


Sowing seeds: A pastoral critique to the theology of survival by the mega-church movements of Makandiwa's United Family International Church and Magaya's Prophetic, Healing and Deliverance in Zimbabwe

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The political instability and poor governance of Zimbabwe since the Mugabe era have led to gross socio-economic deprivation that caused many citizens to sink into abject poverty. This has created a sense of insecurity and despondency among the citizens. Amid the suffering, the mega-church prophets rose, who seemed to provide an alternative route to recover from the political and socio-economic crisis. This article gives an overview of the crises in Zimbabwe and the rise of prophets Emmanuel Makandiwa and Prophet Walter Magaya and their doctrine of seeding. The focus of the article is interrogating the purpose of the doctrine of seeding in the life of the prophets, their followers and their challenges. This is achieved by employing the four tasks of theology conceptual framework. These tasks prompt four important theological questions that can assist in addressing societal challenges. This is a qualitative desktop research article that generates data from secondary sources such as books, journal articles, newspaper articles. Firstly, this article enunciates some of the contextual challenges that arose because of the rise of Magaya and Makandiwa. Secondly, it discusses the desire for survival by using the doctrine of seeding. Thirdly, the article concludes by analysing the mega-prophets' doctrine of seeding.

Contribution: The scholarly significance of this article lies in the current discourse of religious movement and theological challenges within the discipline of practical theology. It raises concerns about theology that is self-serving instead of seeking the greater good by addressing the social injustices prevailing in the Zimbabwean context.

Keywords: sowing seeds; theology of survival; mega-church; prophet; man of God.

Introduction

Although the concept of seeding has its roots in the Bible, those who propagate prosperity theology manipulate it. In Zimbabwe, it can be easily articulated and understood by the audience, because most of the people live in rural areas and depend on subsistence farming. Above all, the concept becomes appealing because it promises to change the fortunes of people who are under pressure because of the economic meltdown, which caused rising unemployment to unprecedented levels and skyrocketing prices of goods and services for more than two decades. It was within this period that Emmanuel Makandiwa and Walter Magaya rose and became popular. The prophets popularised the title 'man of God' showing that they were both the representatives of God and the conduits through which God delivers his blessings upon the people who seed (Chibango 2016). Their gospel of seeding seems to give solutions and answers to the members' social, health and economic challenges, through positive confession and being close to the man of God. They claimed that all challenges, whether individually or nationally, are believed to be caused by the devil's attacks and the influence of evil spirits that can block human and national prosperity. 'The quest for healing and miracles has had a significant bearing on the Pentecostal belief and practice of giving, commonly known as "seeding"/"sowing"' (Biri 2012:8). For them, unless one brings a seed to the man of God and the church, he or she will not be delivered from the impediments of prosperity. This article begins by discussing the economic conditions of Zimbabwe that have promoted the growth and rise of the mega-church prophets and their gospel of seeding. It then examines the use of the Bible in shaping their theology. Finally, it discusses the implications of the gospel of seeding to the prophets and the members of the mega-churches in Zimbabwe, particularly,

prophet Makandiwa's United Family International Church (UFIC) and Magaya's Prophetic, Healing and Deliverance (PHD). The study offers a critique of the theology of seeding, as opposed to the gospel of Christ, which leads to grace and dependence on God rather than humanity.

Methodology

This article seeks to examine the focus and impact of the theology of seeding by the mega-church prophets in Zimbabwe. It is largely a qualitative desktop study using data from different secondary sources. The study uses published books, dissertations, journal articles and newspaper articles on prophetic charismatic movements and Pentecostal churches in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular. These give background insights on the general Pentecostal and charismatic movements in relation to prosperity theology and how it is utilised to enrich the apostles, pastors and prophets within the movements. It also includes field research articles, dissertations and newspaper reports conducted on various mega-churches in Zimbabwe, specifically. Finally, the literature analysis is performed specifically on literature that focusses on the UFIC of prophet Makandiwa and the PHD of prophet Magaya as the centre of the study. These secondary sources are helpful in providing substantial knowledge to explore the subject of this study. The limitation of this article, therefore, draws on textual sources, rather than engaging interviews and case study methodology to collect and analyse data from those who benefit or are affected by the theology of survival. However, the use of literature and newspaper articles that were drawn from the interviews is helpful in getting some of the personal experiences of the mega-prophets and their followers.

Conceptual framework

Osmer's (2008:4) four tasks of theology raise four critical questions when looking at any challenge in each context, like the theology of seeding by the mega-prophets in Zimbabwe. The four theological questions help one to understand the context and the challenge at hand to enable one to comment on and provide thoughts, reflections and proposed solutions. The first question is 'What is happening?' Descriptive-empirical: What is happening? Gathering information in order to understand episodes, situations or contexts (Osmer 2008). This is reflected in the section on the context of Zimbabwean challenges and the rise of the mega-church prophets. The second question is a hermeneutical question, which seeks to understand the reasons, or the root causes, of the challenges as discussed in the sections about the crisis in Zimbabwe and the desire for survival of both the prophets and their adherents. Analysis shapes the practical action and response to the challenges facing the community (Hove & Moyo 2022). This involves entering into a dialogue between theology and other human sciences to be able to explain the patterns of the challenges (Osmer 2008). The normative question is 'what ought to be going on?' (Osmer 2008:134). This is the normative question, which poses questions from theological and ethical perspectives. This discernment is

shaped by God's word and theological ethics. 'Discernment is the activity of seeking God's guidance amid the circumstances, events, and decisions of life' (Osmer 2008:137). This is meant to offer critical prophetic insights into the situation, like the best practice the church and the prophets should be doing in theologically and ethically acceptable ways, rather than perpetuating the suffering of the poor in Zimbabwe. The final question is the pragmatic question of what actions should be taken, like formulating responses to the challenge at hand (Osmer 2008). In this article, there are no specific action plans, but reflections are made on how the doctrine of seeding is causing more suffering and the need to be avoided in the context of suffering citizens.

