

# Siphefumula ngenxeba

Rethinking a transformative missional ecclesiology as standing in the gap in the context of pandemics like COVID-19 and GBV

Thinandavha Derrick Mashau<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Pandemics are not only a reality in human history; similar cases are also recorded in biblical texts like Numbers 16:41-50 and are still happening today, as in the case of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and Gender-Based Violence (GBV). This article affirms that pandemics are either a creation of humanity and/or a creation of God, as is the case in Numbers 16:41-50. It became clear in this article that humanity either struggles to breathe or breathe through the wound (*siphefumula ngenxeba*) when pandemics strike or when God uses pandemics to punish humanity for their rebellion, as is the case in Numbers 16:41-50. A missional reading of Numbers 16:41-50 defines life and ministry in the context of pandemics as standing in the gap—between the angry God and rebellious people of God, and between the living and the dead in the efforts to mediate life over judgement.

**Keywords:** Siphefumula Ngenxeba, Rethinking, Transformative, Missional, Ecclesiology, Stand, Gap, Plagues, COVID-19, Gender-Based Violence

“When we revolt, it’s not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe.” – *Black Lives Matter sign, attributed to Frantz Fanon*

## 1. Introduction

Siphefumula ngenxeba! ‘We are breathing through the wound’ because of pandemics in global communities. The need to reflect on human struggles to breathe in the presence of pandemics was prompted by COVID-19 but is not limited to it. The use of the concept of pandemic in this article is both literal and metaphorical. Literally, in the sense that it covers the scope of pandemics, pestilences, and diseases such as smallpox, plague, Ebola, influenza, HIV and AIDS, polio, and COVID-19, among others (Janssen, 2021:15-18). Metaphorically, in the sense that it covers

<sup>1</sup> Professor of Missiology and Chair of the Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology at the University of South Africa (UNISA). He is the General Secretary of the Southern Africa Missiological Society (SAMS) and the Deputy President of the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS). He can be contacted at [mashatd@unisa.ac.za](mailto:mashatd@unisa.ac.za)

the scope of human-made global empires such as Babylon and Rome, and their oppressive systems whose knees are on human necks and causing the struggle to breathe among global communities. Examples that can be cited include slavery, colonisation, racism (Amponsah, 2013:432), patriarchy (Plaatjies-Van Huffel, 2011), Gender-Based Violence (Gutura & Nunlall, 2020:110), environmental racism (Opperman, 2019:58), escalation of border violence that targets foreign nationals (Tazzioli, 2021:1), socio-economic injustices, poverty and unemployment, globalisation, and neo-capitalist empires (Boesak, 2017:62).

Life under global pandemics constitutes a struggle for humanity to breathe. It is either 'I can't breathe' as popularised globally by the Black Lives Matter movement (Rickford, 2015:35) or siphefumula ngenxeba (we are breathing through the wound) in the South African context where health and other social injustice issues have contributed to black pain and suffering. Life in this context is paradoxically placed—having to consciously chose between life and death, and between breathing and dying. What exacerbates the situation is that human beings do not just struggle against the pandemic(s), but also against the impositions of global empires.

This article is written against the backdrop of the need to respond to the forgoing struggles against pandemics. It does not only turn into the resourcefulness of humanity, but religious and ecclesial praxes as well. Tolmie and Venter (2021:1) opine, "As usually happens in times of crisis, millions of people all over the world turned to religion for guidance and spiritual comfort during the pandemic". In the South African context, the soaring numbers of those infected and dying of COVID-19 and GBV pandemics posed a severe dilemma to faith-based institutions like churches. One of the most critical discourses and the most pressing question was: What does it mean to be a church in the context of a pandemic or pandemics? When church buildings were closed and when at some point, churches were allowed to congregate in small numbers like 50, 100 or 250, other churches opted to close doors completely, while others struggled to adapt to the changing context. However, others responded positively by adopting radical shifts that included the reinvention of 'house churches' (Corpuz & Sarmiento, 2021:111) and the use of technology in doing church (Kgatlé, 2020:3).

Writing in the context of online services amid COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, Pillay (2020:267) remarked:

"A large number of churches turned to electronic platforms to reach their members and this has given a faster and inevitable rise to the digital church. Churches had to adjust to digital worship, digital sacraments, digital sermons, digital tithes and digital mission".

