


# Unsafe spaces? An ecclesiological evaluation and response to recent controversial practices in some South African neo-Pentecostal churches

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From a communal perspective of the church, this article analyses critically the controversial practices reported in some South African neo-Pentecostal (SANP) churches, such as feeding congregants with grass. The article examines the effect of the controversial practices on the meaning of the church. The main question answered in this article is as follows: What is the nature of the church that emerges from the controversial practices reported amongst some SANP churches? And what is a biblically informed understanding of the church that can be used to end these practices that violate the human rights of congregants? The question is answered by describing the controversial SANP practices and examining the theological foundations of these controversial practices. The article argues for the necessity for a sound church doctrine as a way of curbing these controversial practices. This ecclesiology must take seriously the communal nature of the church. The contribution of the article is showing the need for Christians to take personal responsibility to guard against practices that make their churches unsafe spaces.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The article combines perspectives from the communal nature of the church, the Trinity and the salvation mission of the church to analyse the state of the church represented by the controversial SANP churches which use questionable practices, such as healing rituals that involve spraying people with insecticides. The study has direct implications on the doctrine of the church, ministerial practices and foundations of the church that make churches safe places for their members.

**Keywords:** South African neo-Pentecostalism; ecclesiology; communality; miracles; commodification; commercialisation; spiritual abuse; abusive religious practices.

## Introduction and background

The main purpose of this article is to analyse critically the nature of the church that emerges from the controversial practices in some South African neo-Pentecostal (SANP) churches. South African neo-Pentecostal churches are distinct from the conservative classical Pentecostal churches, although they share some similar characteristics such as speaking in tongues. A major characteristic of the SANP churches is the self-appointed prophet-pastors or prophet-apostles who generally maintain sole absolute control over their churches. South Africa has recently seen a media frenzy over strange and controversial practices in some SANP churches such as pastors making congregants eat grass, the use of dog meat for communion and healing rituals that boarder on sexual assault on women. However, controversial practices amongst neo-Pentecostals are not unique to South Africa; they have been reported in other African countries such as Kenya (Weber 2014), Nigeria (Agazue 2016) and Zimbabwe (Chitumba 2016). In South Africa, the public outcry over these controversial practices led government organizations such as the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission) to conduct an inquiry on these activities (CRL Rights Commission 2017).

Scholars such as Resane (2017) and Kgatle (2017, 2019) have analysed critically the underlying theological frameworks behind these controversial activities and made various recommendations of how to curb them. Dube (2019a, 2019b) used decolonial theory to argue that the controversial SANP practices grossly violate the human rights of the congregants and has called for the regulation of religion. Mokhoathi and Rembe (2017) argued that the controversial practices violate the various aspects of the South African national constitution. However, although in their varied criticisms the aforementioned authors do indeed highlight some ecclesiological problems

in the controversial practices (e.g. Kgatle 2017:7–8; Resane 2017:13–14), the criticisms are not done from a strictly ecclesiological perspective that examines the nature of the church represented by these controversial activities. This article attempts to fill this gap through a theological analysis that examines the controversial activities of the SANP churches from an ecclesiological perspective. As used in this article, 'church' refers to the community of Christian believers wherever it may be gathered.

The main question answered in this article is as follows: What is the nature of the church that emerges from the controversial practices reported amongst some SANP churches? And what is a biblically informed understanding of the church that can be used to end these practices that violate the human rights of congregants? The article first describes how the controversial practices have made some SANP churches unsafe spaces that exploit and abuse people. The subsequent section examines the questionable ecclesiological foundations of the SANP churches. This is followed by stressing the need for a biblically informed sound doctrine of the church to curb the controversial practices. The article concludes by appealing for an ecclesiology that takes seriously the communal nature of the church. The significance of the article lies in highlighting the need for churches to guard against harmful practices that make them unsafe spaces. The article attempts to challenge both the SANP clergy and their congregants towards a sound biblical understanding of the church. The article attempts to empower SANP ordinary members to challenge their clergy to make their churches safe places where human rights are observed. Ultimately, the article seeks to provide an ecclesiological framework through which ordinary Christians, especially vulnerable women, can protect themselves from abusive churches.

## The controversial South African neo-Pentecostal practices and their implications for the church

The controversial activities reported amongst some SANP churches reinforce negative perceptions about the church. This section will discuss how the controversial activities lead to negative perceptions about the church.

