



## The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Lockdown Protocols of Social Distancing

### Insights into the Church's Role during Bereavements in Zimbabwe

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#### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown protocols of social distancing disrupted mourning and grieving processes across the African landscape forcing the Church to devise mechanisms to ensure that it remained contextually relevant in this highly restrictive environment. This disruption plunged Christian communities, and bereaving families into a state of cognitive dissonance. Christian communities in Southern African countries such as Zimbabwe faced serious challenges relating to the effective execution of the important role of supporting and consoling the bereaved. This paper reflects on the efforts and strategies that most Christian communities adopted to support bereaved families through engaging Old Testament texts that shed light on social distancing and quarantining. It sheds light on how Christian communities demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the wake of the highly disruptive environment created by the pandemic through the use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook and other digital communication platforms such as Zoom, television, and radio.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing, grieving and bereaved families, Christian churches, Zimbabwe

#### Introduction

Since its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic presented the Church across the globe with what is perhaps the greatest challenge that inhibited the institution from effectively executing

its mandate, especially with regards to offering bereavement services.<sup>1</sup> Epidemics, by their very nature, initiate changes to cultures, traditions, and processes. The COVID-19 pandemic was certainly not an exception. Indeed, it ushered in significant and drastic changes to the way people grieve and mourn the dead. The normal processes of mourning and grieving were adversely disrupted as a result of the practice of social distancing. The pandemic altered all the traditional procedures associated with any funeral and bereavement activities consequently exacerbating the pain of death and grieving. The fundamental argument advanced in this article is that the restriction of social gatherings inevitably plunged the Christian communities and bereaving families into a state of cognitive dissonance characterized by high levels of psychological discomfort. Those who lost their loved ones faced unprecedented restrictions and challenges with regards to not only accessing the much-needed social support from Christian communities but also giving their deceased a befitting send off. Bereaving families found themselves in social isolation with insufficient social support to give them comfort. Generally, experiencing the loss of a family member, friend, or fellow Church congregant is a profound, most difficult, and painful life experience that can lead to long-term distress for some individuals (Güler et al. 2015, 1). Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the level of distress experienced by bereaving families as result of the lack of adequate social support.

The restriction on social gatherings and the need for observing social distancing undermined the capacity of Christian communities to effectively render social support to bereaving families. Studies demonstrate that bereavement is widely recognized as involving considerable social, cognitive, and emotional disruption, which can be devastating for individuals (Oyebode and Owens 2013, 61; Wakenshaw and Silence 2018, 109). This disruption is exacerbated to unbearable levels in the absence of a viable social support system, which is characterized by emotional and material support. Bereavement is indeed a stressful process that often requires the unwavering support of family and friends whenever it occurs (Steiner 2006, 39). Despite the fact that Christian communities have been an essential pillar of this social support system, their capacity to execute this mandate was seriously undermined by the public health guidelines on social distancing. Thus, the various restrictive measures associated with the pandemic made it a practical impossibility for such instrumental communities to extend conventional funeral and bereavement support services to bereaving families.

Given the unprecedented changes to bereavement rituals that the COVID-19 pandemic social distancing protocols presented in the African context and beyond, Christian communities had to respond to some existential questions that had a bearing on their continued relevance in the wake of the pandemic. They had to answer questions relating to what could be done to continue offering social support to bereaving families in the context of the highly restrictive environment that banned social gatherings, which ordinarily constituted

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to indicate that the definition of Church adopted in this article is one that transcends specific denominations and emphasizes the idea of the Church as a community of individuals who share common beliefs and engage in shared religious practices. Thus, the term is used to refer to the universal body of Christians belonging to various Pentecostal and Mainline denominations in the Zimbabwean context. The term “Church” is used interchangeably with “Christian communities.”

