emphasises that the same candidates should always be guided by the Inner Person. They believe that the Inner Person is not a dubious guide in spiritual matters (Emmanuel Mupure, Interview, 27 July 2018).

### **Listening to the Inner Person**

The Inner Person is taken as a spiritual friend or companion that facilitates self-realisation and a quicker movement of the Inner Path candidate into the Inner Circle. Listening and respecting the Inner Person is also regarded by the LLCG as key in destroying and decimating unnecessary denominational exclusivity and divisions. This spiritual guide and life captain is “loosely” taken to be the heart or conscience of every person and of every religion or denomination. However, in the strictest sense, when the concept “Inner Person” is used within the LLCG circles, reference is made to the spirit within who is the real person, that same spirit that pre-existed in heaven before the fall of angels. It is the same spirit that also participated in the Great Fall of angels under the leadership of Lucifer (Rev 12:7–17). The LLCG members often refer to the Inner Person as *Munhu Wemukati* in the Shona vernacular (James Makoni, Interview, 17 December 2018). St Paul calls the Inner Person, “the Inner Man” (2 Corinthians 4:16), “the hidden self” (Ephesians 3:16) or the “inmost self” (Romans 7:22).

LLCG members underline that the maturity of one’s heart determines the time one takes to understand that humanity in general, and Christians in particular, share the same divine family tree. The heart understands reality because it complements the spirit. Hence, the value of the Inner Path can only be determined by the maturity of the heart and not the brain. The LLCG stipulates that under normal circumstances, an individual has two sets of eyes and ears, namely, the material and the spiritual. Jesus confirmed this when he said that the Jews had eyes but they did not see, they had ears but they did not hear (Mark 8: 18). The material set of eyes sees all human wants, needs and experiences. When material eyes capture these, humanity craves to plunge into them. So does the material set of ears. On the other hand, the spiritual set of eyes goes beyond the focus of the material world. It goes behind and beyond denominational doctrines

that divide humanity and sees reality beyond the physical realm, into the eternal metaphysical and esoteric realities. The use of the spiritual set of eyes and ears makes a devotee see and hear what ordinary people do not see or hear. LLCG members are, therefore, urged to inculcate this principle in order to be able to rely on the second set of eyes and ears which they often refer to as the eyes and ears of Christ. Through these eyes that are capable of revisiting moments or times that have long passed, such as pre-existence and the fall of angels (among others), LLCG members are, thus, often made to recall the significance of the model of church as one big family under one God, “where there is care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, inclusivity, acceptance, dialogue and trust” (Amecea Pastoral Department 1995, 21).

Thus, fully cognisant of the presence and significance of the Inner Person, the LLCG concludes that God created all people with virtually everything they need to walk the Inner Path that leads into the Inner Circle and back to the same God. On account of that, people have to look within their hearts in order to find any kind of spiritual help which they dearly need. With a mature heart, devotees can thus go to an extent of getting valuable spiritual lessons from their spiritual friend and faithful companion, the Inner Person. It, therefore, stands to reason that with a developed and mature heart, there is no need to get lessons from ecclesiastical teachers, theological books or some renowned theologians, but simply from the Inner Person. Commenting on denominational divisions that took place in the 16th century and divided Christians, Woodhall (2002, 74) thus alludes to the fact that the scandal of the Reformation was not that Christians had differences but that the Christian Church failed to discuss their differences constructively and in a brotherly and sisterly manner. Rather, they tried to solve their differences by the use of the mind and not the heart or the Inner Person, to an extent that the issue of the Reformation subsequently became more of an issue of power than theological. For that reason, to date, several Christian denominations continue to celebrate inherited disputes which have little or no logical and spiritual bearing on African Christianity *per se*.