### Theatrical prophetic actions that distort the purpose of the church

The controversial activities are often characterised by prophets' dramatic acts that turn churches into circuses, thereby distorting the church's purpose. As an example, in 2014, Pastor Lesego Daniel of Rabboni Centre Ministries reportedly instructed his congregants to eat grass after saying God told him it will bring the people 'closer to God' (Jamal 2017). In 2015, Prophet Penuel Mnguni of the End Times Disciples Ministries in Soshanguve, Pretoria, reportedly made his congregants eat snakes, claiming that he can turn rocks into bread and snakes into chocolate (Jamal 2017). On another occasion, Mnguni reportedly used dog meat and the Fanta soft drink for communion and also fed his congregants

with rat meat (Pijoos 2019). On another occasion, Mnguni appeared on Facebook, demonstrating the power of God by driving over two female congregants with a car (Areff 2016). It was also reported that in November 2016, Pastor Lethebo Rabalago, of the Mount Zion General Assembly, in Limpopo, posted on his Facebook page, photos of himself spraying congregants with a house insect repellent called Doom to cure them of their sicknesses. Other incidents reported in the press include Prophet Bongani Maseko of Daveyton's Breath of Christ Ministries who, in January 2017, made worshippers at his church drink a fluid said to be engine cleaning fluid as a way of healing them. In February 2017, Pastor Light Monyeki of the Grace Living Hope Ministries made his congregants drink Rattex rat poison mixed with water to heal them. These dramatic scenes raise questions about what a church is and what it ought to do. As one sees pastors proudly posting pictures and videos of themselves performing these theatrical acts, one is left asking what such activities have to do with the mission of the church. A church that uses dog meat and Fanta drink at the Lord's Table (Marupeng 2019) leaves people wondering whether the leaders understand what the Lord's Table is about and if such a church is a true church belonging to Christ.

Other theatrical actions that distort the church's meaning include dubious miracles, some of which have circulated on social and news media. For example, in a widely publicised event, Pastor Alpha Lukau of Alleluia Ministries, near Johannesburg, reportedly performed a miracle of raising a dead man from a coffin (Youtube 2019). The 'resurrected' man was shown being lifted out of the coffin, sat on a chair and given food to eat (Youtube 2019). The scandal of the event attracted a comment from the country's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, who was quoted (Shange & Gous 2019) lamenting:

How can we work together to ensure that we rid our country of bogus religious leaders who are taking our people for a ride? [People] who are doing things that are just completely shocking of trying to hoodwink the whole nation and saying that somebody has been raised from the dead? [People] who are actually [taking] the name of the Lord, of God and of churches into disrepute? (n.p.)

The president's words highlighted the high extent to which the dubious miracle had hurt the church's reputation.

Two people connected to the miracle were arrested on charges of fraud, although the charges were later withdrawn (Jordaan 2019a, 2019c). The condemnation of this event, even by the national president, indicated the extent to which the prophet's theatrical actions had discredited the church and caused confusion about the meaning and purpose of the church. Instead of preaching the gospel and bringing people into a saved relationship with God, and being the light and salt of the world, the church as represented by the controversial SANP activities was discredited as a place for frauds.

## Prophetic actions that undermine the holiness of the church

Other controversial acts reported amongst some SANP churches raised questions about the holy character of the church because of the sexually offensive nature of some of their activities. A pertinent example is that of Pastor Paseka Motsoeneng, popularly known as Pastor or Prophet Mboro,<sup>1</sup> the leader of the Incredible Happenings Ministries. Motsoeneng reportedly healed a 17-year-old girl of a sickness he prophesied was caused by witchcraft. Motsoeneng reportedly inserted his fingers into her genitals to remove the evil objects of witchcraft from her (TimesLive 2016). However, in fairness to him, when Motsoeneng later appeared in a radio talk show, he denied ever touching the girl's private parts (Jacaranda FM 2016). In another interview he stated that he respected women and, therefore, as a matter of principle, he never touched any woman's private parts (Makhoba 2014). However, he added that he only touched the private parts of women who requested him to do so, because the women believed that is how he could heal them (Makhoba 2014). He stated that instead of touching women on their private parts with his hand, he puts his foot on the area between their stomachs and private area whilst they lay on the floor (Makhoba 2014). Motsoeneng's other methods include asking women to wave their underwear in church and asking them to place their hands on their private parts whilst he prays for the power of God to come on the underwear. He stated in an interview that he prays for the underwear to ask God's power to fall on the garments so that when the women wear them, the power of God in them will drive away the evil spirits that sexually molest them during their sleep (Jacaranda FM 2016). In 2017, Motsoeneng reportedly conducted a 'Bedroom Sunday' service to pray for sex-starved couples and later visited their homes to witness the results of his prayer on their sex lives which he described as a resounding success (Msibi 2017). He has also appeared on video praying for married couples with husbands suffering from erectile dysfunction (Malatji 2017). In one video Motsoeneng appeared standing over a troubled couple who were lying in bed, after praying for the husband's erectile dysfunction to end; he took a condom packet, opened it, blessed it and handed it to the couple (Malatji 2017; Youtube 2017). Judging by many street adverts from traditional and spiritual healers claiming power to heal sexual impotence and other sexual dysfunctions, Motsoeneng's focus on sexual reproductive issues addresses an area of great need to many married couples.