the primary avenue through which bereaving families were consoled. It was therefore imperative for Christian communities to remain contextually relevant in addressing the challenges that affected bereaving families as well as in restoring consistency in society through biblical interpretation. Thus, using Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, this article critically examines the efforts by Christian communities in Southern Africa and more particularly the Zimbabwe to circumvent these incomprehensible challenges.<sup>2</sup> Such communities had to devise ways to continue rendering important supporting and consoling services to the bereaved families during these trying times. Given that the intensity and impact of losing a family member is more devastating in the absence of a strong support system, the paper demonstrates how it was particularly important for Christian communities to bring hope to the bereaved families. Indeed, the pandemic pushed such communities to reconfigure their bereavement support services to suit the demands of the lockdown protocols of social distancing that characterized the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Underpinning this qualitative article is Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, which is undoubtedly most influential with regards to understanding the psychological processes that often characterize catastrophic events in society (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019, 3). Fundamentally, cognitive dissonance occurs when a certain development causes a serious discrepancy between two of an individual's or community's beliefs (Cooper 2007, 2, 6; Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019, 3). In essence cognitive dissonance is a theory that articulates the psychological processes that occur when certain negative and expected events create conflicting cognitions within a person or a community. At the core of this theory is the idea that catastrophic developments often cause inconsistencies that challenge people's original perceptions or beliefs thereby creating psychological discomfort in them (Cooper 2007, 5). Given that people generally do not tolerate inconsistency and its accompanying stress and psychological discomfort, they make attempts to reduce the dissonance by restoring consistency. As such, the greater the magnitude of the dissonance, the greater the pressure and motivation to reduce or eliminate it (Jenkins 2013, 9; Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019, 7). It is in the attempt to restore consistency that people devise mechanisms to eliminate or cope with the dissonance. As Festinger articulates, the process to reduce cognitive dissonance often happens in three possible ways. Thus, people may attempt to: (a) change one or several elements involved in the dissonance relationship, for example moving an opinion to fit behavior, (b) add new elements to reduce the inconsistency, for example adopting opinions which fit behavior, and (c) reducing the importance of the involved elements (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019, 2–3, 9). The fundamental goal for undertaking any of the listed options is to restore consistency through eliminating the psychological discomfort associated with a certain negative development.

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<sup>2</sup> Although the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown protocols of social distancing affected bereavement rituals and practices across the globe, the author focuses on the Southern African context, drawing upon personal observations, documented experiences, and the rich tapestry of cultural understandings particularly in Zimbabwe. This focus is necessitated by the author's deep knowledge of the Zimbabwean context, which brings a sense of authenticity, credibility, and depth to the work while also creating an engaging, impactful, and responsible representation of how Christian communities responded to the disruptive challenges caused by the pandemic.

The cognitive dissonance approach is particularly important in this article because it provides a sound framework for examining the retrogressive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic especially in the context of Judeo-Christian communities. In essence, the insights from this theory provide a deeper understanding of the psychological processes that were triggered by catastrophic developments associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Bowa 2023, 190–191). The theory provides a lens through which the impact of the lockdown protocols of social distancing on bereavement rituals in the African context can be examined. The theory is significant in demonstrating the disruptive impact of social distancing practices on the traditional procedures that often characterize funeral and bereavement activities in Zimbabwe. This approach helps in demonstrating how the COVID-19 pandemic plunged Christian communities into a state of cognitive dissonance by severely restricting social gatherings including those associated with funeral and bereavement practices. Accordingly, the theory is critical in situating the response of Christian communities to the challenges that social distancing protocols presented especially with respect to the mandate of offering the needed social support to bereaving families.

### **Christian Communities and their Role During Bereavements: A Historical Overview**

Loss, grief, and the need to mourn are experiences common in all societies and historical experience demonstrates that religion has been uniquely positioned to provide bereavement services to members of the community dealing with loss. As Lee et al. (2013, 291) indicate, religion is particularly suited for dealing with loss because it provides, among other things, answers to existential questions about death, a system for dealing with death, and a social group to turn to for support. Accordingly, Kelley and Chan (2012, 201) also highlight that in coping with grief and other sources of stress, many people turn to religious resources, perhaps in part because these resources offer something beyond the limits of this world as people confront crises of meaning. As such, bereaving families intuitively find comfort from religious institutions during times of mourning. Religious beliefs have positive influence on the process of adjusting to the death of a loved one or family member and provide support that reduces uncertainty in the experience of death (Clarke et al. 2003, 210; Kim 2009, 39; Chapple et al. 2011, 2, 4). Thus, from the perspective of Christian communities, assisting and counselling bereaving families has been one of the ways through which support has been extended not only to individuals who share common beliefs but also to surrounding community members (Spilling 2011, 2).