This innovative way of digitalising churches proved not to be a solution for some, especially the poor and unemployed—the majority of black people struggle to breathe against high rates of data in the South Africa context (Pillay, 2020:269). Furthermore, there are other glaring missional challenges that a digital church could not address like challenges of poverty (Van der Merwe, 2020:1), support to widows amid the rampant COVID-19 pandemic (Buthelezi & Ngema, 2021:1), and restrictions on burial rites (Khosa-Nkatini & White, 2021:1). These issues were further exacerbated by lockdown measures which restricted movement (Buthelezi & Ngema, 2021:2).

In solidarity with those infected and affected by pandemics, as reflected in the foregoing, the body of Christ had to wrestle with a difficult question around ecclesiology: What kind of missional ecclesiology and ecclesial praxis do we embrace in the face of a pandemic or pandemics? In using the bible as a resource, Numbers 16:41-50 deals with a struggle to breathe when humanity is dealing with a pandemic or plague as a consequence of their rebellion. A missional reading of Numbers 16:41-50 suggests a radical or revolutionary transformative missional ecclesiology and praxis. It defines doing church as standing in the gap in the context of pandemics.

## **2. Setting the tone: A missiological framework**

This study is undertaken from a broader missiological perspective (Wright, 2006:25). This article embraced the missiological approach that seeks to define missiology as disruptive pop-up encounters (Mashau, 2021). Disruptive pop-up encounters as a discerning method and approach in doing missiology build upon Kritzinger's (2008) missiological thought in defining 'missiology as encounterology'. The encountering missiology has evolved to give birth to offshoots, such as 'contemplative encounter' (Karecki, 2009), 'transformative encounters' (Kritzinger, 2011:52), 'pavement encounters' (Mashau & Kritzinger, 2014), 'transformative pavement encounters' (Mashau, 2018), and 'disruptive pop-up encounters' (Mashau, 2021).

Mashau (2021:2) locates the roots of this encountering missiology as follows:

“My search for a missiology of ‘disruptive pop-up encounter(s)’ was highly influenced by various ‘disruptive popups’ in the public square that occupy many of our public discourses in the global context – namely, racism, Black Lives Matter, xenophobia and the ‘Foreigners go home’ campaign, terrorism, COVID-19 and the collapse of global markets, gender-based violence and a whole range of socio-economic and political injustices against humanity and nature, among others”.

While considering that pandemics like COVID-19 are disruptive pop-ups in the public square, the missiology of disruptive pop-up encounters takes seriously the need to en-

gage the bible missiologically in order to develop a missional ecclesiology and ecclesial praxis that is transformative and liberating. The agency of the church as a transforming agent in the public square is located within a missiological need to be responsive and provide contextually relevant missional solutions when humanity is struggling to breathe because of pandemics. Mashau (2020:54) concluded that there is a need to redefine “the transformation agenda of the church in the age of global economic, ecological destruction and attacks to human life by pandemics such as COVID-19 and Gender-Based Violence”. According to Pillay, this agenda should not embrace the old paradigm of doing church that “preferred to talk about reformation and change to adjust to the times”, but a more “revolutionary way of thinking and being church” (2021:267).

The foregoing proposal requires a revolutionary transformative ecclesiology that seeks to live out a transformed paradigm in ecclesial praxes. I have, in this article, decided to engage Numbers 16:41-50 because it is a narrative of how humanity struggled with pandemics in their historical space, but also how they embraced and lived out an ecclesiology which was life-affirming. As a missiologist, I have adopted missional lenses or hermeneutics (Wright, 2006:49) to read and interpret Numbers 16:41-50. A missional hermeneutic helped redefine the *missio Dei* (mission of God) and the *missiones ecclesiae* (church missions) in the context of pandemics. This article, therefore, presupposes a radical or revolutionary shift from the traditional missionary paradigm to a new missional ecclesiology and praxis as humanity struggles to breathe in contexts of pandemics.

