



The role of the Eucharist in national healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding: A case study of Zimbabwe's fractured society

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This study examines the role of the Eucharist in national healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding with particular focus on Zimbabwe's fractured society. The article is divided into two main parts. The first segment examines the Zimbabwean situation on the socio-political level and the need for unity, reconciliation and healing therein. The second section underlines the potential of the Eucharist as a game changer on Zimbabwe's chequered religious, social and political landscapes. Thus, the role of the church in national healing shall be examined and evaluated. In view of the fact that Christianity controls over 85% of Zimbabwe's total population, the article proposes to seriously consider the adoption of the Eucharist not just as a model for deepening ecumenical growth but also for national healing, integration and peacebuilding. For this reason, the article strongly argues that the Eucharist is an underutilised strategy in religious reconciliation, national healing and peacebuilding. As a nation with religious, social and political landscapes that have traditionally been dominated by Eucharistic exclusivity, denominational divisions, tribal tensions, animosity and political violence, among other challenges, the adoption of the Eucharist as a 'peacemaker' would signify not just a common Christian source of being in the one God and a fulfilment of the deepest African liturgical and enculturation aspirations but also the introduction of a new model and paradigm in Zimbabwe's healing and peacebuilding thrust and trajectory.

Contribution: The study used the association between the Eucharist and the uniting powers of food in secular contexts to underline the prospects and centrality of the Eucharist as an antidote for national healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding on Zimbabwe's fractured society.

Keywords: Eucharist; national healing; reconciliation; peacebuilding; fractured society; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Most Christian denominations consider the Eucharist¹ as one of the central and fundamental pivots of the Christian religion and a ritual of unprecedented symbolic value (Mudyiwa 2021:1). The word Eucharist is derived from the Greek word eucharistia, meaning 'thanksgiving'. While the term Eucharist (Holy Mass) is most common among Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Lutherans (among others), within the Protestant and evangelical settings, names such as Communion, the Lord's Supper, Memorial, Remembrance, Thanksgiving and Breaking of Bread are regularly used (Richert 2019). Among African independent churches, sects and crypto sects, the same ritual is popularly referred to as 'Easter', 'Pentecost', Chirairo or Chidyo (Daneel 1987).

Within the mainstream traditional Christian circles, the Eucharist is the most solemn Christian rite that is dedicated to the remembrance and commemoration of Christ's Last Supper with his disciples (Mt 26:25–29, Mk 14:22–25, Lk 22:19–23, 1 Cor 11:23–25). For over 2000 years, this ritual meal that symbolises and embodies an ancient 'humanitarian' and altruistic favour has often been celebrated with deepest and cordial thanksgiving within the Christian religion.

Whereas traditional Christian theology regards the Eucharist as a memorial of the mystery of salvation, Mudyiwa (2021:132) demystifies the ritual and adds that Christ's Last Supper symbolises God's love and forgiveness to humanity, the Lost Sheep (Lk 15:4–7). The ritual meal signifies Christ's preparedness and willingness to accomplish his divine mission on earth. For Mudyiwa, Christ's main mission was to take away the sin of the world (Is 53:5) or the original sin and to

1. Taking full cognisance of the fact that the Eucharist is known by various other names in different Christian settings, two names shall feature more prominently in this article, namely Lord's Supper and Eucharist.

bridge the gulf that existed between God and the fallen angels who had followed Lucifer (Satan). Contrary to traditionally accepted Christian theology of the Adamic guilt, Mudyiwa argues that humanity on earth is a representation of the biblical 'Fallen Angels' (Rv 12:7-17) who are now participating in God's plan of salvation to effect their gradual ascent and repatriation to heaven, their original home of bliss and splendour.

For centuries, the Lord's Supper has been regarded as the source and summit of the Christian life, and a ritual that enables the unity of the people of God (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994:336). While Sarpong (1985:4) refers to the Eucharist as the greatest symbol of Christian unity, love, reconciliation and re-engagement, Shorter (1985:49) talks of the Eucharist as a fundamental symbol of Christian healing. For Shorter, during Eucharistic celebrations, 'it is not sicknesses [per se] that are healed but people; and in people, there are many levels of being which interact with one another, be it on the religious, cultural, social or political level'.

Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia), as a nation, has so far experienced division, bloodshed, animosity and severe tribal tensions in its historical past. Apparently, on many occasions, the Church has been motivated and invited by the ruling party to take a leading and primary role in national healing and reconciliation. Ironically, the same church has not been able to register tangible and enduring feats on Zimbabwe's socio-political landscape. The government initiated and sponsored programmes for national healing and reconciliation have also not been lacking in this regard. However, a combination of both church and government-related programmes seems to have registered minimum breakthroughs in this area of national healing and peacebuilding. As observed and documented by Manyonganise (2015:2), academic scholarship on national healing and reconciliation in Zimbabwe, while acknowledging the shortcomings of previous policies on national healing, has not taken deliberate steps to come up with more effective paradigms that are political and expedient to various institutions taking part in national healing and reconciliation. Thus, while other scholars have acknowledged and appreciated a handful of strides that have since been achieved so far in national healing programmes, it is, however, critical to underline that, to date, no model or paradigm has placed the Eucharist at the centre of national healing and reconciliation processes in Zimbabwe. The absence of such a paradigm agitated the minds of the authors and prompted this study.