Christian communities have always played a pivotal role in rendering social support and showing solidarity and compassion towards bereaved families in the African context and beyond. Sherkat and Reed (1992, 260) state that social support is a process by which resources in the social structure are channeled towards meeting functional needs in routine and crisis situations. This social support is vital in the construction of meaning during times of loss since meanings assigned to loss are negotiated within specific social contexts (Kim 2009, 39; Howard 2009, 110). The impact of stressful events such as death on the general well-being, both physical and mental, is buffered by social support networks (Sherkat and Reed 1992, 260). As such, Christian communities have been instrumental in providing the much-needed social support for bereaving families presenting them with opportunities for expressing their feelings and thoughts amid their struggles. This support system is valued because, for the bereaved,

interacting with family and friends is very important in finding meaning and coping with loss (Steiner 2006, 30; Kim 2009, 40; Bowman and Koenig 2013, 112). Thus, Christian communities have always provided a conducive and enabling environment for the emotional exchange that is central to the curative process in the face of bereavement. Thus, from time immemorial, such communities have provided very effective coping systems in the context of bereavement, and coping mechanism have been positively associated with a decrease in depressive symptoms for the bereaved. This explains why, after the death of a family member or a close friend, some people turn to such communities for help (Chapple et al. 2011, 6). Important to highlight here is the fact that social gatherings are a primary avenue through which Christian communities have effectively executed their mandate to provide social support to bereaving families. It follows therefore that any restriction on social gatherings inevitably undermines the capacity of Christian communities to support such bereaving families.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on Bereavement Practices and Rituals**

That the COVID-19 pandemic caused massive social disruption and resulted in unprecedented changes in various traditions and social processes is indeed a sustainable argument. The disruptive changes that the pandemic introduced particularly with regards to the conduct of funerals and the provision of bereavement support plunged Christian communities and bereaving families into a state of cognitive dissonance. Normal processes of mourning and grieving were adversely disrupted. This social dimension of the crisis demonstrates how the pandemic wreaked havoc on traditional bereavement practices. Traditional ways of mourning were rendered ineffective as a result of public health considerations on preventing the spread of the pandemic (Taringa and Chirongoma 2023, 44). Social distancing measures brought about significant restrictions to funeral and bereavement practices thereby affecting the people's ability to mourn their lost relatives. In response to the question on how social distancing negatively impacted the experience of mourning, one bereaved family member indicated:

I lost my father in 2021 at the height of the pandemic in Zimbabwe. This has been the most heart-breaking loss I have ever suffered in my life. I can say without doubt that COVID-19, with its social distancing and lockdown measures, cruelly robbed me and my entire family of the rare opportunity to fully participate in bidding farewell to our beloved father. This happened at a time when the majority of the people were not yet adequately informed about the pandemic. Our father was buried by officials from the ministry of health, and we were not present at the burial site. This was something new and strange. No body viewing was done and even up to now most of us are not certain on whether he was buried where the officials claim they did. This left us feeling empty and damaged, as we yearned to gather together, share sorrowful tears, and find solace in the comforting presence of our extended family and friends. COVID-19 robbed us of the opportunity to give a befitting send off to our beloved father as he would have expected. (Interview with a bereaved family member 11/30/2023).

Similar sentiments were expressed by a Church leader and academic who observed that:

As church leaders, we found ourselves operating in a very challenging environment as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. I would say we were conflicted. On one hand we understood the importance of providing social support to bereaving families. On the other hand, we had to adhere to the dictates of the social distancing and lockdowns. The need for social distancing, quarantine measures, and limitations on large gatherings led to significant challenges in conducting funeral ceremonies, gathering for communal rituals, and adhering to customary burial customs. The environment was not only highly restrictive but also changed the way funerals were conducted. For the first time, it so happened that we could not participate and officiate in funeral proceedings of our congregants. Everything had changed and this was very challenging. We were faced with unprecedented challenges. (Interview with a church leader and academic 11/30/2023).

Another bereaved family member explained that:

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our bereavement rituals and burial practices in ways we never could have imagined. It forced us to alter our time-honored traditions, robbing us of the familiar comfort found in coming together to mourn and celebrate the life of our departed loved one. Our inability to gather in person and find solace in the presence of our friends and family left a palpable void in our grieving process. The absence of familiar customs and shared rituals intensified our sense of loss, making it all the more difficult to find closure and peace. The pandemic affected the depth of our mourning and the sense of communal solidarity that is integral to our grieving process in Zimbabwe. (Interview with a bereaved family member 11/30/2023).