### **3. Literature review on Siphefumula ngenxeba:**

#### **A brief contextual analysis**

##### **3.1 Defining siphefumula ngenxeba**

Siphefumula ngenxeba is the isiZulu concept which means ‘we are breathing through the wound’. This phrase received much attention in South Africa through OUTsurance’s ‘switch and save’ television advert. This advert followed shortly after the critically-acclaimed isiXhosa film, *Inxeba* (The Wound), by John Trengove. This film tackled traditions around circumcision, deep secrecy around sexuality (in particular same-sex intimacy) and masculinity in the traditional African setting. While the author intended to challenge “dominant ideas about masculinity through the intersection of Xhosa culture and queerness” (Scott, 2021:36), the film struggled to breathe in the market as it was met with ‘controversy’ and ‘contestation’ (Scott, 2021:26). Others accused the film of being hardcore pornography (Scott, 2021:27) while others raised issues around incompatibility to African culture and homophobia (Thornberry, 2020: E62), something which Scott (2021:36) calls “traditional hetero-patriarchal homophobic power” as reasons that pushed hostility against the film *Inxeba*.

Issues raised in this film, controversial as they may be, and by the OUTsurance advert on television, found resonance in the black lived experiences and pain that black bodies carry in society. The OUTsurance advert displayed black pain in the inability to afford certain expenses like a car insurance policy because of the high level of poverty and unemployment—siphfumula ngenxeba! On the other hand, *Inxeba* exposed the inability of black bodies to express same-sex preferences without fear of victimisation and death in some instances. The storyline also highlights how certain traditional practices are kept as secrets away from the public; hence the notion of ‘breathing through the wound’ because you are, as an ‘initiate’ or as ‘initiates’ in the circumcision school, expected to keep silent and not speak about your experiences no matter how depriving, harmful and painful they are. Kiguwa and Siswana (2018:04), in their article, “Layers of woundedness in *Inxeba*: masculinities disrupted, denied and defamed”, capture how deep the wound cuts as follows:

“This love story’s juxtaposition with the cultural story of *uhwaluko* is perhaps the film’s most daring and critical contribution to not only unravelling the hegemony of heteronormative space but also to expose how desire’s intersection with culture and race makes it both troubling and dangerous”.

The foregoing suggests that siphfumula ngenxeba is used as a metaphor not only to define the pain of blacks in their struggle for life, dignity and justice, but in their marginalisation and silencing. However, at times, it is about their revolt against the knee that is making their breathing difficult.

Writing about the context of the French revolution and by way of providing a context to his struggle to breathe because of the human-made pandemic of colonialism, Frantz Fanon (1965:65) said the following:

“There is not occupation of territory on the one hand and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of a final destruction. Under these conditions, the individual’s breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing”.

In his comprehension and description of postcolonial breathlessness, Fanon identified three elements that characterised his struggle to breathe in his context, namely observed, occupied and combat breathing. In the context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, the breathing of blacks was constantly observed by racist whites. They continually watched and monitored the breathing pulse and technique of the majority of blacks. The legislation was used as a knee to suppress the movement of blacks to urban spaces and to access means of production (Mashau,

2019:4). While death would occur from time to time because of the struggle to breathe in such a context, the enemy used their knee to inculcate a culture of violence, instil fear, enslave and give birth to the culture of dependency. Black Africans, in the context of Apartheid South Africa, were socialised to believe that they can't do anything without a white person, "*setlhare sa mosotho ke lekgowa*". This speaks to the dominance of Western culture over black people (Monyai & Skosana, 2013:13). This kind of occupied breathing, however, generated forms of revolts that, in the end, constituted what Fanon refers to as 'combat breathing'. In this case, blacks, tapping into the resourcefulness of their black consciousness, learnt the technique of resistance—siphefumula ngenxeba!

### 3.2 Siphefumula ngenxeba in the global context

Dlamini (2021:583) correctly observed, "[t]he COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities within countries and across geographies". Globally, the notion of siphefumula ngenxeba finds resonance in the Black Lives Matters movement and the reverberating chorus of protest, "I can't breathe". This movement continues to record stories of the pain and suffering of black youths who experience violence and systemic murders at the hands of police in the context of America. Writing in the context of global efforts to fight pandemics through interventions aimed at minimising the potential for the transmission of the pathogen within and across communities, Bowman highlights how pandemics can mutate and also give rise to others as follows:

"Yet, it is in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in which 'struggling to breathe' is a key symptom, that the world has witnessed widespread protests against the killing of George Floyd, who like Eric Garner was suffocated to death as part of systemic violence perpetrated against African-American men by the US policing system (2020:315)".

