

# Dislocation and continuity: Marking the 30th anniversary of the Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter *Living Our Faith*

**Authors:**

Buhle Mpofu<sup>2</sup>   
Mark Mapaketi<sup>1,2</sup> 

**Affiliations:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Biblical and Religious Studies, Faculty of Theology, Catholic University of Malawi, Limbe, Malawi

<sup>2</sup>Department of Practical Theology and Mission Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Buhle Mpofu,  
buhlem202@yahoo.co.uk

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One of the reasons that prompted Malawi's Catholic bishops to write a pastoral letter in 1992 that triggered the movement towards democracy was the big gap between the rich and the poor. The pastoral letter, *Living Our Faith*, emerged as a critical voice in challenging the socio-economic and political state of affairs. The bishops demanded that the government ensures fair distribution of wealth. Since that time, Malawi has experienced different political parties that have assumed state governance after promising to eradicate poverty in their campaign manifestos. Despite political changes, Malawi continues to experience the very same challenges, which prompted the Catholic bishops to write the pastoral letter in 1992. This contribution drew on the notions of dislocation and discontinuity to explore the significance of the pastoral letter towards commemorating the 30th anniversary of this historical event in Malawi. *Living Our Faith* marked the end of one-party dictatorial regime and the beginning of a multiparty system of governance, something to be celebrated as dislocation. This research interrogated the custodianship of the 1992 Catholic bishops' pastoral letter and suggested that intellectuals should facilitate socio-political and economic transformation and demonstrated the relevance of the pastoral letter as a blueprint for socio-economic transformation in Malawi.

**Contribution:** This research contributes to the evaluation of progress in the role played by the Church and intellectuals in the development of Malawi.

**Keywords:** dislocation; continuity; democracy; governance; Catholic Bishops Conference; Malawi.

## Introduction

Marginalisation of the poor is still prevalent in Malawi despite changing of governing political parties, which assume power following campaigns and election processes. These campaign and election processes have become more of a ritual. Firstly, it is a ritual for legitimatising their authority. Secondly, it is a ritual for appeasing citizens because campaign promises do not translate into changes that voters are looking for in the country. The changes voters expect are mainly centred around socioeconomic transformation. According to Magolowindo (2009), the ritual of campaign and election processes and failure to implement those promises partly explains the voter apathy in the country.

Civic society organisations have been outspoken on several occasions in an effort to remind governing political parties of their responsibility. This responsibility is to lead the nation towards economic prosperity, in line with what the Catholic bishops had spoken about in *Living Our Faith*; 'equal opportunities and participation in development and equal education and just wages' (Episcopal Conference of Malawi [ECM] 1992). Contrary to this vision, the trend of political exploitation continues as those aligned to governing political parties enjoy opulence and more opportunities while the needs of the poor masses are neglected.

After 30 years since the Catholic bishops spearheaded a multiparty system of government through *Living Our Faith*, Malawians have been hoping to change their economic status by voting into power new governments after every five years during the general election. The irony is that the more voters change governing parties, the more people's economic status remains the same. Economic situation in the multiparty democracy continues to be a *replica* of Kamuzu Banda's one-party system where the majority are dying scrambling for scraps from the high table of the so-called democrats, yet few are living in opulence.

This essay is a result of personal reflection on these developments. The focus is to explicate how politicians are failing to transform Malawi's economy despite being entrusted with legitimacy and resources by citizens after every five years. As a result of the failure of politicians to economically transform the society, the article suggests possible agents who could carry forward a dream Malawi's 1992 prelates. The agents are described as 'intellectuals'. The use of the term 'intellectuals' is not intended to take away the responsibility from the clergy in leading the discussion on social issues as was done by the Catholic bishops in 1992. Rather, it is meant to liberalise the project *vis-à-vis* activism involved in the analytical exercise. In this context, 'intellectuals' does not necessarily refer to academia. Rather, it implies that it recognises the agency of people who have analytical skills and are involved in the activism that was initiated by the bishops in *Living Our Faith*.

The liberalisation of the social transformation project is partly necessitated by the nature of multiparty democracy. By default, multiparty democracy in Malawi has made clergy to have party affiliations by the virtue of being part of voters, although their vocation encourages them not to publicly pronounce their affiliation. This is meant to avoid polarisation within the congregation they shepherd. Some clergy are also forming part of clientele for the politicians, thereby benefitting from proceeds gotten from the evil system. Such clergy are compromised as they cannot bite a hand that feeds them. Consequently, the *one heart and one soul* (Ac 5:32) that was witnessed in 1992 is no longer intact. Hence, the article suggests that 'intellectuals' should step-up to fill the vacuum. Like the prelates in 1992, intellectuals should lead the project of sociopolitical and economic transformation. Given their analytical skills, intellectuals are in a better position to understand complex societal processes and so enable them to actively take part in transformation toward the vision articulated by the bishops in 1992.