This article, therefore, seeks to propose that the Eucharist is not just an integral element of ecumenism but national healing and peacebuilding as well. However, many sceptics have asked: can the Eucharist be a game changer in national healing and peacebuilding when the significance of the same has been so contentious during the period of Reformation? If so, where is the potential when most denominations, to date, use the same Eucharist as a boundary maintaining mechanism? The article pivots on the argument that the greatest potential of the

church in national healing and peacebuilding rests on religious innovative practices such as the deployment of the Eucharist as a more profitable model for promoting social cohesion. Before examining the unifying and healing potential of the Eucharist on Zimbabwe's fractured society, it is important that the article briefly surveys the socio-political situation in Zimbabwe to appreciate the importance and need for unity, reconciliation and healing therein.

Violence and ethnic tension in Zimbabwe

A discussion on the role of the Eucharist in national healing and peacebuilding may not be complete without a survey of the history of violence and ethnic tension in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe has a protracted and long drawn-out history of violent conflicts spreading over decades. Key among such violent and ferocious historical episodes include the struggle for independence from 1965 to 1979, the Gukurahundi massacres and butcheries from 1980 to 1987 and the post-2000 electoral violence, which caused divisions in various communities around the country (Du Plessis & Ford 2009; Sachikonye 2011).

Firstly, it should be pointed out that Zimbabwe's socio-political past can largely be described as complex and dynamic, largely characterised by tensions, animosity and bloodshed. Thondhlana (2014) viewed Zimbabwe's multi-ethnic society as a melting pot of many cultures and peoples of different ethnic and folkloric backgrounds. Linguistically, the Zimbabwean society has a multifaceted ethnolinguistic makeup of at least 20 language varieties (Hachipola 1998). The Constitution of Zimbabwe (the Constitution Parliamentary Committee [COPAC] 2013), however, recognises 16 official languages with various ethnicities. Barker (2012:255) posits that ethnicity is a cultural concept that is centred on the sharing of norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices. It is a process of boundary formation that is constructed and maintained under specific socio-historical conditions. Fought (2006:8) views ethnicity as a group of people of common descent or ancestry, people who share similar customs and unique cultural values and morals, and people who are brought together by historical commonalities. These are usually tied together by the collective memory of previous colonisation or migration or other related movements. Membership to particular ethnic groupings, however, does not always imply strong blood connexions and ties. Zimbabwe reflects such a society brought together by historical camaraderie and commonalities.

In his book, *Authentic Inculturation and Reconciliation*, Zvarevashe (2005) briefly traced the history of the ethnic groups and violence in Zimbabwe. He concurs that Zimbabwe, a multi-religious country, is also a multi-ethnic society, comprising more than 10 ethnic groups of diverse backgrounds, which historians and anthropologists have classified into two main ethnic groups, namely, the Shona and Ndebele. There are also other minority groups, such as

the Kalanga, Tonga, Shangani, Sotho, Venda, among many others. Zvarevashe (2005) further revealed that of the many ethnic groups fairly distributed across the country, the Shona constitutes the majority and the Ndebele have always been the minority, occupying mostly the southwest part of the country. Historically, the political, social and economic relations of the two umbrella groups (Shona and Ndebele), as well as the various political parties in Zimbabwe (particularly the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front [ZANU–PF] and the Movement for Democratic Change [MDC]), have been regarded by historians as complex, dynamic and fluid as well, largely characterised by tensions, animosity and bloodshed. While the coming into the country of the white settlers and the subsequent preaching of the Gospel by the early missionaries eased the tension and animosity between the two rival ethnic groups (Shona and Ndebele) to some extent, the volatile political situation of the country has continued to widen the rift between Zimbabwe’s main ethnic groups, in general and the two main political parties, in particular. Such a situation has consequently compelled the Zimbabwean government and the society at large to call for urgent national healing and reconciliation programmes across the political divide.