The foregoing demonstrates that the tragedy is even bigger. The struggle to breathe, at times, constitutes marginalisation and silencing of voices and peoples in the Global South. According to Boesak (2017:76), "wide international ratification of the Human Rights Charter and the Geneva Conventions cause us to frown on the savage and inhumane treatment of persons and whole peoples, on genocide, massacres, and wholesale oppression". This design to silence dissenting voices or voices seeking justice against all inhuman injustices that humanity faces apply mainly to African Americans and those in the global South. This constitutes a struggle to breathe in such contexts.

### 3.3 Siphefumula ngenxeba and pandemics in the South African context

The notion of 'breathing through the wound' in the presence of pandemics like COVID-19 and GBV points to the struggle to breathe during the lockdown and all related regulations imposed by the government. There are three examples that I would like to cite to highlight how black bodies became the site of the struggle to breathe during this period, namely:

- Lockdown restrictions restricted peoples' movement from their homes, but at the same time, it sparked the rise in GBV (Dlamini, 2021).
- The social distancing gospel could not reach and change patterns of living among most blacks living in townships and informal settlements because of spatial congestion. It is remarked, "In South Africa, the policing of particular areas over others clearly demonstrated that the middle-class fantasy of this sanctuary of home was not readily available to poor Black people" (Bowman, 2020:312, 313).
- In the face of government encouraging the observance of sanitary measures, such as the washing of hands, use of sanitizers and social distancing, the majority of black South African, especially those in rural areas, townships and informal settlements, struggle to access clean water, sanitizers and water. COVID-19 helped expose the disparity between the rich and poor in South Africa. At the same time, it "... rocked an economy which was already in recession" (Van der Merwe, 2020:1), thereby leaving the majority of blacks poorer and unemployed.

The foregoing reminds us that many social challenges have reached similar pandemic status as COVID-19. According to Theuns (2017:1-2), "South Africa is suffering from many ailments and some of the most difficult of these to address are racism, xenophobia, sexism and economic inequality". Therefore, we can add to the list of issues around patriarchy and GBV, as already highlighted in the introduction of this article. It is because of these ailments that the majority of black South Africans continue to struggle to breathe, or they are either breathing through the wound (siphefumula ngenxeba).

## 4. Siphefumula ngenxeba: a traditional missionary ecclesiology perspective

Siphefumula ngenxeba became a cry for life and justice which has historical roots in the colonial and apartheid past in South Africa. The unfortunate thing is that the empire used Christian mission to stick its knee on the necks of black people. Annemie Bosch (2011:34) narrated a story that captures this history as follows:

"In September 1976, however, there was an academic meeting at Unisa with an overseas speaker. Afterwards a number of DRC ministers from all races came to our home for a cup of tea. Standing alone with us at this gathering, a longstanding

friend, close to our hearts, said to David and me: “*You cannot be my brother and sister in Christ!*” Aghast, David and I looked at each other – and at our friend. “*Whatever you say and whatever you do*”, he continued, “you cannot change that which is given. You are white, I am black. You gain from the system, I suffer. Whether or not you like it, you are part of the privileged. It makes no difference how you feel about this. You remain standing with your foot on my neck and there is nothing but nothing what-so-ever you can do about it.”

This quote speaks to a traditional missionary ecclesiology that was centred around the discourse between white and black churches in South Africa. It affected, in the main, three White-Afrikaans sister churches that planted churches among the black communities in the townships and rural areas. The underlying issues with such a traditional missionary ecclesiology were characterised by:

First, the *pietistic approach to church*. One of the legacies of Christendom is the narrow definition of the church as covenant people whose focus is on gathering within the four walls of a building called a church. When writing about the uproar among Christians because of lockdown restrictions by government in the face of COVID-19, Jentile (2020:1) correctly argued, “. . . that the uproar could have been caused by the underlying Christendom theology, which has led many African Christians to focus on Sunday as the ‘great day’, rendering Christianity a ‘Sunday cult’”. This approach resulted in ecclesial praxis that generated ‘nominal’, ‘dualistic, and consumer Christians who are only active on Sunday and have no impact in their communities outside church. It is correctly concluded, “The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed this irrelevance of the majority of believers and churches in their communities” (Jentile, 2020:10).