The above excerpts indicate that a major challenge for Christian communities related to how they could continue offering essential services to bereaving families in the context of the restrictions that the social distancing protocols presented. For the bereaving families the challenge was on how they could deal with their loss without the social support, emotional and material, from the Christian community at large. Both constituencies were caught up in a quandary and this caused a great deal of psychological discomfort. On the one hand the capacity of Christian communities to render social support to the bereaved was severely undermined. On the other hand, the bereaved families were equally incapacitated to access the conventional support from the Christian communities that had always been their primary port of call. Essentially, this demonstrates that the lockdown protocols of social distancing were highly disruptive to the conventional ways of handling funerals and offering support to the bereaving families. In this way, the pandemic induced transformations to the deeply cherished death and burial rituals in Zimbabwe (Taringa and Chirongoma 2023, 65–66).

The severe restrictions on social gatherings essentially dealt a death blow to the conventional ways of conducting funerals in Christian communities. Traditionally, funerals have been marked communally, providing an opportunity and a focal point for all members to express and experience grief (Meller 2010, 271). In the Zimbabwean context, funerals are indeed important social gatherings that provide mourners with an environment to offer their

comfort and support to the bereaved.<sup>3</sup> Such practices are often officiated by the Church leaders. Unfortunately, the pandemic disrupted the conduct of funeral rituals by limiting the number of family, friends, and church congregants in attendance. As a result, Christian communities could not effectively render social support to the bereaved as their capacity was severely undermined by the restrictions of social distancing. In essence, such communities could not connect more profoundly with bereaving families. And yet, in coping with grief, bereaved families find their comfort in religious activities and rituals and their connection to a faith community (Kelley and Chan 2012, 201–202). In the Zimbabwean context, most families grieved in isolation, as the pandemic inhibited other people from not only attending funerals but also from rendering support and showing solidarity and compassion towards the bereaved families. To this end, grieving in isolation became a primary characteristic of funerals during the era of the pandemic. Certainly, grieving in isolation was a far more painful and devastating experience for bereaving families. Hence, the pandemic exacerbated the pain of death and grieving, a development which was particularly devastating for bereaving families. Certainly, problems like loneliness and depression emanating from social isolation were compounded by lockdown protocols as many people found themselves disconnected from the usual social networks that rendered them support (Mahiya and Murisi 2022, 12). If this was the case for ordinary people, the situation was certainly worse for bereaving families who had to cope with their loss without adequate access to the social support services offered by Christian communities.

Respectively, given that religious activities have always helped mourners to assimilate the loss and move towards a better level of emotional and social well-being as Kokou-Kpolou et al. (2017, 767) and Bowman and Koenig (2013, 116) argue, it therefore follows that the ban on gatherings hindered the Church's participation in bereavement services worsening the experiences of mourners who found it difficult to assimilate their loss due to the lack of social support. Ultimately, the pandemic severely limited the Church's contribution to bereavement services (Taringa and Chirongoma 2023, 61). The degree to which the Church could offer social support to the bereaved was negatively affected by the social distancing protocols. For instance, Church members could not make occasional visits to bereaving families, which visits are often designed to comfort and support them during and in the aftermath of the funeral proceedings. Church leaders can provide counselling to the bereaving families through such visits (Howard 2009, 90). As Mahiya and Murisi's (2022, 6–7, 8) research demonstrates, the idea of visits is so central to the conceptualization of fellowship and the rendition of social support in the context of Mainline, Pentecostal and even African Initiated Churches in the Zimbabwean context. Thus, it is quite unfortunate that this important social support system was rendered ineffective in the context of social distancing measures, a development that undoubtedly worsened the experience of bereavement. Bereaving families suffered in isolation

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to highlight here that death is essentially one of the most important rites of passage in the context of Southern African countries such as Zimbabwe. As such funeral rituals and practices hold immense significance as communal events that bring together extended families, friends, and community members to mourn, celebrate, and pay respects to the deceased. Thus, such rituals and practices provide a collective space that plays a crucial role in maintaining the social fabric of Zimbabwean communities. Also, important to note is the fact that funerals are generally not a one-day event; the processes extend for many days. To understand the importance of death as a rite of passage in Africa, see Ademiluka 2009.

with inadequate social support from Christian communities to buffer their pain. This disheartening development became an uncommon feature of bereavement because of the pandemic.

