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[Home](#) > [2008](#) > [July \(Web-Only\)](#)

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SPEAKING OUT

Habakkuk in Zimbabwe

We're hungry, angry, and depending on a sovereign God.

By a **Zimbabwean pastor-scholar** | posted 7/24/2008 08:24AM

How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted. (Hab. 1:2-4)

Over the last five years, I have preached often from Habakkuk. I stress the fallenness of our world and the need to be realistic about human wickedness. But Habakkuk also stresses that history demands a judgment. If God is just, there must be a judgment one day — maybe not in this life but certainly in the life to come. God's answer to our struggles with evil and evil men and women in this world is, "The righteous will live by faith — our loyalty to God in spite of the godlessness of others." We're getting lots of practice.

Daily life in Zimbabwe is the painful reality of starvation, AIDS, and violence. Most families are fortunate if they can have one solid meal a day. There is no food on the shelves, there are no medicines in hospitals, and no one can afford to buy from the drugstores.

The last few months have therefore been a total nightmare for my family (me, my wife, our children, our parents, and my HIV-positive sibling's family), especially as the shortage of basic and essential commodities has reached critical levels. When you can find such staples as sugar, maize meal, cooking oil, flour, rice, and salt, the price is ridiculously unaffordable. When we get financial assistance, we cross over the border to buy supplies and withdraw cash.

Zimbabwe has become a nation of beggars who spend more time looking for food than working. Most employees' monthly stipends would not be enough to meet their transportation budget to get to and from work. The majority of people who still work walk long distances because public transportation is too expensive.

State schools have lost almost all qualified teachers. Most factories that had already scaled down operations at the beginning of the year have not opened since the March elections. Those that have opened, often under threat from the ruling party supporters, have kept a skeleton staff.

Since the spring election, we have noticed a dramatic increase in the number of elderly destitutes and children living on the street. Retirees are the most affected because over the last 10 years they have lost all their savings and pension benefits.

According to the United Nations food survey conducted in April and May by the World Food Program, an estimated 2 million people in Zimbabwe need food assistance. This number is expected to rise to 3.1 million by October and will shoot up to 5.1 million between January and March 2009. But the government has banned NGOs from distributing critical food and medical aid.

The few who seem able to survive this food crisis are mostly receiving financial assistance from the Zimbabwean diaspora. To date, there are more than 2 million Zimbabweans in South Africa, most of them illegal immigrants. People do not know where to turn. In the last few weeks, we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of Zimbabweans illegally crossing borders into neighboring countries in search of employment and food. If by the end of the year the situation does not change, we might see the final exodus of the remaining skilled and professional labor force in the country.

But a lack of food isn't the only danger: More and more people are getting killed and beaten up in both rural and urban areas. The culprits are members of the ruling ZANU-PF party; the victims are mostly supporters of the Tsvangirai-led Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The general population has become hopelessly fearful. This terror campaign by ZANU-PF is already estimated to have claimed 500 lives. David Coltart, the opposition senator and a human-rights lawyer, has described this as a deliberate and systematic attempt to wipe out an entire political group in order to permanently cripple the MDC. This has prompted the international monitors Genocide Watch to give Zimbabwe a "Stage 6" listing — the final stage before political mass murder.

To say that most Zimbabweans are angry, frustrated, and hopeless is an understatement. People are tired of politics. They feel betrayed, lied to, and taken for granted. They have lost the energy to fight. At the election, they had painfully gathered all their remaining energy to clearly signal their rejection of a status quo characterized by political repression and economic decay, but once again all their hopes were dashed. All they want is genuine political change that will give them back their dignity as a people.

In one sense, Christians are just as hungry and angry as everybody else. In another sense, churches have risen up to the mission challenge and have become feeding centers for the poor and a refuge for victims of political violence. In Bulawayo, the second largest city, a number of churches have pulled their resources together to provide health care to thousands of residents who otherwise would go without medical assistance.

We have some church leaders who are known supporters of Robert Mugabe and ZANU-PF, his political party. Such leaders have obviously been isolated from other church leaders, but they don't seem to care.

Their support of Mugabe is perhaps because they have also benefited from the crisis, especially from the fast-tracks land reform initiative of 2000. Many of us agree that land reform was inevitable. There was an urgent need to correct colonial imbalances, where 95 percent of the arable land was in the hands of 5 percent of the population. Our economy is agrarian and for that reason, land reform had to be handled sensitively and decisively so that the majority of Zimbabweans would have received the maximum economic and social benefit. But Mugabe went about doing this for personal political gain.

In the recent past, Mugabe targeted pastors and the organizations of pastors. He hosted "spiritual rallies" that endorsed his party and made veiled threats. The rallies promoted a general spirituality in which Mugabe is both a political and a spiritual figure — the kind of spirituality promoted by a notorious, ousted Harare Anglican bishop who claimed Mugabe was like Jesus Christ.

This has not continued, but there are some pastors who continue to be used to legitimize Mugabe's presidency. For as long as Mugabe holds onto power he will use any means possible to achieve this objective.

Church leaders who support Mugabe and ZANU-PF have tended to discourage people from speaking against the president by referring to Romans 13. However, most Christians believe that Romans 13 is about leadership that upholds God's law or is at least sympathetic to it — not leaders who murder, starve, and steal from those they are meant to serve.

Leaders who have gone bad need to be rebuked for abuse of power, authority, and the trust of the people, instead of being celebrated and praised for bringing peace when there is no peace. Christians are called to fear God and not man, to penetrate and expose darkness by allowing the light of Christ to shine. That is why Christians cannot be popular with unjust governments.

Pastors are preaching a lot about the sovereignty of God as they try to help their members make sense of the economic and political crisis. The failure of the people's vote to bring about change has helped the church to strongly believe that the sovereign Lord is the only one who can bring change. It's our duty to, among other things, pray as he works.

We are very hopeful that the mediation efforts of the African Union and the Southern African Development Community will yield a positive result. The church is praying for a process that will bring together all the key players, not only political parties but also the church and civic society.

The Zimbabwean church needs to play the prophetic, priestly, and kingly role with both wisdom and gentleness. A divided church is no good when it comes to speaking against injustices and corruption. We need a united voice that upholds God's standard of peace and justice. The church in Zimbabwe must come out of this crisis with its faith intact, purified, and reflecting the glory of Christ Jesus. It will very unfortunate if the church in Zimbabwe comes out of this crisis not believing better, not deeper in theological reflection, and not

sharpened for service in any way.

The author is a pastor and a scholar living in Zimbabwe. To protect him, we have withheld his name.

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