Among many other scholars, Sachikonye (2011) and Nyere (2016) make a comprehensive and robust survey of political violence in pre- and post-independence Zimbabwe. Going as far back as the colonial era, Sachikonye discussed how violence was institutionalised and used to silence and subdue the black indigenous population. He discussed how the liberation movements used violence against the colonial regime, the public and within its structures. In addition, Sachikonye also discussed how after independence the same violence reared its ugly and obnoxious head when it was then perpetrated by the ruling ZANU–PF party. Like most political analysts and historiographers, he also chronicled post-independence violence such as the Gukurahundi (Midlands and Matabeleland massacres), which claimed over 20 000 Ndebeles (Maseko 2011:93). In addition, Sachikonye referred to the 2000–2008 pre- and post-election violence as well as failed government attempts to facilitate reconciliation at the local level. Togarasei and Chitando (2011) also referred to the same violence that claimed the lives of 200 opposition supporters with several others maimed, tortured and raped. Murambadoro and Wielenga (2015) discussed at length the nature of violence in Zimbabwe and the need for reconciliation as an integral part of the post-conflict peacebuilding process. Nyere (2016) observed and concluded that violence in Zimbabwe is both systematic and political. In most cases, Zimbabwean violence has been described as going beyond ordinary episodic eruptions as commonly experienced by societies, in general. This violence is often entrenched in political systems that existed and continue to exist in various cultural forms. Zvarevashe (2005) thus singled out tribalism as one of the key obstacles (among others) to unity in Africa today, in particular Zimbabwe.

In the same vein, in his book, *Ending Violence in Zimbabwe*, Kaulem (2011) also discussed at length political violence in Zimbabwe with particular attention to pre and post-election violence and the urgent need for reconciliation as an integral part of sustaining peace and security, particularly at the local level. Among many other issues, Kaulem underscored that the continued use of violence is inseparably linked to the fact that Zimbabwe as a nation has not dealt with past violations that date back to the colonial era. With a seemingly endless brutal and barbaric culture of violence, Kaulem thus suggests that the culture of death and destruction should be removed and replaced by a superior and noble culture of love, peace and harmony.

While the Zimbabwean socio-political climate is polarised and largely opposed, of particular interest are the nation’s healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding programmes that are a critical element of this ensuing discussion of the potential of the Eucharist as an underutilised strategic player and paradigm for national healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding. As has already been underlined and also echoed by Munemo and Nciizah (2014:63), the search for peace and reconciliation in Zimbabwe has a long history that has been influenced by events dating back to the pre-colonial period through the colonial era to the post-colonial period. While scholars have highlighted pre- and post-colonial injustices and oppressions, the majority do concur that since the year 2000, political violence in Zimbabwe, torture and abuse of human rights pervaded the Zimbabwean state, thereby generating what has come to be acknowledged and portrayed as the Zimbabwean crisis.

As underlined by Shoko (2016), the phenomenon of national healing and reconciliation in Zimbabwe was largely necessitated and intensified by the disputed plebiscite by three political parties in Zimbabwe, namely ZANU–PF, MDC–T, and MDC–M. This arrangement resulted in the establishment of the Government of National Unity (GNU) whose mandate was to draft a new constitution, and prepare for a fresh electoral process and set up of new government. An Organ on National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration was appointed to spearhead the national healing programmes, and the Church was also tasked to take a leading role in the process of national healing, integration and peacebuilding. Ever since the GNU was established and the involvement and active participation of the Church were keenly felt, academic scholarship on national healing, integration and peacebuilding has not been lacking as well. Because the GNU was expected to deliver on national healing and peacebuilding, Machingura (2010) vehemently argues that the recent call for healing by the ruling party in Zimbabwe is no longer a new phenomenon as it does not produce any positive change in people’s behaviour. For him, surprisingly or not surprisingly, previous calls for unity, peace, reconciliation, integration and forgiveness have left the Zimbabwean society more wounded, divided and polarised than healed. The same calls have left the local people more disintegrated than integrated. Machingura concludes that any form of reconciliation or healing that is devoid of truth

and justice is like a wild goose chase. It bears no lasting fruits. In fact, any reconciliation process that is devoid of such still leaves Zimbabwe a 'violent infested' country.

For that reason, we do believe that ever since peace was initiated in Zimbabwe, the Eucharist has acted as an underutilised strategic player in national healing and peacebuilding. Yet, the ancient ritual has been historically regarded as one of the fundamental pivots of the Christian religion and a sacrament.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994:286) stipulates that sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to human nature. By the action of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, they efficaciously make present the grace that they signify.

To appreciate the potential of the Eucharist as a strategic player and game-changer in national healing, integration and peacebuilding, it is now paramount and pragmatic to highlight its healing and reconciliatory components, taking cognisance of the fact that Christianity controls over 85% of Zimbabwe's total population as already underlined. The adoption of the Eucharist as a peacebuilding strategy on Zimbabwe's socio-political landscape would signify not just a common Christian source of being in the one God and fulfilment of the deepest African liturgical or inculturation aspirations but also the introduction of a new model and paradigm in Zimbabwe's healing and peacebuilding thrust and trajectory. And the Church, which is expected to act as the moral conscience of the government, should thus lay the groundwork for a richer ecumenical practice and a compact future contextual theology by amplifying the role of the Lord's Supper in Zimbabwe's socio-political platforms. This can only be achieved when Heads of Christian Denominations in Zimbabwe acquaint and apprise themselves with a correct and spot-on understanding of the historical significance and essence of the Lord's Supper, what it is, what it signifies and what it affects.