Contextual challenges in Zimbabwe and mega-church prophets

For more than two decades, Zimbabwe has gone through turbulent times. Since independence, Zimbabwe has dreadfully failed to overcome the same challenges that the former colonial state faced, leading to historically high levels of unemployment, deindustrialisation and foreign migration, as well as national food insecurity (Raftopoulos 2009). Chung (2006:269–272) asserts that most of the challenges are caused by the absence of good governance, cronyism, favouritism, nepotism and profiteering among those in government. It can be argued that human error in poor decision-making has contributed to the socio-economic challenges of Zimbabwe. The church in its Kairos document (The Zimbabwe We Want document) in 2006 has blamed the political polarisation and economic deterioration on bad governance that entails corruption, economic mismanagement, repressive laws, political intolerance, lack of a shared national vision, home-grown democratic constitution and poorly resolved land issue that led to the loss friends and the isolation of the country (Banda 2016). Political intolerance resulted in political violence, targeting those in the opposition party, especially the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and has left some maimed and others dead (Madebwe & Madebwe 2017). The political challenges left those in the opposition parties desperate to leave the country to escape the quagmire. Some of the members of the MDC were forced out of the country or killed, as they were labelled as sell-outs of the revolution or as witches (Matshaka & Murambadoro 2024). The country has experienced violence that caused internal displacement and external migration.

Political instability affected the economic environment because the country lost some investors who relocated to other countries (Matshaka & Murambadoro 2024). Zimbabwe's economy suffered a sharp decline in response to the disastrous land reform programme that was implemented, which started in 2000 (Dube 2015). This was further exacerbated by the unprecedented levels of inflation, with the Zimbabwean dollar losing value against the major currencies, forcing people to migrate, and become economic refugees elsewhere. The country suffered a serious brain drain as skilled people, including artisans and civil servants, left for greener pastures in the neighbouring countries, such as

Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia, while others went abroad to Europe, America and Australia (Banda 2016; Dube 2022). The most affected is the Ministry of Health because the workers are not only affected by poor remunerations but also frustrated by the poor working conditions, which involve the lack of medicines and medical equipment in hospitals (Chibango 2016). Health professionals easily found options in other countries (Matshaka & Murambadoro 2024). Those who remain in Zimbabwe face the challenges of inflation, poor health, shortage of food and the high cost of living (Garande 2020; Matshaka & Murambadoro 2024). The financial crisis is exacerbated by the instability of currency, repeatedly causing people to suffer the loss of their businesses, salaries, savings and pensions. These crises caused humanitarian challenges, which led to uncertainty, insecurity and despondency among many Zimbabweans. They desire to have an escape route that can give them hope and assurance under their circumstances.

According to Dube (2015):

[I]n the absence of a functioning economy and health sector in Zimbabwe, the prophets seem to provide an alternative space within which religious canopies are used to explain socioeconomic issues. (p. 1)

The mega-church prophets became more relevant and well received as they promised hope amid the suffering and despondency among the citizens who are battered by unemployment, inequality and deteriorating economic and health systems (Chivasa 2020; Mpfu 2013). According to a 2014 survey by the Zimbabwe Commission of Trade Union (ZCTU), more than 9000 people were unemployed in 2013 because of the closure of more than 75 businesses (Mtomba 2014). The economic meltdown has seen more than 60% of the population living under the poverty datum line because of a lack of financial resources to meet their basic needs, such as health, food and education for their children (Garande 2020). Banda (2016) argues:

The prophets have emerged in the current socioeconomic and political scene as those who can lead poor and powerless Zimbabweans to realise the unrealised fruits in the African quest for liberation from white domination of Rhodesia. (p. 154)

Their prophecy and teachings centre around positive thinking to turn around their economic fortunes through God's intervention in the adherents' lives (Williams 2022). In Zimbabwe, the mega-church prophets are renowned for exorcising the demons of unemployment, poverty, hunger and infertility (Williams 2022). They promise to offer easy and quick fixes to both social and economic challenges, leaving the political system untouched, except for prophesying the winning of elections by the ruling Zimbabwe African Union Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) (Chivasa 2020). Their actions were like the Old Testament court prophecy that was meant to promote consolidation of power by the political system that would, in turn, promote the interests of the prophets. They established a transactional relationship of supporting each other in one way or another.

It was during the decades of these crises that saw the emergence of mega-church prophets such as Makandiwa and Magaya. Emmanuel Makandiwa began his career as a minister with the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) of Zimbabwe (Shoko & Chiwara 2013). He found his UFIC in 2010 when he broke away from AFM to become one of the mega-church prophets in Harare, Zimbabwe (Biri 2012). His healing and miracles attracted many people from inside and outside the city, leading to massive growth in a short period because they caught the public's attention because they were publicised on television (Biri 2012). Shoko and Chiwara (2013:222) suggest that Makandiwa's frequent visits to Victor Kusi Boateng in Ghana imply that he goes out to replenish his power from his Godfather and spiritual mentor. Beside Makandiwa's UFIC, Prophet Walter Magaya founded the PHD Ministries in October 2012, after he had visited the Nigerian prophet Temitope Balogun Joshua (T.B. Joshua) the founder of a most popular mega-church, the Synagogue Church of All Nations (SCOAN) in Nigeria (Mahohoma 2017). The same prophet is also believed to be the prophet and spiritual father of Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa of Zimbabwe and Shepherd Bushiri of Zambia, who used to live in South Africa (Mahohoma 2017). From his prophecy, healing and deliverance, Walter Magaya is believed to be one of the richest Zimbabweans, with a flourishing business empire, besides the seeding from his followers (Mahohoma 2017). The two prophets have commanded respect and loyalty from their followers, as they claim to be closer to God than anyone else, hence the use of the title 'man of God'. For that reason, the followers are made to believe that all things that God can do can also be performed by the 'man of God'; hence, the idea that God is not far away from the 'man of God' (Glover 2006). According to Mpfu (2013), Makandiwa taught about utter respect and honour for the man of God, in such a way that some of his followers had to kneel when they greeted him. Makandiwa and Magaya popularised the title 'men of God' in Zimbabwe and attracted many followers for the prophecies and healing miracles (Muyambo 2020). The Zimbabwean context played a role in shaping the ministry of these mega-church ministries because they directly spoke to people's socio-economic concerns.