However, despite the usefulness of Motsoeneng's ministry to sexually troubled couples, there are serious questions about the appropriateness of sexual explicitness as part of a church worship service. What do children think when they see women and their mothers touch their private parts and wave their underwear during a church service? Questions can also be asked about the filming of prayer sessions for married

1. Although Pastor Motsoeneng is popularly known as Pastor Mboro, in keeping with the African principle of *ukuhlanipha* (avoidance or taboo) (Carton 2000:69), this article has opted to stick to his real name, Motsoeneng, because in the author's native Zimbabwean context, 'Mboro' means penis in the Shona language.

couples with sexual problems whilst lying on their beds and the pastor asking them to touch each other's sexual organs in front of cameras, opening condoms and blessing them. Furthermore, the pastor's touching of women's sexual organs or stepping on them to drive out demons appears as a form of assault and sexual violation. These acts, whilst meeting people's real needs, are performed in ways that raise questions about the moral holiness of the church.

The resultant ecclesiological challenge concerns the need to urgently 'probe the complex theology of worship that lies behind the widely reported request by one pastor for his woman congregants to come to church without panties as a form of self-dedication' (Maluleke 2015). The serious challenge in this is that prophets perform healing rituals that display sexual activity in a way that undermines the church's moral holiness, harms children's innocence and puts an unholy focus on sex. We could also ask, if medical practitioners handle their patients in a confidential, ethical and dignified manner, why do prophets and pastors like Motsoeneng expose their clients and seem to treat them in an undignified manner? Why are the healing rituals of a good, holy and all-powerful God in such shameful taste? How do we live with the notion of a Christian 'miracle-working "[G]od" who teaches his forsaken creatures that humiliation is the way to salvation and demeaning oneself the way to prosperity?' (Maluleke 2015). What emerges from these dramatic performances is that the prophets' popularity is earned in a way that belittles the moral holiness and integrity of the church.

## Criminal acts that make churches unsafe spaces that exploit vulnerable people

Questions about the safety of churches also arise from the criminal activities of some SANP churches. These criminal activities make churches unsafe spaces, particularly for women, children and even men in desperate need for divine intervention. In 2018, South Africa was gripped by the shock and shame of the deadly events linked to the Mancoba Seven Angels Ministry, in the small town of Ngcobobu in the Eastern Cape Province. The church was led by seven brothers who all believed themselves to be angels sent from heaven by God to fight Satan. They established a compound in Ngcobobu to house their followers in wait for the return of Jesus Christ. Before taking up residence in the church compound, the members were required to surrender to the seven 'angels' all their possessions, including pension pay-outs, cars, salaries and proceeds from goods and property sales (Radio 702 2018). On 21 February 2018, the group robbed a cash machine and then attacked the local police station, killing five police officers and a retired soldier, and stole 10 rifles and a police van (BBC News 2018; Miya 2018). Reprisal action by the police on the church compound resulted in the death of three of the Mancoba brothers and four other members of the church. The attack by the police rescued over 40 women and girls, the youngest girl being 12 years old, who were all held as sex slaves by the Mancoba brothers (Manona 2018). The group had earlier appeared before the CRL Rights

Commission's investigations on the commercialisation and abuse of religion, where it had declared its rejection of the South African constitution and school education for children, saying they belong to Satan (CRL Rights Commission 2017:21–22). Prior to the deadly attack on the police station, the CRL Rights Commission had raised red flags against the group on allegations of abusing children and denying them the right to education. The children rescued by the police from the compound had no birth certificates and were not receiving any education.

Many of the characteristics of the Seven Angels Ministry raise questions about what makes a church a church. Dube describes the Seven Angels Ministry as an unsafe place that practised 'mafiaised religion' (2019a) and 'mutually zombifying religion' (2019b). Dube (2019a:2) draws from Gest and Guyard (1995:15) to explain that mafiaised religion is characterised by the mental destabilisation of adherents, exorbitant financial demands, perpetuation of gender inequality using religious narratives, indoctrination of children, expression of antisocial sentiments, non-observance of the law, disturbing social order and the infiltration of public authorities. On mutual zombification, Dube (2019b:56) amplifies Mbembe's idea of mutual zombification as the impotence or powerlessness of the ruler and the ruled, each having robbed the other of vitality, leaving both impotent. In mutual zombification, religious adherents fail to realise the oppressive and exploitative tendencies of their leaders, leading them to support oppressive leaders sheepishly (Dube 2019b:56). After police broke up the Seven Angels Ministry compound, some of the liberated church members were unwilling to be set free from the group but hoped that their dead leaders would resurrect and return amongst them. In a mutual zombified church, 'adherents perceive zombification to be an act of obedience to God' (Dube 2019b:59). These criminal acts by church leaders turn churches into exploitative places.

Other incidents that turn the church into unsafe places include the actions of the Nigerian-born pastor Timothy Omotoso, leader of the Jesus Dominion International, who, at the time of writing, is undergoing trial for 63 accounts of rape and human trafficking (SABCNews 2017). Perhaps as a sign of mutual zombification, some of the church's members, including women, have supported Omotoso and vilified the young women accusing him of rape.