The Eucharist in retrospect: Where is the potential?

A comprehensive survey of Christian history and thought reveals that ever since the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus Christ (Mt 26:25–29, Mk 14:22–25, Lk 22:19–23, 1 Cor 11:23–25), the ritual has largely played a determining role in the development of the Christian Church at the religious, socio-political levels (Barr 1999:21). Thus, the book of Acts uses four words to describe the activities of the infant Church: teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer.

Following the Jewish custom, the Christian communities prayed three times daily, namely, at sunrise, midday and sunset.

Early Christians devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the breaking of bread (Eucharist), prayer, communal life, and even the sharing of possessions (Ac 2:42–45). For

them, nothing of importance happened outside prayer and the Eucharist.

As the theology of the Eucharist developed through the centuries, with luminary theologians such as Saint Paul (c. 4 BCE – c. 64 AD), Cyril of Jerusalem (313–386), Ambrose of Milan (c. 340–397), Augustine of Hippo (c. 354–430), John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) taking the centre stage, the healing and unifying potential of the Eucharist in all spheres of human life was amplified and augmented. The same unifying, reconciliatory and healing components of the Eucharist were implicitly and obliquely confirmed through ecumenical councils such as Nicaea (325), Ephesus (431) and the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). Thus, the Eucharist was viewed as the commemoration of the passion of Christ, a symbol of Christian unity and anticipation of heavenly glory (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994:711).

Apparently, for over 15 centuries, to a greater extent, the theology of the Eucharist had not been regarded as an area of potential contestation, save for the 16th-century Protestant Reformation when the same ritual (Eucharist) became one of the many bones of contention (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2010).

The Reformation also called the Protestant Reformation was a religious revolution that took place in the western Church in the 16th century, pioneered by key leaders and protagonists, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin (among others). The Reformation triggered many other developments on the religious, economic, social and political landscapes of Europe that had far-reaching and monumental effects at the global level. Apart from catalysing the secularisation of music and art, it became the basis for the founding of Protestantism, one of the three major branches of Christianity (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2010).

During the Reformation, denominational boundaries were created and Eucharistic tables were fenced. The Reformation inspired several other reformers, leading to the birth of countless religious movements, with each reformer paying close attention to the danger of encroaching into another reformer, particularly on the doctrine of the Eucharist. However, because the Eucharist has been such an area of intense contestation during this period and the subsequent periods, the dark side of the church may not deter the Eucharistic potential to overcome historical, ethnic and other divisions within the Christian family in Zimbabwe.

Healing and reconciliatory potential of the Eucharist

With proper understanding and catechesis, it is believed that the Eucharist has great healing and reconciliatory potential and prospects. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994:341), the liturgy of the Eucharistic celebration

has for centuries unfolded according to a fundamental structure that has been preserved throughout the centuries and down to the present day. Without minimising the need for justice, truth and impunity, key components that may be critical in the country's search for unity, peace and reconciliation include preparation for the Eucharistic celebration, the penitential rite, the Lord's prayer, the sign of peace, reception of the Eucharist and the dismissal rite. Of necessity, these different parts or stages of the Eucharistic celebration form a fundamental unity with the unprecedented symbolic value. Most mainline churches (including the Catholic and Anglican) have striking similarities on these components of the Eucharistic celebration, which may be critical building blocks to Zimbabwe's thrust on national healing and reconciliation.

Preparation for the Eucharistic celebration

The healing and reconciliatory elements in the preparation for the Eucharistic celebration may not be overemphasised. Preparation for the Eucharistic celebration is inseparably linked and connected to a proper inner disposition. As underscored by Barr (1999:127), the Eucharistic celebration is always preceded by moments of self-introspection. Such moments are critical. Barr posits that among the inner dispositions required for the celebration of the Eucharist is the forgiveness of offences. A passage in the Gospels (Mt 5) requires forgiveness even before participation in the Eucharist:

When you are about to offer your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first, be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (vv. 23–24)

This scriptural passage from Matthew underlines that a sacrifice offered by an individual (particularly the Eucharist) is of no value if one has not put right an offence or offences committed against a fellow human being. Thus, to present one's offering, which happens to be the Eucharist or Lord's supper, it is necessary to make an effort of reconciliation and to enter into heartfelt relations with one's erstwhile adversary (Barr 1999). One's adversaries could be his close relatives, members of his church, members from other denominations, religions, cultures or political parties. The key meaning and message of Jesus in this passage are also in tandem with Paul's message, which emphasises that before partaking of the Eucharist, one has to examine them first. (1 Cor 11:28). For Paul, receiving Holy Communion depicts one's union not just with Jesus but also with one's neighbour, regardless of religious, denominational or political affiliation. Thus, taking cognisance of the fact that Zimbabwe is presently home to people of diverse ethnic backgrounds who require healing, it is believed that with proper catechesis on the meaning and message of this first component of the Eucharistic celebration (particularly when ecumenically shared), the healing and reconciliation process is likely to bear fruit, particularly among Christians who occupy over 85% of Zimbabwe's total population.