Makandiwa and Magaya began to capitalise on the deteriorating financial situation and health systems, which caused social instability in families. They began to teach and emphasise the doctrine of 'seeding' as a way of escaping from poverty to prosperity of any kind. In order for their doctrine to appeal to the poor and the suffering people, Makandiwa and Magaya began to convince people that unemployment, poverty and sickness are curses that need deliverance from the man of God after seeding (Masvotore 2018). By using the doctrine of seeding, the reality of the economic meltdown is downplayed, 'contradicted and trivialised by a preoccupation with curses and demonic oppression' (Banda 2016:169). The followers are taught to have faith and positive confessions to have breakthroughs and realise God's promises declared by the man of God (Adamo 2021; Garande 2020). Because of the increasing poverty levels, Zimbabwean Christians readily embraced the

prophet's promises of prosperity in health and wealth (Banda 2016). The increase in poverty and suffering forced many to turn to seeding and prosperity theology. The two ministries are preoccupied with working miracles, seeking to mirror the Old Testament prophets such as Elijah and Elisha, as well as Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The crippled Zimbabwean health sector provided the much-needed clientele for the mega-prophets, as people fail to get the necessary care in hospitals. Only one option was left to them, submitting to the man of God to be delivered and get protection from all forms of sickness. However, they are taught that all this is dependent on seeding, by giving material gifts, property and money to the man of God, who will release these blessings.

Biblical use in perpetuating the gospel of seeding

Preachers of the doctrine of seeding seek to manipulate Bible verses so that they can justify their position. The proponents end up taking a very literal interpretation of Bible texts, viewing each one as a divinely given truth that can stand alone, without the requirement for context of the text as a whole (Williams 2022). For Williams (2022:3) 'most of the interpretations deemphasise the "otherworld" and emphasise the now; hence, they are at risk of being misapplied quite often'. The purpose is to convince and lead their adherents to seed the church and the prophet in the form of cash and kindness. Some donate assets, such as cars and houses, or voluntarily donate their labour in the church and household of the man of God (Biri 2012). Seeding is always associated with tithing, using the book of Malachi chapter 3:8–12. The emphasis is that people need to bring money to the church for the man of God to have food. This is trying God, who is expected to open windows and bring about tenfold what one has given:

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this 'says the Lord Almighty', and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. (Ml 3:10)

Dube (2015:3) posits 'Tithing is understood as seeding or depositing to God, with an expectation for cash withdrawal'. To 'sow a seed' is to plant a financial contribution that will grow and yield abundant returns, as God is expected to recognise and respond to such actions (Mahohoma 2017). Those who bring their tithes to the man of God, expect automatic financial breakthroughs, with double portions, as they harvest from the seeds they plant.

The other verse, which is literally translated, is Luke 6:38, which says:

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Lk 6:38)

The mega-church prophets implore their members to follow the Bible through their literal interpretation that, whatever is

given to the man of God and his ministry, will in turn be rewarded accordingly (Muyambo 2020). Nothing that is given will not bring about fruits or harvest because giving is regarded as seeding with faith that the biblical promises will come to fruition as they are written. 2 Corinthians 9 usually supports this: 6–11, which teaches, 'whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will reap generously' (Marimbe 2024). However, Eyo, Essien and Ekong (2021) assert that sowing serves as a metaphor, which implies that money should be given to the man of God. For the prophets, it equates to planting the seed that will germinate and yield a good harvest to the benefit of the giver. This led to the use of the law of sowing and an increase in returns (Chibango 2016). Thus, Eyo et al. (2021) argue that:

Christians are admonished to make their giving of money serve as seed. Seed sowing or money giving indicates thanking God in advance. It is like the grace you say before a meal. It is an act of seed-planting, an act of faith of expecting a return just as the farmer does at harvest time. (p. 444)

The prophets manipulate the Bible to fit into the project of self-enrichment. Giving and seeding are never directed to one's family, neighbour or members of the church but to the prophet. Only giving directed to the man of God is the seed that will be rewarded. This undermines the grace of God who provides to all and creates dependence on a created human being for divine provisions.

Seeding is closely connected to miracles that occurred in the Old Testament. The prophets persuade their followers that miracles only happen to those who seed the prophet. Examples of scriptures that are used are, at Zarephath, Elijah miraculously increased flour and oil, instead of these commodities being used up (1 Ki 17:9–16) and he raised the dead (1 Ki 17:17–12), and Elisha used one jar of oil to fill several jars until there was no empty jar (2 Ki 4:1ff) (Banda 2016:156). Seeding to the prophets translates to health and material blessings in this life. Banda (2016) argues that, for believers to experience miracles of prosperity, they need to understand and take what the Bible says as it is. Angel (2013) argues that giving to the church and the man of God is like planting on rich soil that brings a bumper harvest in the form of plentiful blessings. Only those who adjust their understanding of the word of God receive what God promised as the prophet declares it upon them. Therefore, according to mega-church prophets, unless one brings a seed to the prophet, there will be no miracle of multiplication in his or her household. In Zimbabwe, the so-called 'men of God' thrive on human suffering as they project solutions to the socio-economic decline (Dube 2015; Williams 2022). These are gimmicks applied by Magaya and Makandiwa to milk the citizens, by taking advantage of their suffering (Masvotore 2018). They create an alternative hope among the people in such a way that they can donate whatever little they have in order to come out of their economic doldrums.