### **The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Reconfiguration of Bereavement Support Services by Christian communities**

The COVID-19 pandemic was particularly devastating and disruptive to the traditional practices of Christian communities with regards to rendering support and comfort to bereaving families. It placed the Christian communities in a very challenging context that called for innovative and adaptive strategies to ensure that they remained a critical stakeholder in rendering bereavement services in the wake of the pandemic. How could Christian communities continue to be relevant in an environment where the traditional patterns were seriously altered by the pandemic? Given that the Christian communities were caught up in a state of cognitive dissonance, they had to come up with innovative and adaptive strategies to eliminate the dissonance and restore consistency in bereavement practices. In as much as the pandemic practically limited the Church's capacity to execute its mandate in the context of bereavements, its presence needed to be felt in the face of all the challenges that the pandemic was causing. Indeed, the expectation was for the Church to institute measures that enhanced its capacity to render bereavement services in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent with Festinger's second level of coping with cognitive dissonance, the Christian communities adapted their mission to align with the demands of the lockdown protocols of social distancing.

Citing examples from the Zimbabwean context, Mahiya and Murisi (2022, 1–2) argue that lockdown protocols of social distancing created immense pressure for the Church, as a key pillar of support, to reassert its relevance and viability in the wake of the uncharted territories that characterized the pandemic. Essentially, the lockdown protocols served to create barriers to effective communication between the Church and the constituency of its members. Hence, the Church certainly had to find innovative ways to establish effective communication channels that enhanced its engagement with the community. To achieve this, the Christian communities had to embrace and adapt to digital communication, preaching and praying through WhatsApp, Facebook and Zoom, television and radio to overcome the restrictions on social gatherings (Mahiya and Murisi 2022, 1, 10, 11, 13; Ponde-Mutsvedu and Chirongoma 2022, 104, Taringa and Chirongoma 2023, 64). The adoption of digital platforms as a medium of communication enabled the Church to continue rendering social support to bereaving families. In this respect, one Zimbabwean Pentecostal Church leader had this to say:

The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to pivot towards virtual engagement. We had to innovate new ways of extending support to bereaving families. We turned to digital platforms such as social media to offer counselling, share the word of God, and offer comfort during these trying times. Despite its constraints, social media enabled the Church to remain relevant to the cause of providing bereavement support and care to our congregation and community members. (Interview with a Pentecostal leader 11/30/2023).

Commenting on the same issue, another senior Church leader and academic explained:



The pandemic forced us as African Church leaders to rethink our support system for bereaving families. It forced us to retool our approach and utilize digital platforms to offer online grief counselling, prayer meetings, and virtual condolence messages to families who had lost their loved ones. Despite the severe limitations, we were still able to provide pastoral care and emotional assistance these digital platforms. We believe this helped families cope with their loss and find comfort in those uncertain times. (Interview with a senior church leader and academic 11/30/2023).

Although the heightened use of digital communication could not compare to the impact of face-to-face interactions with bereaving families, it nonetheless afforded the Christian communities a platform for providing these families with the much-needed social support. Indeed, the need for face-to-face interactions could not be entirely substituted by digital communication. Physical interaction remained a necessity even though social distancing pronouncements made it a practical impossibility. The following excerpts summarize the views of some bereaved family members on the efficacy of the use of digital platforms by Christian communities to offer material and emotional support to bereaving families:

I personally think that the Church's use of social media platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp and Facebook to console those who lost their beloved was very strategic and helpful. I benefited from that, and I did not feel completely isolated. In as much as I was confined in my home, I did not feel alone. Our fellow Church members prayed with us online. They could not attend the proceedings in person, but they surely made their presence felt virtually. Of course, this could not compare to the support I would have received if all my friends, family and fellow congregants had attended the funeral in person. (Interview with a bereaved family member 11/30/2023).

The impact of COVID-19 on our traditional Christian bereavement rituals and burial practices was profound. It is quite unfortunate that my family had to witness the disruptive impact of the pandemic on funeral processes, firsthand. The absence of our closest friends and community members made it harder for us to find comfort and solace in the midst of the loss we had suffered. I believe that if Church community had not intervened through harnessing digital technologies, our experience would have really been more devastating. The Church remained a beacon of hope and comfort as many congregants offered their support, emotional and otherwise via WhatsApp, Facebook and Zoom. We even received financial support, groceries and other material goods which were bought online, and all this was facilitated by our Church leaders. (Interview with a bereaved family member 11/30/2023).