Thus, ever since the LLCG was founded, the new religious movement has strongly subscribed to the belief that various Christian denominations may not talk of any meaningful ecumenical progress and development without employing the Inner Person to the best of their ability. In spite of their shared Christian history that is shrouded in the mists of divisions, exclusion and fragmentation, the LLCG thus believes that the Inner Person may still guide Christian denominations and dictate the pace, depth and direction towards receptive ecumenism and inclusion. Belief in the Inner Person theory thus opened the LLCG members from their slumber of dogmatic patriotism and denominational parochialism; thereby creating new foundations for a more open-minded encounter with other churches and religions (LLCG Informant, Interview, 10 October 2018). Consequently, among members of the LLCG, there grew an increasingly active and deep interest and awareness of the actual meaning and significance of the branch theory of ecumenism.

### **Branch Theory of Ecumenism**

Even though the LLCG is an association of largely mainstream churches, one key factor and principle that guides the new religious movement is the belief in the branch theory of ecumenism. The branch theory is taken from the Gospel of John 15:5, where Jesus underlines that he is the true vine and all his followers are the branches that are expected to bear fruit abundantly.

William Palmer (1803–1885) was the principal originator of the branch theory, a theory which then was later popularised during the Oxford Movement (1833–1845), particularly through the works of the Tractarians (Franzen 1969, 370). Among other things, the Tractarian Movement sought to renew the Church of England by reviving certain critical Roman Catholic rituals. As a theological concept originating within Anglicanism, the branch theory stipulated that even though the Christian Church may have historically fallen into schisms within itself and its several provinces or groups of provinces fell out of communion with each other, fundamentally, each may yet be a true branch of the one Church of Christ.

In its practice of receptive ecumenism in Zimbabwe, the LLCG thus holds in high regard and attaches significant importance to the branch theory as stipulated in John 15:5. The passage emphasises that Jesus is the vine. All those who believe in him, regardless of their cultural backgrounds or denominational affiliations, are true branches, even though they may for one reason or another not be in “full communion” between or amongst themselves. Every branch of the vine grows directly from the main stock, who is Christ. For that reason, the LLCG argues that for as long as not all who refer to themselves as Christians do not possess the fullness of religious truth and are dubious guides in religious matters (Greber 1970, 2), no vine branch (including the Mother Church) is, therefore, better positioned than the other regarding answers to fundamental questions of the beyond. The understanding is that the various branches that are represented by numerous Christian denominations and movements globally, do not give but take the sap of life from the one true vine (Christ). A separated vine branch is proverbially useless, destined only to be cast out, to wither, to burn in fire. Union with the trunk (Christ) through various spiritual exercises, at denominational or interdenominational levels, particularly through receptive ecumenism and inclusion, therefore, secures abundant fructification.

Fundamentally, the branch theory puts all Christians on a level playing and praying field, Catholics, Protestants or African Independent Churches alike. Each denomination is capable of blooming where it is planted. Regardless of cultural background or denominational affiliation, all Christians have equal opportunities of becoming members of the Inner Church, provided they observe the universal and timeless criteria, namely, listening to the Inner Person and walking the Inner Path. A development of this nature would then put to rest the seemingly endless age-old debates about which church is true and which one is false. Thus, for the LLCG, each denomination is simply a preparatory phase that is intended to propel each committed devotee into the true church

of Christ, namely the Inner Church. While on the one hand the LLCG has introduced a new theology and area of ecumenical contact that is likely to make an impact in southern Africa, by reducing denominational parochialism and acting outside the traditional ecclesiastical box, on the other hand, the new religious movement is not immune to criticism.

### A Critical Appraisal of the Light of Life Christian Group

A quick survey of the birth and development of the LLCG as a new religious movement in Zimbabwe, particularly the call and commissioning of Fr Augustine Urayai, is from a stylistic point of view closely linked with factors associated with the appointment and commissioning of leaders of prophetic movements on the African landscape. Whilst Sundkler (1961) studied African Independent Churches from an etic perspective, and Daneel (1987) opted for an emic approach, both scholars, however, concur that the appointment, training and succession of African religious leaders and prophets are inseparably linked with dreams, visions, prophetic revelations or physical transportations to heaven. Within the African set-up, a divine vocation is often accompanied by other manifestations of God's presence. These include: some form of possession by the spirit, speaking in tongues, fasting, Bible studies and periods of seclusion, among many others (Daneel 1987, 158).