The mega-church prophets read and literally apply the scripture with reference to the people's context without much exegesis. They distort the truth to make it suit the

teachings and doctrines that feed the prophet's ego (Adamo 2021). Whenever the prophets see the word 'prosper' in the Bible, they develop a doctrine of seeding and prosperity around it. For example, 'Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers' (3 Jn 2:1). Such a verse is articulated to demonstrate that all Christians who seed are destined to prosper in health and wealth, which is expressed in monetary and material terms:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)

Instead of heavenly riches, the scripture is depicted to mean that Christ came to deliver humanity from material poverty. Asamoah-Gyadu (2007: 349) posits that prosperity Gospel proclaims that 'God wills spiritual and material prosperity for all believers' as an appropriation of 'the victory that Christ has won over sin, sickness, curses, poverty and setbacks in life'. This is a deliberate interpretation to motivate people to believe that in Christ they are meant to prosper in earthly riches (Gukurume 2020). 'Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows' (Gl 6:7). Using Galatians 6, in reaping, one always gets more from whatever he gives as seed. Prophet Magaya preached that 'If you contribute less, do not expect God to answer your prayers. God answers those who put more. Put more and become rich, richer and richest' (Chibango 2016:65). Therefore, those who want financial prosperity would need to seed more money, and those who want cars or houses would seed for such, as they give money or cars and houses to the man of God (Manyonganise 2024):

At times, the well-to-do in these churches are given prophecies to the effect that God has commanded them to give a certain amount of money to the prophets in order for them to make 'breakthroughs' in their lives. (p. 8)

This is meant to *kudzinga vudyi hwe fuma yavo* (chasing away the devourers of their wealth). The rhetoric implies that one's economic conditions directly correlate to one's magnitude of seeding. Giving becomes central in mega-church teaching and preaching to meet the desires of the prophet, the 'man of God'.

Survival of the mega-church prophets

The point of departure in seeding and prosperity theology is demonstrating that all forms of suffering and poverty are because of demons and spiritual attacks, pushing the believer into a tight corner because they see no other way out. Whether it is a social or economic challenge or a health issue, everything is spiritualised, feeding into the need for deliverance. This helps the prophet to squarely fit into the equation as a saviour and representative of the almighty God. The prophet offers spiritual solutions to every problem, depending on the provision of a seed of faith (Dube 2015). But the ultimate purpose is to get money from the follower, hence, many critics of Magaya and Makandiwa in Zimbabwe demonise and dismiss them 'as fake money-making prophets' accusing them of taking advantage of the harsh economic and health situation

by using prosperity theology for 'self-aggrandisement' (Madzokere & Machingura 2015). Muyambo (2020) asserts that many people have lost huge sums of money as they suffer at the hands of these prophets but none of their dreams have been realised, which affirms this. Congregants are encouraged to sow a seed for their own blessings, but, unfortunately, it is the 'man of God' who becomes rich through their donations. Therefore, seeding is about the survival of the 'man of God' who happens to be the founder and leader of the mega-church.

Research has proved that Magaya and Makandiwa are the beneficiaries of the concept of seeding because they draw millions from their followers to build their economic empires:

Prophets Emmanuel Makandiwa and Walter Magaya are said to be charging as much as US\$1500 per person for a one-on-one consultation for those seeking spiritual solutions to their problems, figures at hand show. (Chitemba & Ncube 2016:1)

The consultation fee (money) brought is a seed to the 'men of God'. People spend a fortune because they desire to meet the 'men of God' face-to-face for their spiritual, social and economic breakthroughs. In fact, it is one size fits all for getting 'spiritual deliverance'. According to Nehanda Radio (2016), Magaya now owns a US\$8 million hotel to cater for those who visit him for one-on-one sessions, with them paying between US\$300 and US\$900 to spend 3 days consulting the prophet. Similarly, Makandiwa's guests to his Mount Hampden facilities would pay US\$300 and US\$1000 for their stay for the same period. It is like a syndicate to swindle people's hard-earned income for the 'men of God's' benefit. However, some people feel deceived and betrayed, and they bitterly complain about the prophet when financial breakthroughs or healing fails to take place (Mahohoma 2017; Muyambo 2020). It is observed that 'the "men of God" are becoming progressively richer, while their congregants' poverty and suffering worsen because of the huge financial sacrifices they make to the church' (Gukurume 2020:273). It means that members sweat for the comfort of the 'man of God'.

Besides consultations and hotels, Magaya is the founder and owner of Yadah Football Club, which is currently playing in Zimbabwe's premier soccer league and a Yada television channel for televangelism (Chibango 2016; Garande 2020). From the seeding of his followers, and one-on-one deliverance sessions, Magaya's PHD ministries managed to open a multi-million-dollar factory, which employs more than 3000 employees (Sachiti 2018). In 2015, he announced the opening of 'a \$10 billion business company which would carry out various projects that include mining and construction' (Mahohoma 2017:4). Furthermore, the PHD ministries own guest houses, located in low-density areas of Belvedere, Marlborough and Borrowdale in Harare, as well as several farming projects around the country (Mahohoma 2017). Chibango (2016:68) concludes that 'it is a well-known fact now that Magaya has afforded to build himself an empire – a clear evidence of material prosperity, even amid the current socio-economic crisis' in Zimbabwe. Therefore, it can be argued that the concept of seeding have been hijacked,

transforming it into a self-help and self-serving interpretation intending to support the mega-prophet's economic plans and projects. This is a self-centred part of the gospel of prosperity, using others for economic self-advancement.