The unsafe nature of the church is also represented in the accusations of fraud and money-laundering charges against Malawian-born prophet Shepherd Bushiri, leader of the Enlightened Christian Gathering Church, who was reportedly investigated by the South African authorities for sending an estimated R15-million a month to his country of origin, Malawi (SowetanLive 2019). This was in addition to accusations of stage-managing miracles by making people act sick and crippled, so that they could later give testimonies that he had healed them (Miya 2018). It is important to note that the actions that bring the church into disrepute are from

both foreign and local South African prophets (Dube 2020:5). These activities make the church an unsafe place by making people vulnerable to all sorts of violent, sexual and financial crimes. Instead of it being a place to be sought for refuge from all the hurts of the world, the church becomes a feared place that people cannot trust with their lives, wealth, money and daughters.

## **The questionable ecclesiological foundations in the controversial neo-Pentecostal activities**

What makes it possible for churches to act in such dangerous ways? This section will answer the question by showing some underlying perspectives about the church amongst the SANP Christians that allow them to act in ways that turn churches into unsafe places.

### **The founding of churches on the personal visions of leaders instead of the Lordship of Christ**

An ecclesiological aspect noted amongst many SANP churches is that they base churches on the personal visions of their leaders rather than on the Lordship of Christ. Although they may claim that 'Jesus is Lord' and even hang banners declaring Jesus as Lord on their pulpits, many SANP churches 'revolve around personalities' (Kgatle 2017:2). These personalities are often self-styled prophets who establish their churches on their own and arbitrarily assign themselves authoritative titles such as 'seer one' or 'major one' without showing any process required to obtain such titles (Agazue 2016:2; Kgatle 2019:3). One finds many followers of neo-Pentecostal leaders donning regalia inscribed 'I am the child of Prophet'. This opens the Christians to the charge that their faith stands on the prophets rather than on Christ as the head of the church.

After examining the operations of some of the SANP leaders, Maluleke (2015) concludes, 'Whatever else the snake-eating phenomenon is about, it is initially about the leader, his self-image, self-esteem and vision of himself'. The statement indicates an individualistic nature of the controversial SANP church leaders. The churches appear more driven by the individualistic vision of the founding leaders than an objective theological and biblical truth. Vision is used here in the sense of what the Christian leader idealises as his or her God-given ministry or mission, or calling. In neo-Pentecostal circles, vision is often explained in terms of what God has anointed an individual to accomplish for the kingdom of God.

As a result of revolving around personalities, neo-Pentecostalism 'is championed by dissenters' (Kgatle 2017:2). Although Kgatle (2017:2) says the dissenters are often from mainline churches, 'who believe that their spiritual gifts are choked by rigid structures of ecclesiastical authority', there

are also many dissenters from within the movement itself. As Marshall (1992) observed amongst some Nigerian neo-Pentecostals:

[T]he churches are notoriously schismatic, due partly to the struggle for clients in a competitive religious market, members appear to be easily won to new congregations when an inspiring leader breaks away to form his own church. (p. 16)

She adds, 'Churches do have loyal members, and loyalty is very often tied to a charismatic leader or aspiring pastor' (Marshall 1992:16). This is often indicated by the branded items the followers have that indicate their loyalty to individual leaders. Often the levels attached to a prophet's anointing determine the number of followers. Therefore in times of the occurrence of major events in the world such as the present Covid-19 pandemic, neo-Pentecostals prophets often try to outdo each other by describing how they foresaw and forewarned their followers about the event. In these churches, although the Lordship of Christ may be claimed or confessed as the foundational guiding principle, it is often the vision of the prophet that reigns supreme.

### Churches that thrive on the unique qualities of their founders instead of the gospel

Because the controversial SANP churches base their existence on the prophetic uniqueness of their leaders, they tend to have shallow objective central doctrinal structures. This is true in many other African neo-Pentecostals.<sup>2</sup> Just like in many African neo-Pentecostal prophetic churches, SANP churches tend to be less preoccupied with proclaiming the gospel, which requires expounding biblical and doctrinal intricacies of the Christian faith. Their main interest is dealing with people's personal problems, which makes the focus of their prophetic activity exposing the evil spirits causing people's sufferings. This leads to churches that have weak doctrinal foundations that only thrive on the uniqueness of the leaders. Agazue (2016:6) observes that the high demand for prophecies by millions of Nigerians has contributed to the increase in revivalist churches managed by self-styled prophets. The insatiable hunger for prophecies is also true in South Africa. It appears that many people who attend these churches are not really seeking some objective truth about God, but solutions to their problems. Instead of rigorously wrestling over the doctrinal foundations of what it means to be a church, as Kgatle (2019:3–4) shows, the interests of these prophets lie in developing 'forensic prophecy' that only focuses in revealing people's personal details, 'prophetic titles' that are used to instil a sense of divine authority over people, 'prophetic objects' or spiritual materials such as anointed oil for people to use to fight evil spirits, 'prophetic consultation' of having one-on-one private consultations with individuals needing spiritual solutions to their problem and the performance of various 'prophetic miracles'. As Dube (2020:8) points out, 'most prophets in South Africa, whether local or foreign, are obsessed by being powerful, popular, and feared'.

2. For example, Gifford (2008:283) says in David Oyedepo's Winners Chapel, the pastors in churches planted in other places often promote his books and teachings and promote the pilgrimage to the annual conference ('Shiloh') at headquarters ('Canaan Land', outside Lagos).