Motivated by these disparities and lack of activism, this essay employs the concepts of dislocation and continuity to engage a pastoral letter written in 1992 by Malawi's Catholic bishops entitled *Living Our Faith* as a theoretical framework. This reflection is critical, given that some clergy are also part of the clientele for politicians, who are sometimes compromised. Considering this context, the researchers interrogated custodianship of the 1992 Catholic bishops' pastoral letter and found that while the pastoral letter was authored within a sociopolitical and economic context that was different from our own, the article demonstrates its relevance after 30 years as a blueprint of social transformation. The first part locates the pastoral letter within the universal tradition of the Catholic Church to demonstrate that *Living Our Faith* was not a lone voice. Rather, it was shaped and at the same time, a continuation of Church's teaching on social issues. The second part discusses the local context within which the letter was written and its content. That is followed by an immediate reaction to the letter both by protagonists and

antagonists. Thereafter, it explicates promises and failures of politicians based on *Living Our Faith*, as the analytical tool. The last part will look at lessons that could be drawn from the letter after 30 years since it was read in Catholic Churches.

## Background of the pastoral letter *Living Our Faith* declaration

Prior to the establishment of the hierarchy, that is, dioceses, the Roman Catholic Church in Malawi was run as apostolic vicariates.<sup>1</sup> It was in 1959 that Malawi's vicariates were elevated to dioceses by Pope John XXIII. This move culminated in the affirmation that the Church in Malawi was ready to govern itself (Mullin 1965:49). Before 1959, missionaries were preoccupied with establishing the Church. Cautiously, they avoided meddling in social-politics of the country; otherwise they risked deportation by the British colonial government that was highly affiliated to Protestant Presbyterian Church. Deportation would have jeopardised their missionary work. Furthermore, the ecclesiological model itself was not vigorous in terms of participation in sociopolitical issues. Therefore, the focus was on establishing the Church and spiritual growth.

The transition from vicariates to dioceses was followed by other notable developments in the Church at the global level. Vatican Council II (1962–1965)<sup>2</sup> took place. The Council articulated an ecclesiological model that takes seriously the social needs of the people:

The joys and sorrows, the anxieties of women and men of this age, especially the poor and those in any way afflicted, those too are the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the followers of Christ (GS # 1). (Abbott 1966:903)

This mandated the Church to take the social context seriously, especially dehumanising conditions ranging from economic poverty, political oppression or suppression and any other unfavourable conditions that hinder the actualisation of human potentialities as images of God (Gn 1:27).

Subsequently, in 1969, Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* (PP), reiterated the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* as he stressed the integral development of the whole human person (PP 12,14). The Pope was influenced by his personal experiences in the face of challenges that emerged when nations fought colonisation, especially problems of hunger and poverty that were systematically brought by inequalities in economic development in the colonised countries (PP#4). In the encyclical, the Pope held a conviction that economic inequalities were socially constructed than natural, therefore, redressable. Mapping the way forward after PP, Roman

1. An apostolic vicariate is a form of territorial jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church established in missionary regions or countries that do not have dioceses. It is provisional. The hope is that the region will generate sufficient number of Roman Catholics for the Church to create dioceses.

2. The Second Vatican Council made significant changes to the Roman Catholic practices that continue to inspire transformation in modern communities. For more details see: *Second Vatican Council Roman Catholic history* (1962–1965).

Catholic bishops from the African continent, during the Symposium of the Episcopal Conference of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) in Uganda in 1969, urged 'Catholics to mobilise themselves for the promotion of justice and peace' (Chakanza 1995:68).

It is also reported that when Pope John Paul II visited Malawi in 1989, during his private audience with the bishops, highlighted the lack of observance of human rights in Malawi as a serious issue (Chakanza 1995). Having in mind a new ecclesiological model and personal support from the Pontiff, the bishops of Malawi were fortified to address sociopolitical issues in the country. *Living Our Faith*, according to Chakanza (1995:68), was conscientised by Vatican Council II, encyclicals and other regional Church documents and the bishops were fortified by a private audience with Pope John Paul II. They had a universal church approach in mind yet were determined to address local challenges. It was at that moment that they issued a pastoral letter, which is fondly known as 'Living Our Faith'.

## ***Living Our Faith (1992)***

The pastoral letter, *Living Our Faith*, was written and signed by all the heads of dioceses in Malawi, who together form ECM. It was read in all Catholic Churches in Malawi on Sunday 08 March 1992. According to Catholic calendar, it was read during Lenten Season. Season of Lent is significant in the Catholic tradition as a time for doing penance by praying, refraining from sin, giving alms to the needy and more importantly, reflecting on the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ who was pro-poor in his manifesto (Lk 4:18). Through the letter, after reflection on the life and teachings of Jesus, the bishops called for far-reaching socioeconomic and political reforms, in line with the manifesto of Jesus and the Social Teaching of the Church. The bishops used this letter to condemn dictatorship and proposed democracy and respect of natural and moral law to be enshrined in the constitution of Malawi.

During the one-party dictatorial rule of Malawi Congress (MCP), 'Public discourse was shaped by party propaganda and the mark of political correctness was unquestioning personal loyalty to the Life President [*sic*], who propagated culture of deceit' (Ross 1995). It was equal to treason to discuss the economic situation of the country realistically except Kamuzu's political party propaganda. The propaganda was full of praises for Kamuzu's economic successes, which initially did not reflect the situation of ordinary people in the village and high-density suburbs.