In the same vein, the prophets created some business opportunities for themselves among the members. These mega-church prophets make and market their brand in religious artefacts, such as anointing oil, holy water, as well as wristbands and stickers, with inscriptions of their names and photos (Sande 2022:408). The items are traded at exorbitant prices, but people cannot resist or avoid them because they are believed to provide healing and all forms of security to the members and their property. Although they seem to be the saviours of Zimbabweans in their economic hardships, they continue to milk people for their hard-earned financial resources by commercialising the church items sold within the church, to provide protection and prosperity (Chibango 2016). This becomes a boost to the prophet's income that is created through seeding.

Survival of the adherents of the prophets

The doctrine of seeding is about one's physical, social and economic wellbeing here and now. It presupposes that any seeding to the church and the 'man of God' provides for one's 'overall physical wellbeing, including good health, financial security, status and personal empowerment, as well as longevity, tranquillity and happiness without the need for suffering' (Omavuebe 2021:389). It is claimed to protect the adherents from all forms of life insecurities like poverty, unemployment, barrenness, sickness and failure (Williams 2022:2). These promises are almost all-encompassing and attractive to any listener who is threatened by the sinking health system, sliding levels of poverty and unemployment and deteriorating economic environment in Zimbabwe. The prophets call their members to confess optimism in their dire situations as a way of turning their fortunes (Sande 2022). These appeals to the citizens create mounting pressures, which results in them easily buying into the gimmicks of seeding in order to overcome the challenges at hand. Zimbabwean mega-church prophets promise members a new economic approach during the decades-long economic crisis. Members are promised that church seeding, through offering, tithing, working of talents and serving the prophets, is the only means to create wealth under such a difficult economic environment (Sande 2022:409). This is buttressed by labelling poverty as a curse and sin that can only be dealt with through seeding (Biri 2012).

Spiritualisation of the economic challenges coerced the members to seed as they easily relate it to the African traditional beliefs. In African society, any misfortune and suffering in one's life is assumed to be caused by spiritual attacks (Madzokere 2024). For the adherents, the man of God has the power to deliver them from demonic influence, witchcraft, curses and all forms of illnesses. Moreover, he is capable of freeing people from all kinds of poverty (Barron 2022; Maxwell 1995). Therefore, the prophet's mediation becomes relevant

and crucial. Magaya and Makandiwa claim that by casting out evil spirits, they deliver people from spiritual poverty and address the economic crisis in Zimbabwe (Chibango 2016). Their central message is spiritualism and materialism, promising divine intervention through the 'man of God' (Sande 2022):

The ever-swelling numbers coming to attend PHD Ministries services indicate the extent to which this message has appealed to many Zimbabweans struggling to find answers to their socioeconomic problems. (Chibango 2016:66)

The prophet's mediating role is the foundation on which the poor and the suffering must sow their seeds to reap wealth (Banda 2016:156). Eyo et al. (2021:442) argue that economic prosperity is an indication of God's favour and payment for praying, planting seeds and paying more than the required tithe to their church, pastor or other religious figures. Through their gimmicks, desperate people put their hopes in the prophets as the saviours of Zimbabwe.

The prophets parade themselves as good examples of how God works and make them rich. Mpofu (2013:72) argues, 'The pastor/prophet becomes the richest person in the fold and the rest can only marvel at him/her'. They then act as an inspiration to their followers, particularly the young graduates and those who are new in business and employment and desire to climb the economic ladder. Prophet Walter Magaya accentuated that because he was rich, every member of his church was going to be rich like him by seeding to the church (Marimbe 2024). Acting in faith, members are encouraged to generously sow a seed of faith to be like their prophet, who displays his wealth in the form of beautiful designer clothing, expensive watches, expensive cars, private jets and houses, in low-density suburbs where the majority of politicians and businesspeople reside. The prophet becomes a celebrity and role model to be admired, followed and identified with (Masvotore 2018). Curiously, Prophet Emmanuel's adherents view him as their father (Baba) and a patron who is responsible for meeting their financial and spiritual needs as his 'spiritual children' and 'material clients' (Gukurume 2022:39). Many of the followers in Zimbabwe adopted the popular saying, '*Ndiri mwana womuporofita*' (I am the child of a prophet) as a way of identifying with the prophet as their father, Papa (Gunda & Machingura 2013). Makandiwa's followers put those stickers on their cars, office chairs and computers, home gadgets such as TVs, microwaves, fridges and their Bibles (Gunda & Machingura 2013). The prophet's message and lifestyle become a bet that attracts many followers to seed through money and other material resources for their economic growth and good health.

The other bet used by the mega-church prophets is the performance of miracles. The prophets performed spectacular miracles like the healing of the sick, enabling the lame to walk, the restoration of broken marriage relationships, as well as the unemployed testifying to the securing of employment (Madzokere 2024). Sande (2022:408) states that prophets lure the rich and the poor by 'stage-manage miracles, gimmicks and do spectacular performances to lure the wealth of the poor'. Mahohoma (2017:6) also asserts that the prophet Magaya is believed to heal the sick by laying

hands on the sick or by using holy water and anointing oil. At one event, Makandiwa prayed and prophesied for people to have more money in their pockets, filling members' cars with fuel and gold and diamonds raining from heaven, but it never happened (Mpofu 2013:144). Mega-church prophets emphasise that receiving one's socio-spiritual breakthrough can only be guaranteed by seeding, particularly through tithing (Eyo et al. 2021; Sande 2022). Seeding to the prophets assures them a life of peace, happiness, longevity and freedom from suffering (Williams 2022). Because of their desire to survive in their difficult circumstance, many embrace the prophets' miracles and the message of seeding for their deliverance.