The penitential rite

In addition to the inner disposition that is required during the preparation for the Eucharist, the penitential rite that comes before the liturgy of the Word contains healing and reconciliatory elements that may be essential in national healing, integration and peacebuilding in Zimbabwe. Within some Christian circles (particularly mainline denominations), during the celebration of the Eucharist, the opening prayer is followed by Bible reading and a moment of silence. During the special moment of silence, individuals are expected to acknowledge their offences before God and their neighbours before committing themselves to the actual celebration and reception of the Holy Eucharist.

The penitential rite is the introductory rite of the Eucharistic celebration that comes before the liturgy of the Word. As per procedure, for example, Catholics and Anglicans (among others) often begin with an introduction by the officiating minister/priest, followed by an act of confession and penance by the congregants (Dewis 1986). According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), with various formulae, the priest or minister of religion invites congregants to call their offences and sins to mind and to genuinely and honestly repent of them. This critical component of the Eucharistic intercommunion offers congregants time to forgive and reconcile with each other before the reception of Holy Communion. Conscious of their past or current offences against brothers and sisters of other religions, denominations, political parties and those of other ethnic backgrounds, congregants acknowledge their shortcomings as members of one big family of God, the Body of Christ. General confession is followed by the words of general absolution by the officiating minister (Dewis 1986).

In a country like Zimbabwe that is dominated by Christianity, the penitential rite may be a key building block and starting point in the country's search for healing, peace and reconciliation. Thus, as Christians ecumenically celebrate the Eucharist with clean hands and hearts, the centrality of the Eucharistic celebration will be appreciated, not just as a model for deepening ecumenical growth but also a means for national healing and peacebuilding.

Eucharistic prayers

Alongside the penitential rite and many other components of the Eucharistic celebration, the four Eucharistic prayers for mainline Christianity (particularly Catholic and Anglicans) underline critical healing and unifying elements that are necessary for national healing and re-engagement in Zimbabwe. The aspect of social healing and reconciliation is very much emphasised in the New Roman Missal and many other Church documents. As documented by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994), Shorter (1985) and Flannery (1975), the first Eucharistic prayer makes an emphasis on coming to God the Holy Father as one undivided body of Christ. 'Remember all of us gathered here before you ... We

pray to you, our living and true God and Father for our well-being and redemption.' The second Eucharistic prayer thus makes the following request, 'May all of us who share in the one body and blood of Christ, be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit'. The third Eucharistic prayer petitions God to grant that those gathered for the Eucharistic celebration may be filled with His Holy Spirit and become one body in Christ. The fourth implores God to gather all who share the bread and wine into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise.

As underlined by Shorter (1985:56), it is critical to underline that African liturgical texts envision the community as including both those who are dead and those who are unborn. For that reason, Nyamiti (1985:28) viewed the Eucharistic celebration as a divine and ancestral encounter between the living and the dead. Taking cognisance of the fact that Paul made reference to the one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God who is father of all (Eph 4:5–6), it is equally critical to underline that those who ecumenically gather for the Eucharistic celebrations (visible and invisible) are expected to form one single and undivided body, regardless of their ethnic, religious or political backgrounds. To that effect, when properly understood, this component has a great unifying and healing potential.

The Lord's prayer

Among the many critical segments or parts that emphasise the unifying, healing and reconciliatory aspects of the Eucharist is the Lord's prayer (Lk 11:1–4, Mt 6:9–13). The Lord's Prayer or the Our Father is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples and would-be disciples for their regular use. Most Christian denominations accord a special significance to this prayer. Whenever the Lord's Prayer is recited within some Christian denominations, it is often advised that the prayer is performed slowly and meditatively such that each of the prayer's key petition or component sinks into the hearts of the congregants.

Wood (ed. 1997:695–697) and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994:633–651) highlight the various components of the Lord's Prayer. They both underline that simple and faithful trust, humble and joyous assurance are the proper dispositions for one who prays the Our Father. During the Eucharistic celebration, with filial boldness, congregants in their cultural, ethnic, denominational and political diversity address and glorify God with bold confidence as their One and Only Universal Father, thereby underlining their common origin, mission and destiny. During the same prayer, among many other petitions, congregants pray for the coming of God's kingdom. The petition 'Thy kingdom come' may for general purposes be used as a supplication that the divine domination of God will be extended here and now in this present age, particularly in the hearts of individuals as well as in the world as a whole (ed. Wood 1997). Values such as love, unity, peace and forgiveness (among many others), are often associated with the manifestation of God's kingdom. The opposite (tensions,

animosity, tribalism and bloodshed inter alia) are often associated with the kingdom of Satan.