Initially, Malawi was a police state. Suppression and oppression of citizens were normalised. Silent grumbling, out of fear for the regime, was interpreted as a sign of peace. Those who opted to unmute their grumbling in public were judged enemies of the state (Chipembere 1970). Married men feared their wives and children. They were used as spies of government. Parents could not say anything ill of the political leadership because the youth wing of the one party taught

extreme patriotism. In that extreme patriotism, the only legitimate father for all youth in the country was Kamuzu Banda. Biological fathers were perceived as 'surrogates'. Hence, the youth never hesitated to spy on their 'surrogate fathers'. In simple terms, trust among citizens was alien because of the spying network system of the regime was strong and brutal. Expressing anything contrary to the propaganda in that 'police state' was tantamount to condemning oneself to, as stated by Chipembere (1970), one of these three places, either exile, jail or cemetery. The culture of deceit was perpetuated by fear of violence and violence itself inflicted on citizens by party's apparatchik.

To the dismay of the regime and all subjects, *Living Our Faith* was drafted, printed and circulated throughout Malawi without detection of the state intelligence. The regime became aware of it only when it was read from the pulpits. The title, *Living Our Faith*, was a call for all citizens towards reconciling faith and works. More specifically, the bishops called for far-reaching socioeconomic and political reforms. Against the government's propaganda that all Malawians had prospered under the beneficent reign of Kamuzu Banda, the bishops bluntly echoed the reality of the majority of Malawians. They wrote:

Many people still live-in circumstances which are hardly compatible with their dignity as sons and daughters of God. Their life is a struggle for survival. At the same time a minority enjoys the fruits of development and can afford to live in luxury and wealth. (ECM 1992:2)

This was amidst state propaganda that claimed prosperity for all.

Regarding the political system of governance, the bishops condemned the dictatorship of one party. They proposed democracy and respect of natural and moral law to be enshrined in the constitution and be followed and in line with Catholic Social Teaching's principle of participation (PP # 23). Active participation in sociopolitical and economic issues, according to the bishops, is enshrined in human nature as co-creators with God. While the letter emphasised the right of citizens to participate in social issues, more importantly, it overstressed the right to be heard and heeded. To be heard and to be heeded emanate from the giver of life, who created humans with dignity, as bishops stated:

Rejoicing in truth, we proclaim the dignity of every person, the right of each one to freedom and respect. The oneness of the human race also implies equality and the same basic right for all. These must be solemnly respected and inculcated in every culture, every constitution and every social system. (ECM 1992:1)

While this may sound normal to our ears now, it was radical and equal to treason during that time.

The bishops observed and firmly stated that:

Many people still live-in circumstances which are hardly compatible with their dignity as sons and daughters of God. Their life is a struggle for survival. At the same time a minority

enjoys the fruits of development and can afford to live in luxury and wealth. (ECM 1992:2)

The bishops were neither stating their opinion nor rebuking the leadership personally. Instead, they were simply reminding the faithful of an essential New Testament teaching. The teaching could be summed up in the following way: Human beings, as images of God, are all equal in the eyes of God. Each is worthy of God's grace. Therefore, it is ungodly for few to live in opulence when the majority are languishing in human-made poverty through structures of evil.

The bishops' message, therefore, was directed towards social structures that were put in place by political leadership than leadership. These structures, while affecting temporal needs of citizens, had a devastating effect on minds and spirituality of the faithful. Prior to the letter, Pope Paul VI had already clarified the involvement of the Church on secular issues, 'The Church is certainly not willing to restrict her action only to the religious field and disassociate herself from man's temporal problems' (Pope Paul VI 1975). In this regard, the bishops were just fulfilling their role, 'to safeguard human spirit by embracing the global struggle for liberation, which was not to embrace specific political system but to call all humans to become active seekers of justice' (Pope Paul VI 1975:38). According to the prelates' analysis, social structures of the time were not founded on ethical and biblical values, to which Malawi as a nation subscribes to, as stipulated in its national anthem, 'Oh. God bless land of Malawi'. Instead, they were founded on whims of a few individuals, therefore, in need of change to align with godly values.

The bishops bemoaned and outlined the shortcomings resulting from the political system in place. Among others, the bishops pointed out the tragic failure on the state educational system, the medical establishment, the access to the vast majority of Malawians to free and full participation in the public life of their nation. The prelates exalted democratic principle abstracted from the New Testament, 'But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift' (Eph 4:7). In that regard, the bishops reiterated that it is, therefore, only a shortsighted society that rejects ideas and contributions of any of its subjects (ECM 1992:10). Scripture was substantiated with Malawi's proverb: one head cannot carry roof of a house (*Mutu umodzi suzenza denga*). Such was an admonition aimed at regime's decision-making process that sidelined the majority of its citizens. The bishops continued to plead for freedom of press and assembly, political affiliation, impartial judicial system and academic freedom (ECM 1992). The bishops made it clear that institutions and persons in authority should never think they have power to give human freedom or take it away as they will. Rather, they must know that they have obligation to recognise them because freedom is natural to humans.