Second, the *pietistic approach to mission*. The church was considered to have a mission in the world- conversion and salvation of souls to the exclusion of social involvement and justice in society. Mission was a considered a movement from church to church— with the planting of churches as the primary goal of doing mission. Consequently, church was defined in paternalistic terms. Churches were described as ‘mother—daughter’ or ‘old—younger’ churches” to the point that the sending churches will remain superior to those churches that they have planted to eternity. Addressing the issue of economic dependency, Tshaka (2015:8) correctly concluded that “the creation of so-called daughter churches for the so-called non-white population never afforded these churches an opportunity for self-determination”. The knee of a sending or mother or older church will remain on the neck of a planted (established) or daughter or younger church forever.

Third, the *divided and racialised church*. This ecclesial praxis is characterised by white hegemony both in terms of organisation and spirituality. Those propagat-

ing homogenous ministry would always glory in their languages and cultures to the point of deification. Divided and racialised ecclesiologies will always be dominated by the logic of white supremacy and characterised by the spirit of denominationalism, lack of contextualisation, and dependency syndrome (Mashau, 2020:9). Consequently, black churches continuously struggle to breathe because of the dependency syndrome. They do not only replicate ecclesial praxis of the West but also depend on ‘white money’ for survival.

Fourth, the *traditional practices and tendencies*. Ecclesial praxes of churches that are traditional glory in the past and refuse to change when transformation is expected. It is characterised by membership cards, membership contributions, dress codes, and subscriptions to church traditions and rituals. Their Christianity is nothing but nominal, dualistic, and syncretistic. Consumer culture is deeply entrenched in the Christ-plus religion, which demands more accountability to church traditions than God.

The foregoing description of a traditional missionary ecclesiology is not meant to be exhaustive, but to demonstrate how most blacks, as cited in the quote by Annemie Bosch above, continue to struggle to breathe today. In the efforts to maintain the status quo of traditional identities of churches, Pillay (2020:266) opines, “For a long time many churches have resisted change and spoke against considering or even implementing different ideas of ‘being’ church today”. Such a paradigm of doing church is not transformative and liberating. It fails to redefine and reinvent itself in the context of pandemics—times of death and dying. It is against this backdrop that a need for transformative missional ecclesiology and ecclesial praxes is researched within the context of a missional reading of Numbers 16:41:50.

## **5. Missional reading of Numbers 16:41-50: towards a transformative missional ecclesiology**

### **5.1 The Old Testament, Numbers 16:41-50 and global pandemics**

The Old Testament is not silent around issues of pandemics. Many stories about infectious diseases and famine are recorded in the Old Testament (Goldingay & Goldingay, 2020:191). It is asserted, “The texts of the Ancient near East and the Old Testament reveal a lot about their world views and attitudes to pandemics” (Zebedi, 2021:79). As for the etymology of the word pandemic, Goldingay and Goldingay remarked as follows:

“The Hebrew word for a plague or epidemic is *deber*, although in this connection the Old Testament more often uses nouns meaning affliction or blow (*nega*’, *negep*, *maggepab*, *makkab*) and often describes an epidemic’s arrival by using the parent verbs of these nouns, which mean hit or afflict (*naga*’, *nagap*, *nakab*) (2020:192)”.

While plagues, pestilences and pandemics are sometimes human-made because of gross negligence (Ndogo, 2021:1), in the Old Testament and Numbers 16 in particular, God is said to be the source of their occurrences. Remarking on the use of the verbs above and their origins, it is asserted, “Commonly, the subject of those verbs is God, so that he is the one who brings epidemics, but not invariably so” (Goldingay & Goldingay, 2020:192).