Among many other petitions, congregants also beg for God's forgiveness and mercy during the Lord's Prayer. Thus, the petition '[a]nd forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us' (Luke 11:3) may be critical in national healing, re-engagement and restoration. Congregants are repeatedly taught that the outpouring of God's mercy cannot permeate people's hearts as long as they have not forgiven those who have trespassed against them in whatever way. As underlined by Rakoczy (2000:6), the continual failure to respect each human being as an irreplaceable person created by God has given rise to a culture of violence that permeates all facets of life in many countries, including Zimbabwe. While the dimension of the culture of public violence may be well known and has been repeatedly condemned, its 'private behind doors' dimension has been viewed as even more insidious and threatening. Thus, during the Lord's Prayer, congregants will be made to understand that their prayers will not be heard unless they meet the first strict requirement of forgiving those who have trespassed against them. Tribalism, divisions, bloodshed, abductions, injuries, abuse of human rights and freedoms, among many other injustices, are part of daily life in Zimbabwe (Manyonganise 2015). For the nation to achieve its national healing, integration and peacebuilding objectives, these social ills may need to be seriously addressed.

The sign of peace

In addition to the Lord's Supper, there is a great healing and unifying potential in the sign of peace that is exchanged during the Eucharistic celebration. For many denominations (including Catholics and Anglicans), before the entire community receives the Eucharist, they offer each other the sign of peace. Whereas some new religious movements such as the Light of Life Christian Group (LLCG) in Zimbabwe put the rite at the beginning of the celebration, Catholics and Anglicans put it right towards the end, just before the reception of Holy Communion. The LLCG strongly believes that when Jesus met with his disciples, they always shared the sign of peace before anything else.

The exchange of peace has been part of the Christian liturgy and practice since earliest times (Franzen 1969). After the Reformation, a handful of reformers (including the Anglican Church) also adopted the same rite, locating it immediately after the Lord's Prayer, just as Catholics had done during the late 4th century. Originally, the rite of peace was located before the presentation of gifts, perhaps in response to Jesus' exhortation that the devotee has to reconcile with their neighbour before gift presentation (Mt 5:23–24). As already underlined, in the late fourth century, the sign of peace moved to its present location. Taking cognisance of the fact that by nature, the Eucharist is a Sacrament of peace (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994), the rite of peace offers congregations of diverse ethnic, denominational,

cultural and political backgrounds an opportunity to genuinely and honestly share the peace of Christ, their universal redeemer. It offers those who have sinned against each other in whatever way, an opportunity to embrace each other, forgive and re-engage.

For Zimbabwe in particular, where most people are fraught with fear, violence and conflicts, the gesture of peace may become particularly eloquent, as the Church has become increasingly conscious of her responsibility to pray without ceasing for the gift of peace, national healing and unity. Thus, Wood (ed. 1997:891) emphasises that for erring humanity, firstly there must be peace with God and the removal of sin's enmity through the sacrifice of Christ (Rm 5:1, Col 1:20), thus inward peace can follow (Phlp 4:7), unhindered by the word of strife (Jn 14:27). Peace between fellow humans is part of the purpose for which Christ died (Eph 2) and of the Spirit's work (Gl 5:22), but humans must actively promote it (Eph 4:3), not merely as elimination of discord but at the harmony and true functioning of the Body of Christ, the Church (Rm 14:19, 1 Cor 14:33). Thus, sharing the peace of Christ through a handshake or in whatever other ways presents a wonderful opportunity for congregants to genuinely express their love, forgiveness and sense of community as Zimbabweans who belong to different religious, cultural and political backgrounds.

Reception of the Eucharist

One of the other key components of the Eucharistic celebration that has the potential to unify and reconcile people is the reception of the Eucharist. Ecumenically receiving the Eucharist is symbolic. Among many other related values, it symbolises fellowship, a friendship of a deeper nature, reconciliation and re-engagement. For that reason, Sarpong (1985) underlines that the sacrament of unity above all else is the Eucharist. For him, it is a travesty and a caricature of Christ for Christians to partake of his Body and Blood and then live as if they have different Lords and Masters.