Zimbabwe's economic pressure and deterioration of medical facilities leave people struggling to survive. It is within this context that mega-prophets flourish by promising people an alternative health system. People visited Magaya and Makandiwa ministries because they could not afford the medical bills or medication (Chibango 2016). Some of the people went to Magaya's PHD ministry because of the testimonies of people who confessed that the prophet healed them from physical 'disabilities, HIV and AIDS, cancer, barrenness, and all types of diseases' (Chibango 2016:66). People flock to the prophets and seed so that they may also be cured from their physical ailments. Others go to prophets for protection from *varoyi* (witches), *zvikuwambo* (goblins) and *ngozi* (avenging spirits) that are believed to be the cause of different diseases, loss of employment and troubled marital relationships (Maxwell 1995:21). Instead of seeking medical attention in the institutions, people scramble to reach out to the prophets who claim to not only heal diseases but also give enough protection against the root causes.

Challenges of the theology of seeding

Seeding is another strong niche of prosperity theology. It is not only confined to the mega-churches in Zimbabwe but includes the Pentecostal and charismatic churches across the globe. Seeding places the 'man of God' at the centre, emphasising all types of giving to the prophet as the seed of faith. This seed of faith is believed to produce a ten-fold harvest for the members who adhere to the message of seeding from the prophet. Spiritual, physical and material blessings are perceived to be rewarded only to those who directly give financial and material resources to prophets and pastors (Banda 2016). This relegates the sovereignty of God, his grace and divine providence. This goes against the understanding that God's blessings and provisions for humanity are not dependent on human initiatives. David says 'He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry'. The LORD sets prisoners free (Ps 146:7) and Paul also says, 'And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus' (Phlp 4:19). In fact, he holistically cares for his creation. The above verses demonstrate that God cares for the spiritual and physical needs of all people. Barron (2022) argues that the theology of seeding diminishes the relationship between God and humanity to a mere transactional relationship, where

God acts like an 'Automated Teller Machine (ATM)' that responds to human deposits and investments. This is what other critics of prosperity theology refer to as 'the gospel of greed' and 'commercialised gospel' (Adamo 2021:2). Because those who seed are promised to expect multiplication of their giving to the 'man of God' and the ministry, God must do as the prophet and the member demand. In the transactional relationship, God is perceived as a business partner who responds to a business contract and pays the goods and services with interest and profit. He is obligated to respond to the prayer and demands of those who have fulfilled their obligation of tithing and seeding (Barron 2022). This leads to the desire to manipulate God to do the human will because they have accomplished A, B and C as commanded by the prophet. The gospel of seeding becomes misleading because God is not on the same footing with the prophet, or any human being, and works in ways that cannot be easily manipulated.

The other challenge of seeding and prosperity theology is the diversion of the people from real issues facing the nation. The Zimbabwean mega-church prophets divert people's attention from the socio-economic and political crises that cause their suffering, as they promise spiritual solutions to their situations of unemployment, poverty and health issues (Dube 2015). Seeding theology shifts the focus of people from the reality of corruption and economic crisis. Instead of drawing the attention of the people who speak truth to power, like Amos and other Old Testament prophets who condemned social and economic injustices, Makandiwa's and Magaya's gospel of seeding towards prosperity shields those in the political echelons and the corruption that cause poverty and economic marginalisation. The Old Testament prophets cried for justice and condemned injustice:

Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. (Is 10:1-2)

God does not tolerate injustices upon his people for it is against His will. 'For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them' (Is 61:8). People love justice but God demands it. Amos called kings and political leaders to promote justice, 'But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream' (Am 5:24). Prophet Amos and Isaiah stand out in expressing God's will in the context of political and socio-economic injustices. God demands social justice for the sake of peace and prosperity of a nation as a whole. Woodbridge and Semmelik (2010) agree that:

The church's prophetic witness can be a vital source of guidance for public discourse in the social arena, since through a knowledge of the scriptures, they know the indisputable moral truths on which a society depends, such as the dignity of every human being and a need for the poor to be protected against social injustices, a moral principle for which the biblical prophets stood. (p. 84)

The question of social justice and care for the poor is overshadowed by prophecies from mega-church prophets. Banda (2016:154) also posits that the lavish lifestyle of the prophets and their proclamation of favour and vision of economic prosperity mislead people. Instead of challenging the system that causes citizens' suffering, people are drawn into looking beyond what is happening and depend on the declarations of the prophets.

Through seeding to the 'men of God' members are assured of transformation of their economic situation and get employment, money, houses and cars (Banda 2016; Dube 2015). The mega-church prophets seek to convince their adherents that their proclamation works, as they show off their lavish lifestyles by wearing designer suits, living in comfort, riding posh cars and flying in private jets (Masvotore 2018). The prophets neither expose the political system and the rich who cause systemic poverty nor open the eyes of the poor towards the cause of their poverty and suffering and the ways they can use to come out of their situation (Gifford 2004; Gukurume 2020:273). Instead of providing realistic messages of the gospel of care and support for the poor, the prophet and their adherents are saddled with the mood of self-enrichment and desire for more wealth. Seeding and prosperity tend to promote the idea of 'individualistic consumerism that views the material wellbeing of people as a salvific goal' (Williams 2022:3). The focus is no longer on caring for the flock, or for one another, but seeking ways of gaining wealth from the followers. The gospel of seeding takes advantage and manipulates the poor and the vulnerable congregants. It gives the prophet an advantage, as he takes financial resources in exchange for promises of increasing their seeding tenfold and eliminating their challenges. Because of desperation among the congregants, they are exposed to manipulation and pay huge sums of money as seeding, to come out of their quagmire (Garande 2020; Gukurume 2020). The only prescription by Magaya and Makamndiwa is a seed of faith that produces positive results and solutions to people's problems. The poor are at the losing end, being poorly affected by both the corrupt political system and the 'men of God' who protect the system through their promises of prosperity through seeding.