However, these actions by the prophets are rarely concerned about the salvation of individuals or strengthening the church as an ecclesiological institution. Rather, these prophetic actions are primarily interested in establishing the personal kingdom and glory of the prophet. Instead of advancing the kingdom of God, leading people to salvation and strengthening the church, these actions of the prophets promote celebrity cult by making the church leaders more important than Christ and the church (Resane 2017:3–5). The problem is that when there are no independent objective doctrinal structures to govern the life of the church, the church is left at the mercy of the existence of the leaders because, when the prophet's uniqueness diminishes or another prophet with better anointing comes into the scene, congregants change their membership to follow the new prophet (Van Wyk 2019). There is high mobility amongst neo-Pentecostals as people search for more powerful prophets, and there is intense competition amongst the prophets (Marshall 1992:16, 2009:82; Van Wyk 2019).

To show the stiff competition amongst the prophets, Dube (2020) spotlights the acrimony between local and foreign prophets in South Africa, with the local prophets telling foreign prophets to leave South Africa and go and prophesy in their homelands. Dube (2020:1) shows that this rivalry between native South African prophets and foreign prophets has degenerated into 'idolising the "us" and demonising the "them"'.<sup>3</sup> However, the problem is that many local and foreign prophets, instead of building enduring independent churches anchored on strong doctrines that enable them to be self-sustaining and self-propagating churches, neo-Pentecostal leaders generally anchor their churches on their personal brands. In the wake of Pastor Lukau's publicised controversial miracle of resurrecting a dead man in 2019, Maluleke (2019) saw the action as designed 'to gain the ultimate competitive advantage over his rivals in the lucrative prosperity gospel industry'. Interestingly, this was expressed by people interviewed by journalists including Pastor Motsoeneng (Youtube/Multimedia Live 2019). This observation indicates a church that endears itself to the world by miraculous practices of its leader instead of a church institution built on objective biblical doctrines. Such a church is unsafe because it lives and dies with the prophetic figure.

### Church activity based on empty pragmatism and experientialism that violates the church's holiness

Ultimately, the controversial acts by the SANP prophets and pastors raise questions about the holy identity of the church. As one looks at the theatrical practices of the prophets, their

3. Interestingly, after the much publicised display by the Congolese-born Pastor Alph Lukau, of resurrecting a dead man from the coffin, Pastor Motsoeneng led a delegation of local pastors to confront him over the miracle and then proceeded to Sandton Police Station, close to Lukau's church premises to press criminal and fraud charges for staging a fake miracle (eNCA 2019; Jordaan 2019b). Motsoeneng appears in the video in front of Lukau's Alleluia Ministries, with his supporters and other local pastors, taunting Lukau and challenging him to go to the grave of the late President Nelson Mandela to raise him to life. Without any irony, Pastor Motsoeneng appears in a video kneeling close to his BMW i8, praying against Lukau, asking God to forgive fake pastors (Multimedia Live 2019). When one carefully examines this episode, it has a dimension of local prophets versus foreign prophets (Dube 2020:4–7).

criminal actions conducted in the name of the church and prompted by questionable prophecies, one is left asking the question: what is the church and at what point do certain actions stop a church from being the church? When one watches Pastor Motsoeneng instructing women to wave their underwear in the air and touch their sexual organs during the worship service, one is left asking the question: what constitutes a Christian ministerial function for a true church of God? As one watches a pastor use dog meat for communion, one is left asking about the integral qualities of the church that should guide its conduct and place limitation to thoughtless experientialism. This is exacerbated by the startling element amongst SANP leaders of the tendency to freely publicise their outrageous acts in various forms of media (Kgatlhe 2017:6). They post their controversial activities whilst aware of the offence they cause amongst Christians and observant non-Christians. This reflects a loss of the church's holiness and identity with Christ, which in itself reflects a lack of understanding of the reality of the church. This lack of understanding of the church leads to unpredictability, empty pragmatism and experientialism. Pragmatic utility builds leaders' ministerial activities on whether or not they meet the practical needs of their congregants at that moment, instead of whether or not they are true, biblically, theologically and ethically.

Instead of an interest in demonstrating identity with Christ through ministerial activities that pass theological and moral ethical scrutiny, these pastors use outrageous methods that distinguish them as spiritual heroes who can use God's power to do anything, however shocking it may be. For instance, when Pastor Lethebo Rabalago sprayed his congregants with an insect repellent spray called Doom, he reportedly stated: 'I use anything that the Lord directs me to use to heal people' (DailySun 2019). Therefore, controversial SANP churches are not concerned with whether or not this is responsible use of faith in God. Instead, they are more concerned with the exhilaration of their controversial activities. This shows their preference for utility over objective doctrinal truth because for them the church is not judged by its identity with Christ but by what it can do for people. Therefore, for the controversial SANP churches, the measure of the church's authenticity is not objective doctrinal or moral identity with Christ, but its function in meeting people's needs. Resane (2017:9–14) highlights that controversial SANP churches suffer from anti-institutionalism, which is demonstrated by their dissentious attitude; anti-intellectualism, which suppresses critical thinking; antinomianism, which is interested in strange practices and anti-sacramentalism, in which the traditional sacraments of the church are often substituted by miracles and other strange activities.