It is a common proverb in Zimbabwe that, 'Ukama (kinship) igasvahunozadziswanekudya'. When translated, the proverb emphasises that a relationship is completed and fulfilled by sharing food. From a typical African and Zimbabwean point of view, nothing of importance happens outside the framework of sharing of food. Food is at the centre of almost all human relationships, as it connects people and often builds trust among people, thereby boosting morale and promoting productivity. Eating implies compliance, communion and commitment, and it heals. The Eucharist (as spiritual food), thus has the potential to make Christians one Body of Christ, and the notion of this Body includes all the dimensions of human existence: religious, cultural, social and even political dimensions (Shorter 1985). Thus, in many cultural traditions and settings, ordinary food is often used as a unifying and healing symbol (Gelfand 1976). Because the Eucharist is regarded as a spiritual food by most Christians, it is, therefore, expected to transcend and eclipse ordinary

food in terms of its value and significance within Zimbabwe's religious, cultural and socio-political circles. For that reason, it is thus proposed here for serious consideration that a good understanding of the Eucharist could enable it to play the vital role within Zimbabwe's fractured society, the role of unifying the faithful ones in such a way that would unreservedly seek the promotion of the kingdom of peace, love, unity, reconciliation and national healing.

In the article, *Why is the Holy Eucharist a sacrament of unity?* Moushey (2018) underscored that the Holy Eucharist is regarded as a sacrament of unity because it has the potential to unite the lay faithful with Jesus and with one another. By ecumenically receiving the Body and Blood or power of Christ, Christians are taken into close union with Christ and with one another. For Zimbabwe in particular, in this symbolism, the unity of the over 85% of all those who believe in Jesus is not only shown but also accomplished. This is what Paul meant when he wrote: '[b]ecause there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we are all partakers of the one bread' (1 Cor 10:17).

As Jesus draws Christians of various ethnic, cultural, denominational and political backgrounds to himself, he also brings them closer to one another through the Eucharist. Just as Israel's sacrificial meals such as holocausts, meal offerings and peace offerings (among other sacrifices) united them as a nation, so the Eucharist has the potential to unite Zimbabwean Christians as one God's family, making them one Church. Thus, when received with faith, the Eucharist can bring about gradual changes within the hearts of Christ's faithful followers. When its unifying and communitarian elements are well understood, the Eucharist can transform Christians, making them more like Christ who dwells in them (Moushey 2018). Barr (1999:119) emphasises that one key effect of the Eucharistic meal is a more intimate union with Jesus. Jesus enters as food into the persons of the faithful, to establish the deepest bonds with them, and transform their whole inner lives as they are also expected to establish deepest bonds among themselves. Thus, having been nourished by Christ, Christians may, in turn, with active, genuine and unconditional love strive to eliminate all prejudices and obstacles and form brotherly cooperation, family reunion and reengagement. Consequently, this may as well lead to social transformation, particularly in the area of national healing, integration and peacebuilding.

The dismissal rite

From the authors' point of view, the dismissal rite is perhaps the most important of all components of the Eucharistic celebration. This part is so critical that the name Mass or Holy Mass is derived from this very notion within the liturgy. Thus, Bozant (2016) argues that if Christians come for the Eucharistic celebrations and take nothing away that would nourish their faith and the way they live their daily lives, then they would have missed an essential component of the greatest symbolism of the Christian religion.

Within mainline Christianity, the Eucharist is often called Holy Mass (*Missa*) because the liturgy in which the mystery of salvation is accomplished concludes with the sending forth (*missio*) of the faithful, so that they may fulfil God's will in their daily lives (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994). Having gone through all the components of the Eucharistic celebration, now armed with the unifying and reconciliatory messages, Christians are sent back into the society to be other Christs, to radiate all Christological qualities, and to eliminate obstacles to national healing, integration and peacebuilding. Within some new religious movements (NRMs) like the LLCG that has already been cited, after the celebration of the Eucharist, members are advised to leave the venue quickly and quietly, only carrying the message of the day. This shows the importance of the 'takes home' message after any Eucharistic celebration.

The dismissal rite, thus, becomes an essential test of the Christian faith. As Christians go back to their respective areas, to love, forgive and serve the Lord, they are expected to transform the society in which they live. Among many other enemies of unity and peacebuilding, Christians are expected to put an end to discrimination, all forms of violence, injustices and tribalism. Discussing tribalism as one form of disunity, Sarpong (1985) underscored that:

Tribal realities of Africa sometimes leave much to be desired. Tribalism gnaws at us at every angle. It rears its ugly head everywhere on the continent. Tribalism has been responsible for atrocities of untold proportions. Tribalism has caused wars. It makes one ethnic group look down upon another. It has caused bribery and corruption, favouritism and nepotism to the irreparable detriment of emerging African nations...It is undoubtedly the main reason for disunity and for the inability for people to consider themselves as one with others that are so glaringly in evidence in many African countries. (p. 6)

It is, thus, critical to underline that the Church, particularly through the Eucharist, can be a transformation and change agent (Pillay 2017). The assumption is that through the use of the various components of the Eucharistic celebration, namely preparation for the Eucharist, the penitential rite, Eucharistic prayers, the Lord's prayer, the sign of peace, reception of the Eucharist and the dismissal rite, the Eucharist may be regarded as a strategic player and a game changer in Zimbabwe's national healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding programmes. Perhaps, what is required is for the various Christian denominations to take initiative and realise that the Eucharist is not just an extension element of the Ecumenical Movement but also an integral element of the same. Well understood, the healing and reconciliatory potential of the Eucharist may influence both the policy and practice on the religious, socio-political spheres depending on the disposition of drivers of key ecumenical bodies and policymakers. While, on the one hand, the Christian religion (through the Eucharist) has the potential to influence both policy and practice as underlined; on the other hand, it has a handful of some negative implications that can mar the much-desired unity.