The principles of seeding, just like the whole prosperity theology, are perpetuating greed and selfish ambitions. Some critics have labelled it as 'the gospel of greed' (Adamo 2021:2). Instead of seeking the greater good, it focusses on the prophet and his purse. Muyambo (2020:30) argues that many of the adherents of the mega-prophets 'are duped of large sums of money by "Men/Women of God," only to realise afterwards that they have been duped'. Some fell into debt and destitution after giving away their property in the hopes of receiving ten-fold profits that never materialised (Mpofu 2013). Some of their false prophecies have resulted in conflicts and legal battles in the church. One of such conflicts was between Mandiwa and the Mashangwa family. The Mashangwa family sued prophet Makandiwa for US\$700 000 after losing their house to debt collectors because they received a false prophecy that they were about to receive

debt cancellation if they continued to seed to the prophet (Nemukuyu 2018). Greed led to deceiving and misleading members by promising things that are non-existent. The prophets pursue financial gain and wealth at the expense of the members' spiritual life and welfare. Jesus warned his followers against the utmost desire for money and material pursuit, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions' (Lk 12:15). The prophets' greed feeds into the adherents' desire and pushes their consumeristic appetite, causing them to live in sin. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Paul who gave a warning for such behaviour echoes this. He warned, 'Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs' (1 Tm 6:10). In 2017, Makandiwa was caught on a video, urging his adherents 'to seed money ranging from US\$7, US\$77, US\$770, US\$7700 and US\$77 000 as a sign of a covenant with God for the fulfilment of their 2017 hopes' (Chamalimba 2017). Ncube (2021) also reports that in another incident, Makandiwa claimed that over 5000 of his followers were going to raise US\$1000 each for seed money, sparking debate and contestation about his seeding programmes on social media platforms, as many condemned him for looting from people for personal gain. This approach does not address the people's current economic challenges and spiritual welfare but promotes materialism that Jesus condemned (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013). The programme supports 'the self-aggrandisement and material enrichment' for the prophet and does not benefit the members in any way (Barron 2022). The desire for material wealth has led the prophets and their followers to relegate spiritual matters, such as sin and righteousness. Because they focus on money and wealth, they do not have congregations in rural areas where people struggle with poverty, because they cannot fund the seeding programmes (Biri 2012). They remain in affluent areas in the capital city and major urban areas targeting middle- and upper-class people. There is a lack of servanthood among the prophets, because they seek to be served by their followers through seeding that will benefit themselves.

The challenge of seeding promotes injustice that is against God and the principles of Christianity. The poor, the sick and the elderly, who are unable to seed, are side lined and marginalised. There is no just sharing of resources in the mega-churches (Sande 2022). The prophets should be committed to sharing physical and spiritual resources, equitably and justly, with all those who are in need. Instead of being an accomplice to the government and the politicians, the prophets need to be the conscience of the political leaders on issues of corruption and misgovernance. Prophets should be advocates for the poor as a way of promoting justice in Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, the mega-church prophets continue to amass wealth for themselves only serving the rich and those who can afford the seeding. They fail to provide holistic pastoral care that equally attends to both the rich and the poor. The church is meant to provide pastoral care and counselling freely to the members of the church and the community at large. It is an inclusive,

rather than exclusive community, which does not segregate people because of their social and economic status. The approach of the mega-church prophets does not embrace the aspects of compassion, kindness and empathy that drive the church's pastoral care activities (Moyo 2015). The church with its pastors, apostles and prophets should embody and identify with Christ who loved and sacrificed his life for all (Mahohoma 2017). He embraced both the rich and the poor alike.

Furthermore, the mega-church prophets blame every circumstance and misfortune on demons and evil spirits. This proposition diverts people's attention from challenging and facing the root causes of poverty and inequality in Zimbabwe (Gukurume 2020). Instead of admitting that company closures, business failures and joblessness are because of corruption, bad governance and economic meltdown, the prophets blame everything on demons. For them, the solution is not found in political change and economic turnaround but deliverance through seeding to the 'man of God' and the church (Banda 2016):

To the poor who have been bruised and brutalised by the impoverishing short-sighted and corrupt policies of their national superintendents, the visionary images of prosperity prophets speak life and hope. (p. 154)

Nevertheless, it is giving false hope that does not change the economic environment. A prophetic voice needs to address socio-political and economic issues in more pragmatic and progressive ways (Garande 2020) agrees that:

The church is required to speak against the abuse of power, wealth, and privilege. The economic meltdown in Zimbabwe, the ever-increasing rate of corruption in a context where no serious action is taken to ensure accountability, the widening gap between the few politically connected rich and the majority poor, and the sharp increase in the poverty rate are all a constant reminder to the Zimbabwean Church of its duty to speak against socio-economic injustice. (p. 116)

Instead of having preferential options for the poor and economically marginalised, the prophets are promoting and supporting systemic injustice and oppression of the poor in Zimbabwe. Magaya and Makandiwa promise to provide extraordinary solutions to the poor amid the unredeemable economic meltdown, which, in reality, can only be rescued through some economic turnaround strategies that can create favourable conditions for investment and industrialisation. Like any other tenets of prosperity theology, seeding seems to oppose Jesus' basic teaching and suggests that God's preference is on the side of 'the rich and powerful, those who are able to plant seeds' (Banda 2016:162). Even though the congregants seed huge sums of money in exchange for prophetic declarations, 'not all of them succeed and become prosperous in achieving their dreams' (Gukurume 2020). Instead, many remain suffering or become worse off than before, because they lose their capital and property, which they surrender, to the prophet as seed.