## **5.2 A transformative missional ecclesiology: Numbers 16:41-50**

### **5.2.1 A missional reading of Numbers 16:41-50**

A missional reading of Numbers 16:41-50 in this article is premised within the broader religious framework of the holiness code in the Pentateuch, and in the book of Numbers in particular. The notion of holiness is derived from the holiness of God, and therefore underpins the very ethos of the ecclesial praxes of God’s ecclesiae, “For I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:45). Holiness, in this instance, is defined in terms of being obedient to God which is demonstrated in one’s observance of God’s laws and regulations which guides one’s religious praxes. It presupposes that the church, as a holy people of God, has to be separate from sin and the world.

Holiness in the Old Testament was always characterised by God’s hatred for sin. Those who disobeyed God or sinned against his holiness code were met with correction, rebuke and, at times, punishment. In this instance, God’s judgement, is considered punitive justice because of its missional nature—correction with an eye towards redemption and correction. It is within this broader understanding of the holiness of God’s ecclesiae that those who disobey God are considered to be rebels and worthy of God’s judgement.

Therefore, contextually, the missional reading of Numbers 16:41-50 should first and foremost be placed within the broader context of Israel’s 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and the continuous grumbling and rebellion of God’s people (Vander Hart, 2016:114). Secondly, the missional reading of Numbers 16:41-50 should be viewed within the context of three distinct narratives, namely the rebellion of Korah and his group of the Levites (Numbers 16:4-11), the rebellion of Dathan, Abiram and their groups (Numbers 16:12-15), and the rebellion of 250 leaders of the church of God and the whole congregation or the Assembly of God. These three narratives are clustered or interwoven (Jeon, 2015:381), and they are read as one account because they fit within the broader religious framework of holiness stated above. Wendland (2016:99) concluded, “[t]his broad thematic principle of “holiness” (religious purity) is more important in the overall organization of the book than the strict chronological order of events”. It is asserted, “. . . the holiness

of Yahweh and his concern that his people would reflect this same characteristic in their relationship with him and among themselves as the covenant people of God” (Wendland, 2016:103).

The three narratives are also tied together because they all recorded rebellions against the leadership and authority of Moses and Aaron. The fourth narrative, Numbers 16:41-50, shares the same reasons as the three above. Numbers 16:41-50 follows the same pattern as the other three, namely protest against the leadership of Moses and Aaron, God’s punishment to the rebels, and the struggle to breathe. However, when using a missional hermeneutical lens in reading Numbers 16:41-50, the notion of holiness, contestation against the leadership of Moses, and God’s judgement over the rebels help to locate God’s missional heart. God’s missional and transformative agenda and ecclesiology are discernable in all four narratives.

### **5.2.2** Plague(s) and a struggle to breathe in Numbers 16 as a context

The word ‘plague’ or ‘pandemic’ is used in the narrative of Numbers 16:41-50. Numbers 16:41-50 use the word ‘plague’ or ‘pandemic’ without identifying the kind of ailment that befell rebellious Israel. Consequently, we can define a plague or pandemic as a natural or supernatural calamity. This broader definition includes the plague or pandemic in Numbers 16:41-50 and the two previous incidents—the ground opening up and swallowing the rebels (Numbers 16:30-33), and the fire consuming the 250 leaders (Numbers 16:35).

The foregoing affirms the reality that life and ministry in the context of plagues, pandemics, or unnatural calamities constitute a struggle to breathe among humanity. As for the Israelites in the context of Numbers 16, the struggle to breathe is four-fold. First, the struggle to breath against the empire. Second, the struggle to keep up with the moral dictates of the holiness code of God. Their protest against Moses and Aaron was considered to be a protest against God and his choice of leadership over Israel. Third, the struggle to keep up with God’s judgment over Israel’s rebellion. Fourth, the struggle to keep up with natural disasters and the death of their leaders and fellow congregants. The last plague, which resulted in the death of 14,700 people, came as a result of a protest against Moses and Aaron, who were accused of having killed the other leaders of Israel and their followers (Numbers 16:41).