Perhaps the problem is not a lack of understanding of what the church is, but a lack of commitment to the right understanding of the church. For, example, it is difficult to reconcile the words of Pastor Motsoeneng's condemnation of Pastor Lukau's allegedly fraudulent resurrection miracle with his own ministerial conduct. Motsoeneng appears on

video standing at the gate of Lukau's church's premises declaring: 'I am here because the name of Christ has been played with. I am here because the name of God is being played with' (Youtube/Multimedia Live 2019). Continuing with his 'holy' rage, Motsoeneng is heard asking Lukau, who had hidden away:

[W]hy do you lie about God? Let God perform miracles. We still pray; God still answer prayers. We believe miracles still happen. If God didn't give you that gift [of performing miracles], preach and leave it [performing miracles] to those that God gave the gift. (Youtube/Multimedia Live 2019:n.p.)

Motsoeneng's utterances do not say anything about his theology of the church, but they do reflect an important aspect of his theology of God, which ought to inform his view of the church: God is holy, and no one should make a mockery of God with a fake miracle. Yet Motsoeneng's self-expressed holy view of God seems absent from his own ministerial practice, which is characterised by rituals that inappropriately publicise sex in church and sexually violate vulnerable women. One may say that whilst the controversial SANP prophets do have an understanding of God's holiness, their church activities are based on empty pragmatism and experientialism that violate the holiness of the church. Their conduct fits Degbe's (2014:264) description of some Ghanaian neo-Pentecostals, whom he said lack accountability and 'do not exhibit any credible or biblical qualities of Christian leadership and ethics'. Degbe (2014) added:

They are usually independent and not under any ecclesiastical authority; they are not accountable financially, doctrinally, or ethically to any Christian bodies or organisations. Strangely enough, though they subscribe to core Pentecostal-Charismatic emphases and ethos, they somehow do not mix or share their platforms with the more credible, recognized and established Pentecostals or Charismatics. They are scandalous, dubious, and morally bankrupt; they portray a negative face of Ghana's Christianity in general by their actions, beliefs, practices, and syncretistic mode of operations. They are at best, rehabilitators of the primal worldview. (p. 264)

It is sad that Degbe's description depicts the South African context. Such characteristics make the church an unsafe place for anyone, especially those in a state of vulnerability.

## The need for a sound ecclesiology in addressing controversial religious practices

The above discussion shows that SANP churches need to develop a sound biblically informed ecclesiology that will safeguard them from veering into dangerous practices that make the church a harmful place to the society instead of a safe place for Christ's life-giving love.

## The safeguarding of the soteriological purpose of the church

A sound ecclesiology is necessary to safeguard the soteriological purpose of the church, which has been replaced

by theatrical performances of some SANP prophets. This article holds a holistic or integral view of biblical salvation. However, it questions the soteriological significance of theatrical performances such as pastors driving over their congregants with cars just to demonstrate God's power. In the Gospels, Christ did not perform miracles just to dazzle people with the power of God, but to authenticate his divinity and to cause people to turn to God to worship him and be saved. Christ's miracles were not theatrical; instead, they were equally theological and soteriological as they announced God's saving presence and called people to that salvation.

### **The safeguarding of the integrity of the church**

A sound doctrine of the church is needed to address the controversial practices amongst SANP churches because good doctrines define the church by spelling out what the church is, what the church believes and what it ought to do. A foundational issue amongst the SANP churches, just like the broader neo-Pentecostal movement, is the idea of a Holy Spirit-led church, which is free from the doctrines and traditions of human beings. An emphasis of individual conversion and belonging to an anointed prophet is seen as better than belonging to a static church. However, doctrines and long-established traditions safeguard the integrity of the church. This point is mindful of the fact that some churches unfortunately also use doctrines and traditions to oppress church members, by promoting practices such as patriarchalism and a status quo that prohibits churches from growing. Indeed, static doctrines can also be used to stifle the dynamic nature of the church. However, the important thing to note is that when a church takes doctrinal thinking seriously, it has more integrity and stability than a church built on pragmatism and experientialism, which are seen amongst the controversial SANP churches.

Focusing on the differences between the neo-Pentecostals and the older traditional churches in Nigeria, Marshall-Fratani (1998:283) stresses that whilst both church traditions used literature and electronically recorded messages for the purposes of evangelism, for the older traditional churches 'such production and dissemination was largely used to consolidate the congregation and distinguish it from others'. The highlighted difference indicates some underlying attitudes about the church, showing that neo-Pentecostals tend to preach Christian salvation that often has a weak view of the church. In fact, as already noted from Marshall, amongst the neo-Pentecostals, loyalty is more invested in the charismatic leader than in the church, and this loyalty to the leader is based on the fact that he functions as a mediator between God and humanity. Marshall-Fratani (1998:283) further shows that neo-Pentecostalism 'stresses the importance of the individual conversion experience over the experience of belonging to a given institution as the marker of identity'. Consequently, one finds people who thoughtlessly stress that the important thing is to belong to Christ and not to a church. Indeed, there is merit in that belonging to Christ is much better than belonging to a church and that Christians should

be more loyal to Christ than to the church. However, such statements disingenuously promote churchless Christianity that undermines the necessity of the church in the faith and discipleship of the individual Christian believer. It further disingenuously denigrates the institutional church in order to create a vacuum that promotes reliance on the prophets. Sound ecclesiology is important because a church that simply relies on the whims of its leaders is an unsafe space. If doctrines were not important and the only important thing was just reading the Bible, Paul would not have impressed the issue on Timothy (Tm 1 6:3) and Titus (Tt 2:1) in the strong terms that he did.