While on the one hand dramatic encounters with the "hierophany" (Eliade 1957) on the African continent may be a common phenomenon, on the other hand, the LLCG missionary strategy of "stay and reform from within," seems to go against the established trend in studies on new religious movements. A survey of the history of religious movements from a local and global perspective reveals this uniform pattern of "move out and reform." While the LLCG continues to be independent in its organisation, leadership and religious expression, the new religious movement has continued to operate within the fringes of several mainline churches, with a view to reforming the same from within, both theologically and morally. By viewing its organisation simply as a platform for extra-spiritual/ecumenical lessons, crafting a unique "stay and reform from within" missionary strategy (while maintaining common sharing of the Eucharist among denominations that have been historically separated by doctrine, history and practice), the uniqueness of the LLCG for Zimbabwean Christianity, in particular African and global Christianity, is revealed. To some extent, the LLCG missionary strategy prevents further fragmentation of the Body of Christ and preserves the unity of the people of God.

While elements that constitute Eucharistic inculturation are essential, perhaps more essential is the adoption by the LLCG of the African value of commensality, over and above other rituals such as baptism, confirmation and ordination, penance, anointing of the sick and holy matrimony. One of the rich African (particularly Shona) cultural values is commensality as it is expressed in African communal meals. In Africa, it is rare for people to eat alone. Kustenbauder (2005) underscored that a meal is perhaps the most basic and ancient symbol of friendship, love and unity. Food and drink taken in

common are signs that life is shared. Sarpong (1985, 5) posits that from an African perspective, to eat from the same pot is of vital significance and symbolic value. Commensality is reflective of friendship of an extraordinary nature or the closest type of blood relationship. For him, the Eucharist as a symbol of unity has such a communitarian significance. He further argues that Eucharistic celebration is an assembly of believers, of brothers and sisters who partake of the same food and are nourished by the same source. In the book of Acts (2:43–47), common life, prayer and the Eucharist were the hallmark and recruitment techniques of the infant church. For that reason, the LLCG views interdenominational fellowship on the level of common sharing of the Eucharist as not threatening the unity of the church in any way, but rather creating, sustaining and strengthening Christian unity, particularly on the Zimbabwe Christian landscape.

While it may be rather difficult to pin down with accuracy and exactitude why Fr Urayai and the LLCG opted for common sharing of the Eucharist as one of the defining features of their movement, the fact that the ritual meal is symbolic cannot, however, be overemphasised. Taking cognisance of the fact that the Eucharist is regarded as the source and summit of Christian life (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, 336), the LLCG believes that by celebrating the Eucharist together, members unite themselves to Christ who in turn makes them sharers in his spiritual bond with God. They believe that, as a registered charitable organisation, the ritual meal gives them the much needed spiritual energy to love and serve the Lord through charity work (LLCG Informant, Interview, 10 August 2018). For them, the spiritual meal symbolises the spiritual communion which Jesus meant to maintain with his followers (rich or poor), despite the fact that he would be parted from them on earth (Greber 1970). Thus, by ecumenically sharing the Eucharist, the LLCG members believe they constitute a single unit with Christ, as well as among themselves, a unity that Christ prayed for so fervently and touchingly on the night he was handed over to his enemies (John 17). For that reason, the new religious movement presents new church polity, theology and commendable ecumenical contribution which have never been explored before.

## Challenges of the Light of Life Movement

Inasmuch as the LLCG theology of the Inner Church (inter alia) appeals to liberal minds and has the potential to make a positive impact on the Christian landscape, the new religious movement has a number of areas of potential conflict and clash with mainstream Christianity. One of the many criticisms first levelled against the LLCG was directed towards the incompetence of Fr Urayai vis-à-vis the formation of public associations, from a Catholic perspective. The Catholic governing code (Canons 312–320) underscores that the authority which is competent to establish public associations is, the Holy See, (for universal and international associations), the Episcopal Conference (for national associations) and the Diocesan Bishops (in their own territories).