The letter concluded with a conciliatory voice by declaring that all the freedoms are not meant to belittle anyone or to make any person arrogant. The bishops' letter is meant to

foster an atmosphere of open discussion and debate whereby real human progress, not staged one, is made and greater proportion of citizens might partake in the fruits of development (Mitchell 2002). This was in contrast to the dictatorial regime where only a few were enjoying fruits of the land meant for all, while the majority were living in fear and in abject poverty. Looking back after few years, Ross (1996:24) declared that the letter 'voiced what everyone knew but no one had ever dared to say it. It broke the culture of deceit that had been allowed to develop'.

However, the letter had a rude awakening among all citizens and the regime. Ross (1996:23) described the rude awakening the letter brought by likening it to 'the moment in a fairy tale when the little boy pointed out that the emperor had no clothes', at a time when nobility was at pretense busy congratulating the King for his magnificent attire. The rude awakening was not about the revelation of new and fascinating knowledge. Rather, the making public of *hidden transcript*<sup>3</sup> was what made *Living Our Faith* a popular document at that time. Furthermore, the letter called for dialogue on issues of equality in wages, opportunities and participation in development and education (Magolowindo 2009:2). These issues hinge on human dignity deserving images of God (Gn 1:27).

## Immediate reaction to the letter

*Living Our Faith* evoked mixed feelings and outcomes. Immediately after the reading of the letter, other faith leaders such as the Protestants Presbyterians, to which Kamuzu Banda was a church elder and Muslims, all joined the prelates and became outspoken defenders of democracy and democratic values. As if that was not enough, university students in the only State University with its constituent colleges of Polytechnic and Chancellor College in Blantyre and Zomba, respectively, initiated the first public demonstrations against Kamuzu's stifling of intellectual freedom. Workers went on strikes for the first time in the history of Malawi. These were acts that were unheard of in Malawi. These actions demonstrated popular support for the bishops' initiative (Mijoga 1996).

On its part, the immediate reaction of the regime itself was aggressive. It banned the letter and declared it seditious. It warned that anyone found in possession or distributing would be liable for prosecutions (Mijoga 1996). The bishops were subjected to a psychological torture through continuous interrogation by the state police. They were subsequently put into house arrest. They were ridiculed and publicly insulted by party cadres. Some Catholic faithful *cum* party cadres went as far as renouncing their membership from the Catholic Church. The word in the street claimed that the regime was hatching a plot to assassinate the prelates. Ross (1996) stated

3. Hidden transcript represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. It is characterised by the discourse that takes place 'offstage', that is, beyond direct observation by those holding power. What creates the hidden transcript is domination. For the hidden transcript to exist, there must be a public transcript.

that it was 'intense diplomatic and ecclesiastical pressure that prevented this threat from being carried out'.

Overreaction of the regime against the letter attracted international support on the part of the bishops. It is alleged that powerful allies of Kamuzu's regime such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom threatened Kamuzu that they would withdraw their financial support if anything happens to the bishops. The mounting pressure from within and outside the country left Kamuzu's regime isolated. As a result, he gave in. Bishops were released from house arrest without any physical harm except psychological torture and insults thrown at them. Kamuzu gave in to the call for democracy by calling for a referendum that took place on the 14th of June 1993. Citizens voted for democracy overwhelmingly.

The bishops were conscious of the possible dangers that could happen to them. However, they were motivated by their vocation, to liberate those in oppressive situation. Faithful in following the footsteps of Jesus, they became an advocate of the poor and the oppressed. Faithful to the title of the letter, the prelates demonstrated their preferential option for the poor by speaking on behalf of the voiceless, who lived in situations of hopelessness (ECM 1992:13, 15). Like a *juggernaut*<sup>4</sup> the 'seven, just, brave men of the miter's'<sup>5</sup> precipitated a chain of events culminating in the transformation of governance system to multiparty system. The change from one party dictatorial regime to multiparty system of democracy was itself a drastic change of direction, hence, the concept, *dislocation*.

## Post-Living Our Faith: Poverty vis-à-vis democratic promises

Since the bishops' landmark pastoral letter, the Church has continued to be critical of governments' maladministration. In the pastoral statement, dated 31 October 2010, while the government was boasting of achieving food security after a long time of insufficiency, the Church pointed out lack of political will on the part of the government to help some people who were facing hunger, yet handing out foodstuffs during political rallies to people who were able to fend for themselves (ECM 2010). The bishops condemned the practice as a politicisation of basic services such as roads, schools and hospitals that were mainly taking place in constituencies where legislators of the ruling party belonged. This was meant to entice voters whose legislators were in opposition and the phenomenon created a culture of 'handouts'<sup>6</sup>, which consequently promoted corruption in public offices.

4. Juggernaut is a runaway engine of enormous power that, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but that also threatens to rush out of our control and that could rend itself asunder. The juggernaut crushes those who resist it, and while it sometimes seems to have a steady path, there are times when it veers away erratically in directions we cannot foresee.

5. Those who signed the letter were seven in number. They were brave because they spoke knowing that they could be killed but they had courage to speak out what everybody knew and nobody dared to speak.