The question of seeding promotes spirituality of competition, rather than caring for one another. Members of the mega-

church are encouraged to seed so that they can rise in their socio-economic status. Biri (2012:9) highlights some of the claims in the prophets' sermons, such as 'To be poor is a sin before God' or 'Why are you poor? Check your life/relationship with God!', are meant to justify the prophet's position and blame the members for their unfortunate situations. Barron (2022) posits that:

This results in victim-blaming and victim-shaming of any believer who is not experiencing all the marks of 'a victorious life' such as 'success, prosperity, health, and strong social ties'. Any Christian who lacks such blessings, it is argued, clearly lacks faith, is immature, or spiritually ignorant; once a Christian truly knows what blessings belong to her by faith, God is necessarily required and even forced to give those blessings. (p. 92)

It is no longer an issue of grace, but the prophet has the power to manipulate God to change the economic situations of the members. This practice of seeding is deeply embedded in the temporalities of 'faith' (Gukurume 2022). This becomes a dangerous teaching and position because it presupposes the buying of God's grace through faith and seeding (Mpofu 2013). The focus is on amassing wealth in the form of material riches, rather than demonstrating the love of Christ by promoting sharing and caring. Failure to fulfil the gospel of caring for one another (Gl 6:2, Rm 12:11–17) is against the gospel message that invites Christians to love one another and serve their neighbours. Much like the church of the first three centuries, 'care for the sick, orphans and widows' (Ja 1:27), remains crucial in today's context in Zimbabwe. According to Jesus, serving the sick and the needy will form part of the assessment on the last day of judgement when Christ will present him as the poor, the sick and the prisoner whom people served and visited in time of need (Mt 25:35–40). In mega-churches, the desire for material wealth supersedes people's character and morality in a caring community (Williams 2022). Church members get closer to the 'man of God' so that they can tap into the anointing to make more money and accumulate more wealth than their counterparts. Christianity tends to be individualistic, competition breeds hatred, jealousy and envy, instead of building a community of communion and sharing.

The doctrine of seeding undermines human trust in God and His grace upon His people. Makandiwa and Magaya have become powerful beyond imagination and above all human beings. Many people blindly follow them as their 'Papa', 'Man of God' to help them with prophecies and deliverance (Muyambo 2020). Instead of trusting God, people put their trust in the prophets. According to Eyo et al. (2021), the situation has created charlatans who can oppress and manipulate the poor who hope to get more wealth after seeding. The prophets encourage their followers to seed through tithes and talents to get 100-fold protection from poverty and sickness (Banda 2016; Eyo et al. 2021). According to Manyonganise (2024:8), the followers of Magaya and Makandiwa seem to replace Christ and God in their lives as the prophets claim to have more power. This misleads people from God who warns that 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the Lord' (Jr 17:5). Depending on humanity

rather than God is against God because it makes the prophets themselves gods.

Researchers have it on record that not all who are coerced to seed receive the promised prosperity. Some Christians in Zimbabwe embraced the gospel of seeding, but they continue living in poverty. Abundant prosperity is difficult to attain given the circumstances of the deepening economic crisis in Zimbabwe (Banda 2016). Only those who have enough financial resources continue to experience some economic growth. Banda (2016) further posits that high levels of corruption, unemployment and poverty exacerbated by poor governance make it difficult for people in Zimbabwe to realise the promises and many declarations of bumper harvest. On another note, the Mashangwa couple claimed that they lost a sizable amount from their business towards seeding to prophet Magaya, who gave them a false prophecy that they would own an airline, but it never happened (Mazara 2019). One may argue that this may draw many to hate the church and body of Christ for empty promises and even doubt that the God of Christianity is living, faithful and just.

Recommendations

Firstly, the government, though seemingly aligned to mega-church prophets, needs to regulate their (the prophets) operation to protect the poor from being ripped off their little resources.

Secondly, the government needs to care for the people and improve the economic circumstances of the people by making economic policies that promote growth for people to get economic means for survival rather than depending on and hoping for miracles from the prophets.

Thirdly, the ecumenical bodies should also find ways of accommodating charismatic movements and mega-church prophets so that they set boundaries as a way of protecting people from being misled by prophets instead of exposing the root causes of their poverty and suffering in Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

The church is the light of the world and the conscience of the society. Therefore, it needs to embody the light of Christ exemplified by truthfully and honestly preaching the gospel of Christ through the Word and acts of caring holistically and embracing all who are suffering. The gospel of seeding promotes the marginalisation of the poor, embracing the rich. Despite promising to provide an alternative economic redemption and health facilities, people remain suffering in the context of the sliding economic crisis in Zimbabwe. For that reason, the mega-church prophets seem to be offering false hope to the people facing the realities of socio-economic challenges in Zimbabwe. The article gives an analysis of the economic crisis in Zimbabwe, the emergence of mega-church prophets and the challenges and criticisms surrounding the practice of gospel of seeding. The biggest challenge, which was exposed, is the enrichment of the 'men of God', leaving

the adherents in their various economic challenges. It is a betrayal of the Christian doctrine of grace and responsible giving. Some recommendations are suggested as to how the poor and the suffering can be protected from the mega-church prophets and their prosperity theology. Both the government and the church through ecumenical bodies can find ways of curbing economic injustices perpetuated by prophets using the Bible. The article contributes to the body of knowledge about the current debate on prophetic charismatic movements and the broader prosperity theology and its challenges in Africa and Zimbabwe in particular.

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