Thus, following the same logic, Fr Urayai, as a mere Catholic priest had no papal privilege or mandate to establish a public association, whether Catholic or ecumenical.

For that reason, as earlier underlined, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops dismissed the LLCG as anti-Catholic, heretical and canonically unconstitutional, targeted at misleading the Christian community (ZCBC 2005). Prior to the ZCBC Pastoral Statement, Fr Urayai's own bishop had earlier relegated him to rural peripheral parishes as a result of his controversial healing ministry and ecumenical association. In addition, in spite of the fact that he was among the pioneers in Gweru Diocese, from 1964 up to 2003 when he died, Fr Urayai was never appointed parish priest in Gweru Diocese. He simply served as an assistant priest for a period of 39 years (Mudyiwa 2016). Apart from the ZCBC, the other key ecumenical bodies in Zimbabwe have also distanced themselves from the LLCG, claiming that the movement is not recognised as an associate member of any one of them. One interviewee, who is a key member of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, underscored that the LLCG has not yet become a phenomenon of national dimension, and for that reason, it can simply be ignored by the world around it. Whilst para-church organisations such as the Zimbabwe Student Christian Movement, Young Men's Christian Association, Young Women Christian Association, Bible Society of Zimbabwe, among many others, are associate members of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, the LLCG is not yet a registered member (Mapondera, Interview, 10 May 2018).

Another serious criticism targeted at the LLCG is that of purporting a communion that does not yet exist between Catholics and non-Catholics. Engaging in Eucharistic intercommunion with non-Catholics, particularly Anglicans and other mainstream denominations without full pontifical approval and consent, is reflective of the fact that the LLCG is demonstrating that the various denominations who have been historically separated by doctrine, history and practice now share certain essential principles and yet, no such agreement has since been officially ratified. It is for this reason that the Catholic disciplinary system has not hesitated to deal with any of their members who are openly affiliated with the LLCG.<sup>5</sup>

Commenting on the impact and implications of the LLCG's negative publicity, one LLCG interviewee had this to say:

... [At one point], being a member of the LLCG in Gweru Diocese then became punishable by an ecclesiastical sanction or interdict. However, throughout Zimbabwe, most Catholic Bishops and priests did not generally hunt out LLCG members. The majority simply ignored them unless someone formally accused a member of being LLCG. Consequently, punishment was intermittent in most parishes. Like during the time of the persecutions of Christians, the LLCG members at one parish would suffer untold suffering while their counterparts in a nearby parish or centre would be untouched. By and large, the imposition of sanctions was completely unpredicted ... yet

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5 Research findings indicated that in 2005, the Diocese of Masvingo suspended a total of seven clergymen over their links with LLCG. A handful of other LLCG loyalists (priests) from other dioceses, however, survived the witch-hunt. By the time this article was written, the seven clergymen had appealed to the pope and their local ordinary was taking some essential steps to relax the ecclesiastical sanction and take them on board once more.

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most LLCG members particularly within the towns of Kwekwe and Redcliff lived daily with an ecclesiastical sanction hanging over their heads but they were undeterred by such threats. (Madanhire Joseph, Interview, 10 May 2018)

The same system of suspensions and interdicts was also at some point applied by some Anglican authorities in and around the city of Kwekwe. However, in spite of the warnings and interdicts from their responsible church authorities, a number of Anglican Christians who had joined the LLCG simply ignored the stigma, welcomed Fr Urayai's ecumenical policies and initiatives and continued to double deal, as if to indicate and attest to the projection made by Akerboom (2002, 19):

As a movement of renewal, ecumenism can only find its completion when the faithful [themselves] are prepared to reform themselves through prayer and repentance. To call upon Christians for a renewed awareness of holiness was the aim of the Reformers and is also the aim of the ecumenical movement in the churches. If the missionary witness of churches is to regain its credibility, a new Reformation [perhaps of the Inner Church] is needed.