6. The habit, among politicians, of giving people money and material things in order to win their vote in the next election. The habit was creating a dependency syndrome among Malawians than empowering them.

When Malawi was preparing for the celebration of 50 years of independence (1964–2014), in 2013 the Roman Catholic Church issued another pastoral letter in which they evaluated 50 years of how far the country had gone in achieving its vision. The bishops expressed their dissatisfaction. Among other issues were the continued systematic abuse and looting of public resources for selfish party and personal benefit, to the detriment of the national good, the entrenchment of the politics of poverty and exploitation, where the poor are more and more lured into a culture of handouts than being empowered to become self-reliant *Strengthening the Vision of Our Destiny* (ECM 2013). To this extent, the bishops labelled Malawi's democracy, compared with Kamuzu's dictatorial regime, as change without transformation and democracy without democrats (ECM 2013). This makes sense because, despite the change of governance system, it is still the elite minority who are enjoying fruits of democracy yet the majority are languishing in poverty as it was during Kamuzu's one-party era. In Malawi's democratic era, politicians and their cronies are the ones:

[W]ho control and own the country's economic and political resources and the majority of the population hopes to attain any little bit through the good will and generosity of those same people. (Gilman 2001:46)

It is not exaggerating to state that after three decades of democracy, democratic leadership has failed to transform economic well-being for majority.

Magolowindo (2009:240) was critical of Malawi's democratic leadership when he stressed that Malawi's politicians 'are concerned with more appearances than the substance of the ideals they profess'. For instance, the present governing coalition of parties, *Tonse Alliance*, when asked for accountability and fulfillment of their own promises, they have already formed a cliché, 'The President requests your patience'. The irony is that, while the government implores patience on its poor citizens, the entire political leadership including the first citizen is not patient with their salaries (*Nyasa Times* 03 December 2020). They live in abundance while the majority are walloping in poverty (ECM, *Living Our Faith* 1992). The concern raised in 1992 continues to be echoed in 2021, where in Malawi's sociopolitical and economic context, the poor are pushed to the gutter. Englund (2010) concurred with Magolowindo (2009) as he described Malawi's politics as 'politics of the belly', because their concern is to fill their stomachs and observed a phenomenon of 'chameleon politics' as 'appointments are made as a reward for political allegiance' (Englund 2010:234).

On 19 January 2021, Malawi's *Tonse Alliance* political leadership recently launched another document as a national agenda christened as, *Malawi Government 2063*<sup>7</sup> (MG 2063). As a *modus operandi*, MG 2063 urged towards transformation on two fronts: Firstly, mindset must change from focusing on poverty reduction to wealth creation. Secondly, it states, 'We must transform the structure of our economy from a

7. The choice of 2063 is premised on the year when Malawi will be commemorating 100 years of self-rule.

predominantly importing to an industrialised exporting economy' (MG 2063:10). It postulates that by 2063 Malawi should be 'an inclusively wealthy and self-reliant nation'. Authors of the document argue that Vision 2020 focused on poverty reduction that was largely driven by development aid (MG 2020:5). As a result, Vision 2020 saddled the nation with 'the yoke of dependency' (MG 2020:5). As a contrast, they argue that the strength of MG 2063 is on the trajectory shift from dependency on donations to wealth creation and self-reliance where the focus is no longer 'what is in it for me [but] what is in it for our children and their children' (MG 2020:5). It aims at economic independence and prosperity for all.

The framers of MG 2063 presumed that Malawi's socio-economic problem Malawians are experiencing now emanates from the paradigm of individualism. They implicitly suggest a communalistic paradigm as the springboard towards economic independence. At the social level in Malawi, communitarian values are what all citizens agreed upon on the surface indeed as the operative values. However, the reality is different. There are other ideologies that are more dominating. Among them are regionalism, tribalism and cartelism and cronyism. Of all ideologies, individualism and cronyism take precedence as ideologies operating of most of the citizens. However, cronyism tops all. Cronyism focuses on 'what is in it for me, my family and my party comrades'. Cronyism is saddling the majority of Malawians into poverty as few connected to party leadership are becoming 'overnight millionaires', while those far from the centre of power are languishing in poverty. Ability, hard work or legitimate academic qualifications are no longer a recipe for economic success in Malawi. Vacancies are floated in newspapers to fulfill the law.

Shortlisting is itself biased according to *isms* stated above. Interviews are just staged to the extent that some who get the job are those who were never on the list of interviewees. All these facts culminate to a point that personal networks are a key to success in Malawi. Since vision 2020 was initiated, Malawi was saddled with cronyism and it continues till today. Cronyism than individualism contributed to the failure of Vision 2020.

As things stand, there is no ground to suggest that MW 2063 would shift mental paradigm automatically from cronyism to communalistic values. The document is talking about the change of mindset yet there is no comprehensive plan to touch the core where social norms of cronyism are abstracted from, which is culture (Israel & Hay 2006:12). The phrase, *what is in it for our children and their children*, does not state as to whose children. Like *Tonse Alliance* 2020 campaign on *creating one million jobs*, so far it is family members of top brass and their cronies who are getting those jobs. If the appointing authority doesn't know you personally, then your curriculum vitae cannot speak for you. In many organisations, for example, parastatals, interviews continue to be staged because the law stipulates that, yet those to take such positions are already known. The trend is a norm in Malawi.