### **The prevention of the commodification of churches by the ministers**

A sound doctrine of the church is needed to address the commodification of the churches by their leaders. Commodification and commercialisation are interrelated and point to the treatment of the church as a commodity to be possessed by the leaders and the practice of ministerial duties as a commercial activity to be rendered at a price. Various aspects of commodification can be identified amongst neo-Pentecostal churches, indicating the extent to which these churches differ from each other. The basic notion of the commodification of the church is that it is viewed as a personal property of the leader for his or her own personal possession and often used for the leader's economic gratification. Ultimately, this makes the leader a businessperson with the church often run as an entrepreneurial project (Gifford 2008:286–287). Whereas in traditional churches money is collected to fund ministerial personnel and ministry activities, in controversial neo-Pentecostal churches money is mainly collected for the leader's gratification, resulting in some church leaders collecting enough money to be listed amongst wealthy global or regional economic entrepreneurs. A prominent characteristic of the commodification of the church is the treating of congregants as personal possessions of the leader, which is reflected by their perpetual movement from one prophet to another prophet.

### **Towards a communal ecclesiology of transforming unsafe South African neo-Pentecostal churches into safe places**

The case made in the above discussion is that the controversial practices in some SANP churches turn churches into unsafe places, particularly for women and children. These unsafe ecclesiological practices must be addressed by a communal ecclesiology that emphasises the communality of the church.

### **The responsibility of the Christian community in addressing unsafe church practices**

To address this state of insecurity in SANP churches, theologians and biblical scholars must challenge neo-Pentecostal prophets and their followers to revisit their theology of the church. The position of this article is that the

duty of challenging SANP Christians to revisit their theology of the church and make the church a safe space for all believers belongs to knowledgeable Christians, particularly scholars and theologians. It is not the duty of state bodies such as the CRL Rights Commission. The responsibility of safeguarding the integrity and purity of the church is the duty of biblically informed Christians and not secular bodies such as the CRL Rights Commission. Christians, as the body of Christ, must theologically address the commodified and commercialised view of the church to rein in predatory churches that only promote and safeguard the interests of the greedy clergy at the expense of often vulnerable congregants. Believers must learn about the biblical nature of the church in order to avoid being caught up in abusive churches.

### The notion of the communality of the church

SANP leaders and their followers must be challenged to learn and understand the communal nature of the church. Biblically, the church is a communal entity. Communality conveys the communal and relational nature of the church and the equality that forbids any leader from claiming exclusive ownership and control of the church. A foundational component in the communality of the church is apostle Paul's assertion of it as a 'body of Christ' with many members that all belong to each other (Rm 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12, 27; Eph 4:4). The church is a Christological community for as Moltmann (1977:66) expressed it: 'Without Christ, no church'. This expresses the biblical declaration that Jesus is the foundation of the church (1 Cor 3:11, Mt 16:18, Eph 2:20). Other communal metaphors of the church include the church as a 'family of God' (2 Cor 6:18; Eph 2:19) and 'God's house' (Tm 1 3:14-15). A principal point in this relationality of the church is that God is the head that keeps the body together, the father or parent who keeps the family and the household together. Significant to the idea of the communality of the church is that God has given different spiritual gifts to each member in order to serve each other and not to dominate or outshine each other. The communal life in the church is described by countless 'one another' passages such as 'love each other deeply' (Pt 1 4:8); 'be devoted to one another in brotherly love' (Rm 12:10), 'have equal concern for each other' (1 Cor 12:25); 'serve one another in love' (Gl 5:13) and 'look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others' (Phlp 2:4). The human body serves as the greatest metaphor for the communality of the church in that all the parts of a normal functioning body serve each other. These metaphors and many others not mentioned express the aspects of *koinonia* fellowship and *diakonia* service. The church is a communal community made by fellowshiping with one another and serving each other; it is not a self-serving community where people systematically defraud each other, especially the needy, poor and powerless.

The communality of the church is affirmed by the Greek word for the church, *ekklesia*. As Hill (1987:185) explains, the English word *church* comes from the Greek *ekklesia*, which is derived from *ekkaleo*, meaning 'to summon' or 'call out', and its Hebrew equivalent is *qahal*, meaning a 'convoked assembly'.