From the above excerpts, the heightened use of digital media platforms by Christian communities proved to be useful particularly to bereaving families. It is a fact that such methods never adequately replaced face-to-face interactions, but they became an effective way of showing solidarity and compassion with bereaving families in the face of the public health guidelines of social distancing. It is also evident that Christian communities continued to offer

the much needed financial and material support to the bereaving families without physically visiting them. They made use of online and mobile financial platforms to render financial assistance to the bereaving families. Christian communities engaged online service providers to purchase important resources that could be delivered directly to the bereaving families. By making use of such strategies, the Christian community continued to render essential bereavement services whilst observing the lockdown protocols of social distancing and contributing significantly to curbing the spread of the pandemic.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, communication via various digital platforms became an exclusive method available for the Church in Zimbabwe such that members resorted to sending audio messages, audio prayers and sharing the word via such platforms (Mahiya and Murisi 2022, 9). This also had direct implications on how the Christian communities engaged with bereaving families. They relied on effective biblical interpretation in their efforts of supporting bereaved families. Bowman and Koenig (2013, 107) indicate that scriptures are an important religious resource for the pastor's ministry to the grief sufferer. Thus, to remain relevant Christian communities engaged a liberative reading of Biblical texts in response to the challenges that emanated from the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, as Bowman and Koenig (2013, 107) further contend, the scriptures that pastors use to comfort the bereaved should speak to their struggles. In this respect, most Church leaders had to interpret scriptures in a manner that comforted the bereaved in the context of the struggles and the cognitive dissonance they were experiencing as a result the pandemic. Bereaving families were forced to grieve in isolation and as such, pastors had to choose appropriate scriptures that spoke to such families in the context of this reality. Such messages were awash on social media platforms. Christian communities created a conducive environment, through effective biblical interpretation, that reduced the pain of grieving in isolation which had been exacerbated by the pandemic. Through this process, Christian communities comforted and assured the bereaved that they were still present, rendering support and compassion in the context of the COVID-19-related challenges. Indeed, For Bowman and Koenig (2013, 109), appropriately chosen scriptures spoken to the grief sufferer convey comfort and understanding. Respectively, the Church undertook to convey comfort and understanding to the bereaved, particularly through effective biblical interpretation that was geared towards addressing the challenges they were facing due to social distancing protocols.

Indeed, biblical interpretation played a key role in this reconfiguration process. First, the Church engaged biblical texts such as Leviticus 13:45–46 and Leviticus 13:53–56 to reinforce the idea that practices of social distancing and quarantine were indeed a common means of protection against contagious diseases dating back to communities in ancient biblical times. Underpinning the Church's positive engagement with such texts was the idea of fostering the acceptance of lockdown protocols in Christian communities including bereaving families who had to endure the pain of having their departed buried in their absence. Thus, Church leaders from the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference (ZCBC) and Indigenous Inter-Denominational Council of Churches (ZIIDCC) sought to dispel some of the conspiracies associated with the COVID-19 pandemic using the Bible (Bowa 2023, 199). The Church demonstrated that the ancient society had developed laws around purity and regulated interaction with the idea of improving the general health and well-being of people. Thus, the

lockdown protocols of social distancing and quarantine were essentially meant to mitigate the effects of infectious diseases in the same way the laws in Leviticus 13 did in ancient Israel. In an attempt to restore society to normalcy, the Church also engaged biblical interpretation to foster vaccine acceptance (Bowa 2023, 198).

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there were calls for Church leaders to collaborate with government and non-governmental entities as well as health experts in the fight against the pandemic and more particularly in promoting vaccine acceptance (Dzinamarira et al. 2021, 7; Masiyiwa et al. 2021; Kwaramba et al. 2021; Maiden 2021).<sup>4</sup> Church leaders answered this call and intervened to improve vaccine acceptance. For instance, in Zimbabwe Apostle Andrew Wutawunashe is quoted to have said:

People should not be misled by falsehoods being peddled on social media since the word of God did not prohibit the use of vaccines, hence there was no excuse for Christians not to take it. This is to inspire others to be vaccinated, especially those who are being misguided by falsehoods that it is ‘unchristian’ and against the word of God to be vaccinated... I keep saying the first vaccination was in Exodus 15:26 when Moses was given a tree to vaccinate the water. (Zinyuke 2023).