As appointments to important positions in government are a prerogative of the President, the language is, 'It has pleased H.E., the state President to appoint...' Rather, as Englund (2010:234) observed, such appointments are awarded because of comrades 'as a reward for political allegiance'. Cronyism was there during Vision 2020 and cronyism is continuing in during MW 2063 era. Consequently, 'what is in it for our children and their children' is fast becoming to mean, 'what is in it for my children and children of my comrades thereby excluding the poor who are outside the network'. If cronyism is not addressed, MG 2063 will remain a dead document. This is because, unlike *Living Our Faith* that tackled the root cause of disparity, which were 'structures of evil, MG 2063, has beautiful objectives but fails to address the root cause of Malawi's problems, which is the culture of cronyism.

Furthermore, like previous governments, the current political leadership is fast proving that it is turning into an entity not ready to be accountable to its citizens. The current Vice President used to quote a traditional proverbial saying during the 2020 re-run election campaign that 'When you see an elder refusing to move from his seat, know that he has messed up in his pant[s]'. While it is too early to think that present leadership has soiled its pants, its concern to appear transparent and accountable, yet missing its own datelines and changing narratives at will, without a valid explanation, smells fishy. The fishy smell is fast corroding trust that citizens had placed into *Tonse Alliance* coalition government. So far, its actions are short of tenets of democracy that were stipulated in *Living Our Faith*, which is accountability to the citizens.

On two significant occasions, towards the last quarter of 2021, during the graduation of the law students at the Catholic University in Malawi and at the symposium presided over by the Vice President of Malawi, the czar of Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) in Malawi, publicly stated that the ACB has received more complaints of corruption during *Tonse Alliance* administration than any other regime. The czar of ACB reiterated that public officials who condemn corruption in public are ones perpetrating the vice, a thing that up to now is not clear as to who these officials are. However, what is clear is that the President, Vice President and the entire executive have been condemning the vice. Furthermore, ministers in the *Tonse Alliance* government are answering charges of corruption in a court of law. This makes it difficult to understand the ACB czar's statements as to whether it is literal or metaphor. Nevertheless, trust that legitimises any leadership in any democratic society, as outlined in the *Living Our Faith* is slowly being eroded from *Tonse Alliance*, as evidenced by popular statement, *pa galaundi patelera*, translated literally as 'the ground is slippery'. In this socio-political and economic context, it simply means, economically, life is tough. This is because corruption continues to be endemic in the government despite changing political parties.

## Lessons from *Living Our Faith* after 30 years

In a democratic state such as Malawi, legal justice has been reified as a panacea of all anti-social behaviour. Despite this conceptualisation of legal justice as the ultimate justice, despite the maxim that nobody is above the law, the evidence on the crime 'scene' gives a different picture altogether. Legal justice system has become a conduit in the elite's ploy to defraud the nation. In 2014, Malawi had an infamous scandal, christened 'cash-gate'. In 2021, there is another infamous scandal christened 'covid-gate'. The common denominator is 'theft of public funds'. The majority of these thieves are being acquitted one by one on the grounds of 'lack of evidence', yet for those who are affected by such theft, their pain is real. Those few to be found guilty, often minions, might serve time behind bars but the public service delivery that could have been improved by such resources is ruined forever. While legal justice may be served, however, the loss of such funds and lives that could be saved is real and irreparable. Politicians who are entrusted with powers and resources to socially and economically transform society continue to disappoint. They are consumed by cronyism than the national agenda. To put it simply, Malawi continues to operate within social structures that are unjust.

In the given situation, motivated by *Living Our Faith*, then resignation or postponement of justice till after death is not an option. Socioeconomic transformation agenda cannot be shelved if Malawians are to live a meaningful life as intended by their Creator (Gn 1:31). It is here that Malawi needs a new crop of intellectuals. Intellectuals, being a generic term, here it has a specific meaning. They are persons who have the capacity to examine sociopolitical phenomenon by separating it into constituent parts and give an assessment, description and explanation to it (Bricmont 2005). Intellectuals have the capacity to break down a complex social phenomenon, so that it is clear and digestible to a layperson, both in the street or in the village so as to harness his or her consent towards social transformation. Intellectuals are not to pursue legal justice because legal justice is, at the core, political, selective and at times devoid of morality. It often serves the interest of those in power. Instead, intellectuals must seek another kind of justice that transcends individual groups and persons. This is justice according to biblical tradition.

### Biblical justice

According to biblical tradition, justice is often referred to as radical transformation of the society. It is inspired by the prophetic tradition that focuses on justice where peace is itself a repercussion of just living. Justice in this context is not eschatological but an invitation of people 'to enter obediently into the sphere of God's sovereignty on earth' (Bonino 1983:84). Righteousness and respect for human dignity are the distinguishing characteristics of a just society than peace and order. It was that righteousness and respect for human dignity that propelled Jesus to disturb the peace by whipping persons who were doing dirty business in the

temple (Jn 3:13ff.). Jesus disturbed the peace in order to achieve justice and righteousness. It was the same righteousness and respect for human dignity that propelled bishops to disturb 'peace' in Malawi, in order to restore the dignity of humans by issuing *Living Our Faith*.