### **5.2.3** Contestation and the struggle to breathe: Ecclesial context of Numbers 16

Strives and leadership contestation were part of the ecclesial praxes of Israel as God’s ecclesiae. First, it was a contestation around the holiness of God’s ecclesia versus the special appointment of Moses and Aaron as priestly leaders. It is opined, “[t]he exclusive hereditary claim by Aaron and his descendants to the priestly class was under attack”. The rebels’ primary challenge to Moses and Aaron is expressed

as an accusation of arrogance on the part of Moses and Aaron, “Why do you ‘raise yourselves’ [from the Hebrew root *nasa*] above the community of God!” (Num. 16:3)” (Diamond, 2006:93). This is what Mirguet calls, “exclusivity in the cultic service” (2008:318). In their understanding, Korah, Dathan, Abiram or any other leader within the group of 250 chiefs were legible to perform the same priestly leadership role that Moses and Aaron were performing. Accordingly, Moses and Aaron were no different from the rest of Israel; hence the affirmation of each other’s holiness as recorded in Numbers 16:3. At the heart of their rebellion was a question, “If God’s people are holy, how is it that Moses and Aaron have exalted themselves over the rest of God’s people?” (Vander Hart, 2016:114).

Second, it was a contestation of their giftedness and service to God and his church. In their judgement, rebels believed that their responsibilities were insignificant as compared to the leadership roles assigned to Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16:9). They accused Moses and Aaron for having exalted themselves above everyone else and thereby found guilty of having breached the holiness code of God (Vander Hart, 2016:114). Third, it was more of a leadership contestation, particularly the kind of power, prestige and privileges that come with the priestly office (Weinstein, 2009:259). Vander Hart (2016:114) correctly interpreted the rebellion against Moses and Aaron as “[t]he attempted coup”. Fourth, it was a contestation against God, as recorded in Numbers 16:11. In contesting Moses and Aaron, the rebels were contesting God, knowingly or unknowingly. At the heart of it all is a question: why would God only use Moses and Aaron to provide leadership to his church and not us? It is opined, “According to Moses Korah conspired not against himself, nor even his supine brother (Num 16:11), but against God (16:11, 28; 26:9), whose prophet he was (Ex 19:9)” (Derrett, 1993:60).

Five, the contestation was around the faithfulness of God’s promises. When refusing to appear before Moses and Aaron (Vander Hart, 2016:114), Dathan and Abiram argued that Moses and Aaron failed to fulfil their promise of taking the Israelites to a land flowing with milk and honey (Numbers 16:13). In essence, the rebels were accusing God of failing to fulfil the promise made to them through Moses. The foregoing contestations gave rise to a different contestation—contestation in solidarity (Numbers 16:41-50), which will be discussed in the next section.

#### **5.2.4 Plague(s), God’s judgement and the struggle to breathe in Numbers 16:41-50**

The missional reading of Numbers 16:41-50 points to the interrelatedness of plagues, God’s judgement and the struggle to breathe. The rebellion in Numbers 16:41-50 came from human solidarity—contestation together towards life. Weinstein (2009:259) opines, “The fourth general and disorganized uprising is a result

of the punishment of Dathan and Abiram, who were swallowed into the earth, and the punishment of the followers of Korah, who are burned to death". He continues to add that the rebels were not just shocked by what had just happened, but they suspected Moses and Aaron of the murders of their leaders (Weinstein, 2009:259). This element of contestation in solidarity, which presupposes the element of rising together, also embraced the aspect of falling in solidarity. God unleashed a plague that started to kill some among the Israelites (those murmuring and protesting) as a punishment to their rebellion. It can be concluded in the context of Numbers 16:41-50 that human beings always struggle to breathe or breathe through the wound (siphfumula ngenxeba) each time God unleashes plagues or pandemics as part of his missional agenda—correct, reprimand and redeem. Wendland correctly concluded, "By acting decisively in such a dramatic punitive manner, God confirms his holy justice as well as his chosen community and religious leaders, Moses and Aaron" (Wendland, 2016:105). God's judgement has always carried an element of calling his people back to the covenant and the praxes of maintaining religious purity.