Thus the church is a community 'called out' by God through his gospel of salvation in Christ to gather as one body or one family before him and to serve him. Communality is an essential tenet of the church. South African neo-Pentecostal Christians should be awakened to this biblically derived view of the church.

### The basis of the communality of the church

The basis of the communality of the church is the Trinitarian communal being of God. To emphasise the Trinitarian basis and nature of the church, Moltmann (1977) says the church 'is the people of God ... who has called it into being' (p. 1), 'Christ is his church's foundation, its power and its hope' and 'fellowship of believers who follow the one Lord and have been laid hold of by the one Spirit' (p. 106). Moltmann's statements highlight the Trinitarian nature of the church affirmed by biblical passages such as 2 Corinthians 13:14, 'May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all'. Since God is relational and communal in himself, his church must also be relational and communal. The community of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the 'prototype' of the church community (Breedt & Niemandt 2013:2). In other words, '[T]he nature of God's being, not just God's commands, is integral to the character of Christian beginnings and ends' (eds. Volf & Welker 2006:3).

Therefore, since 'God is love' (Jn 1 4:8), the communality of the church is one of love in which the safety and welfare of all members are of greatest significance as highlighted by the 'one another' passages. Taking reference from the Trinitarian benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14, Breedt and Niemandt (2013:3) underscore that 'koinonia (fellowship) with the Father through Christ, made possible by the Holy Spirit, makes the church a relation-based community'.

In the light of the scope of the church as a community of God's people, SANP prophets, pastors and apostles must realise that their responsibility as church leaders is to promote and safeguard the well-being of the members entrusted under their leadership. 'The church is life in the Trinity, and the organisation and understanding of leadership in the church must therefore reflect this life in the Trinity' (Breedt & Niemandt 2013:3). The SANP prophets and pastors who use their 'prophetic privilege' to abuse their congregants should be helped to realise how God uses his sovereign power to promote the well-being of his people, not to oppress and devour them. In his Trinitarian relationship with his people, God promotes their well-being in that he is with them, beside them, in them, connected to them and lovingly related to them (Breedt & Niemandt 2013:3). Controversial SANP prophets must abandon the tendency of exploiting God's people through commodifying and commercialising them; instead, they must follow the example of God's act of giving, caring and saving his people. God demands that those who act as leaders in his church must promote the interests of the church communities they lead and not their own selfish interests (Phlp 2:5-11).



## Communality as security

The communality of the church is an important form of social security because it reminds the leaders of their equality with the other believers in the church. Paul's call for love, grace and fellowship in the 2 Corinthians 13:14 benediction teaches that Christians relate to each other communally, not by authoritative force as tends to be the norm in the controversial SANP churches. Furthermore, it is instructive that Christ commanded his disciples to practice servant leadership which is mutually relational instead of acting as masters who use power to rule and not relational servanthood (Mt 20:25). Communality can act as security against the mafiarisation of religion (Dube 2020:2), which only benefits the leaders.

Communality acts as security by making the church 'a community of family members who are all free and equal' (Breedt & Niemandt 2013:3). Therefore, in the church,

[T]here is no hierarchy, for it has been replaced by a covenant [of love]. In Christ no one has a higher or lower position; in his church, no one is above the other, and every one is a witness, bringing to the community what they received from the Holy Spirit. (Breedt & Niemandt 2013:3)

This important point highlights that members of the church are all accountable to one another. The leaders are accountable to their followers in how they are leading. Similarly, the followers are accountable in how they are following. This means that it is false to imply that SANP pastors and prophets have a special, highly exalted status that places them above all members in God's church.

The securing essence of the communality of the church is denoted by the 'one another passages' that emphasise mutual care within the body. Communality acts as a form of security by challenging any use of power that threatens the welfare of any community member, and it safeguards against the mutual zombification of religion. Communality demands that members ensure that there is justice and righteousness in the body, and this means that the vulnerable must be protected from abuse by leaders. It also stands against blind loyalty and defence of Christian leaders who harm church members by sexually and financially exploiting them.

## Conclusion

This article attempted to analyse critically the state of the church represented by the controversial practices in some SANP churches. The question that the article answered was as follows: What is the nature of the church that emerges from the controversial practices reported amongst some SANP churches? And what is a biblically informed understanding of the church that can be used to end these practices that violate the human rights of congregants? The argument made in the article is that the controversial SANPs have turned churches into unsafe places that sexually and financially abuse women, harm the innocence and welfare of children and exploit people in desperate need of divine intervention. Much of this unsafe nature of the SANP

churches lies in their entrepreneurial view of the church that allows prophets to commercialise and commodify the church. South African neo-Pentecostal churches are challenged to examine their ecclesiology critically and change it from an entrepreneurial one and develop it into a biblically informed communal ecclesiology, which will act as bulwark against practices that endanger the lives of vulnerable congregants. Instead of the growing tendency to appeal to the CRL Rights Commission to address abuses within the church, this article calls for Christians to take responsibility by deepening their theological understanding of the church and to challenge the SANP churches towards a sound ecclesiology that upholds the integrity and holiness of the church. Christ the Lord of the church wants his church to be a safe place for all people seeking his salvation

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