Alongside the issue of sanctions and interdicts imposed upon the LLCG members, most of the LLCG theological aspects were regarded as contradictory to traditionally accepted Christian theology (Mudyiwa 2015). First was the issue of Archangels and the original sin. Traditional Christian theology does not subscribe to the doctrine of seven but only three Archangels, namely, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994). The same theology also does not accede to the theory of the fall of angels (Rev 12:7–17) as a true representation of the original sin. Instead, traditional Christian theology clings resolutely to the Adamic guilt (Gen 3:1–24) as the actual original sin. Second, was the issue of spiritism. The same Catholic governing code underlines that spiritism often implies divination or magical practices and for that reason, in spite of its positives, the church for her part warns the faithful against it.

Third, introducing or importing the theology of re-incarnation is also viewed as controversial, since the same concept has its origin in some Eastern religions that are not Christian. In fact, the concept is at the centre of religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism (Cox 1992, 122–123). However, while the Roman Catholic Church may deny the doctrine of re-incarnation, Origen (ca 185–215), a Catholic theologian well versed in ecclesiastical literature had, as early as the first century, taught that there is re-incarnation and restoration of all things (Ephesians 1:10) at the end of time (*apocatastasis*). The same first century theologian had also championed the theory of the fall of angels and their subsequent imprisonment in bodies of clay. Thus, the theory of re-incarnation which is taught by the LLCG is Origenistic in nature. However, the only danger of paying allegiance to Origen is that his theory was later condemned by the church and replaced by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas (Sibanda 1999, 38). Over and above the LLCG controversial theology of re-incarnation, the new religious movement's preferential option for mainline churches was also viewed as one more area of potential clash with other non-phlegmatic denominations. Thus, following the same

logic, a handful of critics have questioned the new religious movement's commitment to commune with other streams of Christianity in Zimbabwe.

In spite of all the criticisms levelled against the LLCG, statistics have, however, shown that the unintended effect of negative publicity has largely led to the accreditation and not to the repudiation and rebuttal of the new religious movement. With a handful of Catholic priests and nuns secretly backing the LLCG agenda in a situation almost torn to shreds by the Roman Catholic disciplinary system, their support for the movement has not just offered a repeated and constant rock of steadiness but also remained an important stabilising force for the emerging new branch on the ecumenical tree in southern Africa. Taking full cognisance of the fact that nobody is looking for yet another church or religion in the 21st century and beyond, the LLCG's ecumenical efforts are, therefore, commendable on Zimbabwe's highly polarised Christian landscape. Commenting and summarising the challenges of the LLCG and its relationship with mainstream Christianity, one interviewee underscored that in most cases, people fear what they do not understand and hate what they cannot conquer. In his view, the LLCG theology of the Inner Church is not meant to contradict or compete with mainstream traditional theology but to be viewed as a theology of complementarity (LLCG Informant, Interview, 10 October 2018).

## Constitutive Elements of a True Church

A discussion about the impact of the LLCG theology of the Inner Church in Zimbabwe would not be complete without briefly highlighting some historical and contemporary debates around *notae ecclesiae*. Apparently, as far back as the New Testament times, there have been seemingly endless debates on elements that define a true church and appointment of quality leadership. A quick scan through the New Testament reveals that the Bible itself lays down some of the criteria of a true church (Compelling Truth 2020). For that reason, the Word of God then became the foundation and basis for evaluation of any church, church group or church leadership. Thus, some of the biblical criteria would include questions such as: Do the church teachings show fidelity to scripture? Do the church leaders meet the requirements of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 that underline issues of unquestionable credentials on the part of church leaders? Are the church members themselves devoted to the word, to fellowship and to the breaking of bread and to prayer? (Acts 2:42)