### 5.2.5 A transformative missional ecclesiology as standing in the gap

A transformative missional ecclesiology and the praxes thereof are defined, in the context of Numbers 16, as standing in the gap in the context of plagues or pandemics. The notion of 'standing in the gap' is recorded in Numbers 16. It is relevant to all four recorded narratives, namely rebellions of (1) Korah and his followers, (2) Dathan, Abiram and their followers, (3) 250 leaders, and (4) the whole community of Israel. As instructed by Moses and in executing his priestly responsibilities, Aaron is said to have stood between the dead and the living (Numbers 16:48). Standing in the gap as a missional transformative ecclesial praxis has three dimensions: First, *standing where God stands in the face of contestation*. What is remarkable about all the narratives is not only the theological ground of the holiness code that God had to protect through all the plagues and unnatural calamities that came the way of all rebels, but the Tabernacle as a symbol of God's presence among them. In standing where God stands amidst all rebellious encounters, Moses and Aaron opted to invite the rebels to meet at the entrance of the Tabernacle as a sign that the disputes are not just among the congregants but also God. Second, *standing between the angry God and God's rebellious and sinful people*. When God was burning with anger and wanted to destroy the rebels, Moses and Aaron had to plead with God not to destroy the rebels (Numbers 16:22). Third, *standing between the dead and the living*. Moses and Aaron had to execute their priestly roles of burning incense in order to mediate reconciliation and salvation among the rebels.

## 6. Lessons towards a revolutionary transformative ecclesiology and liberating ecclesial praxis

First, pandemics are disruptive pop-ups that can be traced back to human history and biblical text like Numbers 16:41-50. Second, a missional reading of Numbers 16:41-50 affirms that they are caused by human actions, as we have witnessed with the rebels in Numbers 16. However, we also need to note that the source of God can be God—who, in the context of Numbers, used the plague(s) to punish the rebellious Israelites. Third, when God uses pandemics to punish the rebels, humanity is given a new opportunity to turn away from their rebellion and return to God for forgiveness and reconciliation. Fourth, humanity always struggles to breathe in the context of pandemics. In that case, the ministry of the church as an ‘essential transforming agent of the *missio Dei*’ is needed. A missional reading of Numbers 16:41-50 affirms that a revolutionary ecclesiology and the praxis define ministry in the context of pandemics as standing in the gap between the angry God and rebels, and between the living and the dead in order to mediate life. It is in this context that Pillay concluded:

“The church affirms its integrity and faithfulness to the Gospel when it takes up the struggles and sufferings of the world, when it favours the poor, and when it joins with God in turning to the world to establish justice, peace and the fullness of life for all people and creation” (2020:270).

The ministry of presence is needed in the context of those grieving, the widows and orphans, including the LGBTQIA+ community who experience GBV due to their sexual orientation and preference. Writing in the context of death, grief, mourning and healing due to pandemics like COVID-19, Kgatle and Segalo (2021:5) encouraged communal presence as follows:

“We need to acknowledge that grief happens at the physical, cultural, psychological and spiritual level. It is therefore pertinent to take seriously how all these dimensions intersect and influence the mourning and healing process of the bereaved”.

If we are to give the bereaving folks, as we stand in solidarity with humanity but also as servants of the *missio Dei*, churches remain essential in terms of standing in the gap to mediate God’s healing to those struggling to breathe and those dying because of pandemics.

Lastly, the church should always remain a missional and transforming agent of the kingdom of God. Writing in the context of COVID-19 and the church’s missional role from a kingdom perspective, Pillay (2020:274) concluded as follows:

“The kingdom or reign of God is the primary missional perspective of the church as we continue to pray for, and work towards, God’s justice, peace, righteousness and love on earth. The church is a sign, symbol and pointer to that kingdom as it is called out of the world and sent into the world to be the presence of God.”

Being in the presence of God in the world is the same as standing where God stands in mediating life among struggling humanity and creation. It has the elements of ‘standing for God’, ‘standing for the truth’, ‘standing beyond known borders’, ‘standing in solidarity with those in the margins’, and ‘standing for justice’ (Mashau, 2018). The church’s efforts to stand where God stands in the context of the pandemics like COVID-19 and GBV will go a long way to mediate salvation, reconciliation, and healing to those struggling to breathe because of these pandemics.

## 7. Conclusion

Pandemics like COVID-19 and GBV are a reality facing global communities. They are disruptive pop-ups that appear from time to time, and when they occur, humanity struggles to breathe or finds themselves breathing through the wound (siphefumula ngenxeba). The church is not only essential in such a context, but its approach should remain one of active participation as we stand in the gap and mediate life amidst death and dying. We should assume the very prophetic and missional role that we have witnessed during the apartheid era – when the church became not only a symbol of hope to the hopeless, but a site of struggle to many.

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