In Malawi, politicians have been patting themselves on the back for peaceful transition from one party to a multiparty system and staging the so-called 'peaceful elections'. However, on the ground biblical justice continues to be elusive. Righteousness and respect for human dignity are yet to be attained. At the time the bishops wrote *Living Our Faith*, politicians were celebrating 28 years of peace in the country. The bishops observed that righteousness and respect for human dignity were absent; therefore, there was no real peace. The bishops were the intellectuals of that time. In our context, intellectuals are what Malawi needs so that they tell a nation that the absence of physical war is not enough peace to celebrate but respect for human dignity in action than on the paper.

To put it simply, as Gutierrez (1988) stated, how the society forms its social structures to assist the poor to get their basic needs, the oppressed to be freed from chains, is the test of righteousness of a society. In 1992, the Catholic Church in Malawi, being faithful to biblical justice, orchestrated a political reform through '*Living Our Faith*'. The political regime feigned *status quo* as peaceful yet it lacked righteousness and therefore, no real peace. Through their pastoral letter, the Bishops were in pursuance of the righteousness and right relationship here on earth for all (Bonino 1983). Following the Bishops' lead of pursuance of justice and real peace, how would *Living Our Faith* be relevant today? Intellectuals are responsible for *telling the truth* as best as one can, about *things that matter...*' (Bricmont 2005:282).

### Nature of truth

Claim to truth by experts and what is generally understood as truth are often not the same. Claim to truth by experts, as Chomsky argued, had been regularly used as a weapon by the powerful in society against the weak (Bricmont 2005:281). Similarly, Lyotard rejects the totalising of social phenomenon by social scientists. This is because individuals will always tell their story from the subjective perspective and baptise it as a godly view that is universal. Therefore, the universalisation of knowledge by experts is itself *a will to power* as it is often abused by political authority. Foucault also added that knowledge, be it scientific or not, must be traced to different discourses or practices that frame it, because knowledge is contextual (Agger 1991). More importantly, scholars like Chomsky, Lyotard and Foucault agree that a claim to 'universal truth' has a tendency to conceal interests and values of the framers, scientists and experts because every knowledge is contextualised by its historical and cultural nature. As such, deconstruction reveals the values and interests suppressed beneath the surface of claimed universal knowledge. As a saying goes, 'the one who pays the piper calls the tune', experts often hide behind their academic credentials or

experience to push the agenda of those in authority by claiming truth without substantial evidence.

Intellectuals should not be influenced by an expert claim to truth that is initially a 'concealed will to power' (Janse van Rensburg 2000:22) but the truth that is supported by 'crime scene evidence'. They must 'dig out facts in order to correct abusive reasoning' (Bricmont 2005:281). Like the bishops who went against the propaganda to expose deceits from the MCP, intellectuals have a social responsibility; to expose lies or illusion and tell real motivations of those in authority against the web of spins advanced by 'spin doctors'.<sup>8</sup> In this way, truth does not become a privileged commodity for those with power, neither does it become an 'imposition of one's will on others' (Bricmont 2005:281). Rather, truth becomes a public property essential for an individual and community's self-determination.

From 1964 to 1992, while the majority were silent, Kamuzu and his cronies were busy propagating their own claim of truth. Their narrative claimed that Malawi had developed beyond recognition. The development they claimed was difficult to measure because it was not supported by 'crime scene evidence'. Dissenting views were silenced systematically by what Glasberg (1989) referred to as *agenda setting, mobilisation of bias or pre-emptive strategy*. Agenda setting strategy is when those in authority chose what is supposed to be discussed in the public arena. For example, the regime used more airtime on trivial matters at the expense of necessary issues on the sole broadcasting radio in order to solicit consent. In a *pre-emptive strategy*, as the country was a police state, dissenting views were stifled, by expulsion, arresting or exiling potential critics before their criticism see the light of the day (Glasberg 1989:36). Mobilisation of bias is a strategy that those in authority may allow controversial issues that may disturb their interests, to be allowed into the public decision-making process. To control the outcome, the methodology of resolving the issue is chosen by those in power. For example, if it is about voting in parliament, the authority may vouch for raising hands than secret ballot. This is to ensure dissenters are identified. In that regard, academicians, legislators and civil societies were silenced, thereby maintaining *status quo* that favoured the regime.

The Catholic Bishops meticulously by-passed party apparatchik who was responsible for agenda setting and brought their own agenda. They brought on the table for discussion, issues that were prescribed as taboos not to be discussed in public. Issues ranged from governance system, human rights and freedoms (ECM 1992). Not only that but also the regime's pre-emptive strategy failed miserably in the context of bishops. They outwitted the spy network and brought to the fore a *hidden transcript*, 'a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant' (Scott 1990). As to how they managed to outwit pre-emptive strategy, we shall never know except to speculate whether there were no 'Judas Iscariot's' within their ranks or they swore to the

8. Somebody whose job is to present to the public the policies, actions or words of a person or institution in their best possible light and likeable.