Building on the much celebrated biblical criteria, Kung (1968), Leith (1990) and Koffeman (2009)—among many frontline scholars on *notae ecclesiae*—underlined some critical distinctive marks of a true church. To a greater extent, these scholars concur that as far back as the 4th century AD, unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity have been identified as critical ecumenical marks that define a true church. The four marks, namely unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity are thus regarded as the four conditions of the true church. As observed by Kung (1968, 266), the four marks are no longer merely characteristics but distinguishing characteristics. Duncan (2010) emphasises that the Reformation, however, required that the four marks be re-



defined in a particular context in terms of the soundness of the doctrine preached, celebration of the sacraments and the exercise of discipline. Seemingly, these marks are still relevant in the 21st century in both ecclesiastical and social contexts. Thus, Duncan adopts a much broader perspective of what should constitute a church. Whereas McMahon (1998) underlines sound doctrine, right administration of sacraments and discipline as the three marks of a true church, for Leith (1990, 26), faith in Jesus Christ constitutes the church. Leith underscores that the decisive mark of the church, as Luther (1483–1546), Zwingli (1484–1531) and Calvin (1509–1564) knew, is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Everything else is regarded as secondary. For the LLCG, the true church remains the Inner Circle, not simply upholding faith in Jesus Christ. So the debate around *notae ecclesiae* is seemingly endless.

While on the one hand the LLCG may not meet some of the celebrated constitutive marks of a true church as discussed above, on the other hand, the fact that the new religious movement insists that it has no ultimate plans to completely secede from the mainline churches as the historical trends reveal, makes the new religious movement a unique phenomenon in the history of new religious movements. For that reason, it then becomes difficult to nail down with precision the status of the LLCG in the dynamics and dialectic of African Christianity. By defying the historical common trends of “move out and reform” model and strategy, the LLCG provides an intriguing and unique example of a new religious movement which strategically stays within the “old”; thereby making a theological contribution which has never been explored before. This new model has glaring implications for the study of new religious movements in general and Christianity in Africa in particular. Historically, perhaps there has been too much emphasis on new religious movements as only those that proceed to set up separate structures, beliefs and practices. The LLCG challenges this model by illustrating how a new religious movement can leverage on a central ritual, in this case the Eucharist, to galvanise believers to set up a new community, invent new ways of conceptualising the ritual, as well as new ways of practising the ritual. In this regard, one can argue and conclude that ritual studies, as noted by Grimes (2013), must expand their scope and investigate the extent to which rituals are the defining feature of some new religious movements, such as the LLCG. Taking full cognisance of the fact that after five decades, the LLCG still has no plans to secede from phlegmatic churches, situating and classifying the new religious movement as an emerging African independent church then becomes a hotly contested assertion.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the birth and development of the LLCG, her theology of the Inner Church as well as the movement’s ecumenical drive. Fundamentally, the LLCG stipulates that the Inner Church or Inner Circle is the most essential, true and universal church that all Christians ought to strive for. This state of holiness and perfection is achieved by simply striving to be Christ-conscious in people’s various Christian denominations. In fact, it is achieved by radiating and reflecting all the Christological

qualities, particularly love and forgiveness. In spite of the fact that the LLCG raises several potential areas of clash such as the doctrine of angels, re-incarnation, Eucharistic intercommunion and spiritism, among others, the movement's ecumenical agenda is reflective of a timely and well-calculated move, away from the traditional and conservative approach, to a more generous, receptive and inclusive one. While the issue of legitimacy remains critical, particularly with regards to the formation of the LLCG, the fact that the movement has crafted a unique form of ecumenism that finds its anchorage on the significance, centrality and universality of the Inner Church has something to offer both theologians and drivers of key ecumenical bodies. Ever since global and local ecumenical movements for unity, renewal and rapprochement were established, ecumenism has always been regarded as a journey, process and evolution, rather than a process of tearing down (Akerboom 2002, 17). The LLCG contributions are, therefore, reflective of the fruits of that same journey; the dynamics of African Christianity as well as the ecumenical vision of home-grown Christian movements (Molobi 2011). Thus, it remains a glaring fact that significant elements and endowments which build up and edify the church can exist outside the boundaries of key ecumenical movements or mainstream denominations. For such a unique and accommodative theology of the Inner Church, crafted over five decades of existence, the LLCG can thus be placed on the larger canvass of key ecumenical branches, not just in Zimbabwe but in southern Africa.

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