Evidently, through this kind of engagement with texts such as Exodus 15:26, Church leaders inspired confidence in members of Christian communities to accept vaccines. Such texts were used to emphasize the idea that there was nothing biblically wrong not only with getting vaccines but also with practicing social distancing as these were preventative measures (Bowa 2023, 200). More importantly, this kind of engagement with Old Testament texts fostered the idea that people could only revert to normal life processes only if they got vaccinated. This kind of interpretation had transformative implications, especially for bereaving families. Fundamentally, it meant that people could only take part in conventional funeral and bereavement rituals if they were vaccinated. Thus, the Church demonstrated that vaccination was key to resuming social gatherings. The recurring principle emerging from the Church’s engagement with Old Testament texts was the idea that despite its accompanying challenges, the practice of social distancing was meant to curtail the spread of infectious diseases through restricting social interactions. The Church provided bereaving families with a chance to reflect on their realities through biblical insights that were implicitly related to their experiences.

According to Kim (2009, 73), the Church always has a duty to preserve its integrity of faith and to provide a meaningful experience for the mourners. It is in this respect that the Christian communities strived to provide comfort, render support, and show compassion towards bereaving families even in the context of the most challenging environments such as

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to highlight here that, at first, the lockdown protocols caused tension and disagreement, with religious leaders expressing concerns about the infringement on religious freedom and the perceived lack of consultation from the Zimbabwean government. However, as time progressed and the severity of the pandemic became more apparent, the relationship started to shift towards collaboration and cooperation. The governments recognized the importance of religious leaders in providing support, comfort, and guidance to their communities during such challenging times. Overall, the relationship between Church leaders and government entities in Zimbabwe evolved from initial sourness and disagreements to a more cooperative and collaborative partnership as they recognized the mutual benefits of working together to combat the challenges posed by the pandemic.

the one created by the COVID-19 pandemic. It was their duty to provide a platform for ensuring that bereaving families did not suffer in isolation as a result of social distancing measures. Howard (2009, 110) has established that the support and presence of members of the Church positively impacts the experience of grieving. Based on this observation, the Christian communities in Zimbabwe made their presence felt in the context of the social distancing measures that rendered its traditional mechanisms of bereavement support ineffective. The pandemic pushed the Church to engage virtual platforms in offering bereavement services to members who lost their loved ones during the pandemic. By adopting such measures, the Church asserted its presence as an important institution that provides essential social support to bereaving families. Ultimately, the Church contributed to reducing the impact of the pandemic on the experience of bereavement by ensuring that many families would not grieve in isolation.

### **Conclusion**

This paper establishes that the Christian communities in Zimbabwe and beyond found themselves amid an everchanging and challenging environment because of the public health guidelines on social distancing associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This article argues that the restriction on social gatherings inevitably plunged Christian communities and bereaving families into a state of cognitive dissonance characterized by high levels of psychological discomfort. The capacity of Christian communities to effectively execute their mandate in the context of bereavements was extremely undermined. The pandemic adversely disrupted the normal processes of mourning and grieving through the practice of social distancing. This rendered the Church's traditional mechanisms of providing social support to the bereaving families practically ineffective in the context of the health guidelines on curbing the spread of the pandemic. As such, the pandemic forced many of the bereaving families to grieve in isolation with insufficient social support from the Christian communities that had always provided a very effective coping system in the context of bereavement. In this way the pandemic has exacerbated the pain of grieving and it was incumbent upon Christian communities to minimize this pain and suffering.

The Church had to find ways to continue providing its important bereavement services, without which bereaving families would face extreme grief and depression. Christian communities faced unprecedented restrictions and challenges in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but they had to adapt to this new environment to avoid being irrelevant particularly with regards to providing efficient bereavement services. The Church had to create environment, through effective biblical interpretation and prayer that provided support and comfort to the families who were being forced to grieve in isolation. The Church made use of various online platforms to provide social support, both material and emotional, to bereaving families. By making use of such strategies, the Church continued to render essential bereavement services while observing the lockdown protocols of social distancing and contributing significantly to curbing the spread of the pandemic. Despite these challenges, Christian communities showed resilience and adaptability by finding innovative ways to uphold certain aspects of their burial and ritual practices. Such adaptations demonstrate the enduring importance of these customs in Zimbabwe and the determination to honor the departed amidst unprecedented circumstances.

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