*confessional seal*. Committed to social transformation, with one heart and one soul (Ac 5:32) and with courage, they uttered things that matter to Malawians as *imago Dei*.

Despite the bishops' philosophical and theological background where they could discuss complex concepts, such as *transubstantiation, homoousias, eschatology*, the criteria of truth that matters for them were issues that are related to human relationships (Gutierrez 1988). These are moral truths that are oriented towards a better society where righteousness is a key factor. The bishops did analysis of the local *situ* and observed that human relationships were unjust, social structures were oppressive, the economic distribution was uneven (ECM, *Living Our Faith* 1992). The pastoral letter was itself a means to seek righteousness and justice.

Justice, in the context of bishops, could not be sought from the state's judicial system because judiciary was itself 'captured' by the executive. Instead, they were convinced that the better way to restore human relationship was to transform governance structures (ECM, *Living Our Faith* 1992; Gutierrez 1988). Structures included the judicial system, the executive and legislature, which was reduced to be a *praise singer house* than August house. To achieve the objective, they consciously chose the forum to address *truth that matters through* all Catholic Churches in Malawi on 08 March 1992.

The slogan, 'speaking truth to power' although not directly stated as such, has its origin in the Bible. Jesus did not shy away from speaking the truth to power (Jn 19:11). Herodians testified to that fact (Mt 22:16). The slogan summarises a belief that in order to make an impact in social transformation, one has to be bold enough and speak to those who command power in a society.

*Speaking truth to power*, as a catalyst of social transformation, works when the oppressors have fallen into the spell of the system whereby, they are shielded from seeing the truth. Speaking truth becomes a moment of awakening. However, it is tricky when the authority is conscious of its own oppressive operations and is geared towards concealing the truths. Speaking truth to that authority directly could not only be reckless but also dangerous. Typical examples were those who dared to speak the truth to the regime during the Kamuzu Banda's era. Voices that tried to speak truth to the authority during the time of Kamuzu, were silenced by, as Chipembere (1970) stated, death, exile or prison. Hence, there is a need to differentiate authority and power.

The bishops had options to seek audience and speak directly to the Kamuzu in person or to issue a pastoral letter. After critical reflection, they observed that there was a power shift. Kamuzu's regime had authority but power had oozed away from it. The centre of power were subjects that were already saturated with Kamuzu's regime of terror. The regime had empowered them by robbing them everything that was humane about them. That was why the bishops spoke

directly to citizens through pastoral letter. The assertion that *truth that matter could transform the society when it is spoken to the right audience* was demonstrated by bishops when they spoke directly to subjects, who, by then, had powers and Kamuzu had only authority. Intellectuals who share the passion towards social transformation have the obligation to analyse the society and trace the centre of power to speak the truth that matters to it. The bishops were inspired by Jesus' teaching, '... the truth shall set you free' (Jn 8:32). It is clear that by saying the truth, at times may land one into trouble, as observed with the reaction of the authority to the 1992 pastoral letter. The bishops were arrested, tortured and threatened with death. It has been speculated that it took 'intense diplomatic and ecclesiastical pressure that prevented this threat being carried out' (Mijoga 1996:12). The diplomatic and ecclesiastical interventions were not just a coincidence.

Rather, as Mijoga claimed, the 1992 pastoral letter's delivery was timed to coincide with Lent, one of the most important seasons in the Catholic calendar. It is also recorded that on the day the letter was read, each bishop was in his cathedral, where their seats of powers are symbolically located (1996–1997). As for the content of the letter, as observed by one of the bishops said that *the letter was written a long time ago on the hearts of the people*. The content was itself a hidden transcript. That was why people were not scandalised to hear those things because they know them. Rather, they were only be grateful that their true needs are recognised and that efforts are made to answer them (Mijoga 1996). The timing, context and symbolisation within which the letter was written and read was meticulously methodological, to make it louder beyond national borders. There is no doubt that the truth shall set free. However, the manner, timing and symbols made the letter significant such that diplomatic and ecclesiastical interventions that set bishops free were inevitable. This is also a lesson to intellectuals that the timing, manner and symbols, if need be, should not chance but be part and parcel of package in addressing social issues that are critical and have the capacity to lead one to trouble.

## Conclusion

As Malawi commemorates the thirtieth anniversary of the 1992's Lenten pastoral letter, *Living Our Faith*, citizens have a choice: to give the document life or to assassinate it. One can give it life by continuing what was started by the Catholic Bishops in Malawi in 1992, that is, seeking to restore the right relationship. The bishops, adhering to gospel values, felt called to seek ways and means where all could have life in abundance (Jn 10:10). The other option is to take away life in it by maintaining unjust relationships and structures of evil that are existing in Malawi's society. Citizens have a choice to continue with structures of evil where corruption, nepotism or cronyism are order of the day or to dislocate the status quo so as to build new relationships that are founded on biblical justice:

Now, if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served

in the region beyond the river or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. (Jos 24:15)

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## Authors' contributions

B.M. and M.M. contributed equally to the writing of this article.

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