The role of the Church

In the context of organised violence and torture that has characterised Zimbabwean politics for decades as already mentioned, the role of the Church in the process of national healing, reconciliation and integration is essential and indispensable. However, ironically, because the role of the Church in national healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding is seemingly undebatable, the same role has since been met with some mixed feelings on Zimbabwe's polarised religious, socio-political landscapes.

Munemo and Nciizah (2014) have examined the Zimbabwean crisis since the year 2000. They observed that the Church has been largely pushed to the shores and periphery of the peace and reconciliation process. For that reason, they strongly argue that the Church should take its rightful position and spearhead the healing and integration process. For a long time, the process has been dominated by state-controlled institutions, and the desired results have not been forthcoming. They strongly believe that the church has great potential in acting as a peacemaker and go-between. While the work by Munemo and Nciizah amplifies the Church's potential in the healing and reconciliation process, they do not, however, suggest Christian models or paradigms, which can be used by the Church as guiding principles in the national healing. As this article amplifies the significance of the Church in national politics, the role and place of the Eucharist as an underutilised game changer in the national healing process are thus proposed and augmented for serious consideration by policymakers in Zimbabwe.

With special reference to countries like Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa, Butselaar (2001) also examined the role of the Church in the peace process. He concludes that the Church in Africa (Zimbabwe in particular) often fails to heal the scars and wounds of division, hatred and bloodshed for the simple reason that, in some cases, the same Church often takes sides. By doing this, the church aggravates the situation and further compromises its potential as an arbitrator and peacemaker. The same view is also shared by Mangena (2015) who feels that because the Church is also divided and in need of healing, it cannot be entrusted with the special mandate and role of leading the national healing and reconciliation process. Ever since Christianity was established in Zimbabwe, numerous divisions and secessions have happened within the Christian family itself, Catholics and Protestants alike. For that reason, Mangena has observed that no reconciliation policy after 1980 has been able to bring Zimbabweans together by effectively burying the past on the religious, socio-political landscapes. Instead of tasking the church with such a unique responsibility, Mangena, however, opted for unhu/ubuntu to be the guiding principle in national healing and integration processes.

While the works of Butselaar (2001) and Mangena (2015) may be too critical of the Church's potential as a peacemaker in national healing and peacebuilding, the two works, however, shed some light on the fact that the Church participates in the

national healing process, not as an untainted institution. A quick survey of the inception and growth of the Christian church reveals that the same church has so far experienced visible division, bloodshed, animosity and severe tribal tensions in its historical past as well. Because the Protestant Reformation harmed the unity of Christians that had far-reaching consequences, it is, however, believed that all is not lost. The article continues to argue that with rigorous catechetical instructions that take into account historical healing and unifying elements of the Eucharist, the feebleness and obscure side of the Church may not deter and discourage the same church from suggesting and deploying new models (like the Eucharist) to try and overcome historical, ethnic and other divisions within the Christian family in Zimbabwe. For that reason, it logically follows that the article pivots in an area of great importance in ecumenical and contextual theology as well as the future of ecumenism in Zimbabwe. The Eucharist is considered by many denominations as the pinnacle of their Christian spirituality because it epitomises the heavenly bliss that unites all Christians with one another and ultimately with God (Mudyiwa 2021:9). Despite denominational divisions and Eucharistic exclusivity, the same Eucharist or Lord's Supper continues to occupy a significant place in Zimbabwe's ecumenical and political relations. Through the Eucharist, the Christian church, in general, and Zimbabwe, in particular, can, indeed, be the salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt 5:14).

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of the Eucharist in national healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding with a particular focus on Zimbabwe's fractured society. The article has underlined that Zimbabwe as a nation has so far experienced division, bloodshed, animosity and severe tribal tensions in its historical past. As the Church has been motivated and invited on several occasions to take a primary and prominent part in national healing, the role and significance of the Eucharist as a unifying sacrament or ritual on Zimbabwe's religious, cultural and socio-political landscapes have not been adequately explored and taken advantage of as a mechanism and model for deepening ecumenical growth, national healing and reconciliation. Drawing an analogy between the Eucharist and the uniting power of ordinary food among mostly African family members, the study used the association and the uniting powers of food in secular contexts to underline the prospects and centrality of the Eucharist as an antidote for national healing, reconciliation and peacebuilding on Zimbabwe's fractured society.

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Authors' contributions

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