



Compiled and edited by Nontando Hadebe, Daniela Gennrich, Susan Rakoczy, and Nobesuthu Tom, *A Time Like No Other: Covid-19 in Women's Voices* (The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Johannesburg, 2021), pp. 227. ISBN 978-0620924207. Available to download at <https://jliflc.com/resources/a-time-like-no-other-covid-19-in-womens-voices/>

A Time Like No Other is a collection of experiences of South African Women during COVID-19: stories, poems, songs, and theological reflections. The authors, coming from a variety of backgrounds, document their struggles, fears, pains and traumas, as well as hopes. Through these pieces, the writers explore a range of darker issues in South African society, while promoting gender equality and justice. The book introduces the effects of COVID-19 on women through the lenses of gender and social injustice. The reflections are assembled in six sections.

Section 1, “Tribute and Trauma”, initiates the chief context of the book, addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) experienced by women, bringing into view their trauma and survival stories. This opening article is a theological reflection by activist Daniela Gennrich, challenging and questioning church leaders and compelling them to act. Gennrich reports the voices of women from Phephisa, a community-based support network for GBV survivors. The experiences of women during the various stages of lockdown serve to unlock the realities of GBV in South African. These accounts of women’s sufferings are enough to persuade anyone of the horrors of GBV.

The book introduces COVID-19 as a pandemic of discrimination against women, particularly those who suffer economic disadvantage and/or abuse within the family. To some this may seem an over-dramatisation, given the near universal impact of the pandemic. However, the authors are specifically speaking to the current state of South Africa. Where the metaphor of the pandemic being discriminatory is used, the reference is to the plight of South African women, especially those with little to no help from the state. The section continues by developing further the stories of women who have suffered loss: “Death and Mourning During a Pandemic: The Passing of Alease Brown”, by Nobesuthu Tom; “Tamsyn Allison – A Loving Revolutionary”, by Emma Kennedy and friends; and “Letter to Mahlamba Ndlopfu”, by Bhekisisa Mncube – a tribute to victims of femicide. These stories retell the tales of many who



lost loved ones during the pandemic and those who did not receive the right to mourn through religious and/or cultural rituals with their family and community. The experience of losing a loved one is difficult to bear in normal times. The added restrictions of lockdown intensified this: Alease, whose body could not be sent back home; Tamsyn, who was denied medical care for a routine procedure and died during childbirth. Tshegofatso Mekgwe writes of her experience of sexual violence in China, memories of which were brought back during lockdown. Many people living in isolation suffered from serious psychological difficulties. This issue is brought to the fore when Tshegofatso shares her experience in isolation, away from her family. The section closes with eighteen-year-old Tari Nyamayaro's evocative poem: "Auditioning for My Funeral". Perhaps the poet takes a facetious approach to death and loss in order to manage emotions and contain her crushing grief. Or perhaps this is an attempt to raise awareness of the plight of innumerable women suffering GBV, and a call to authorities to take action.

Section 2 introduces "Lament", both in the literal sense and as a response to the role of women in South African society. Through biblical sources, Merrishia Singh-Naicker draws on various traditions and disciplines to express the strength of the lamenting process of women through lockdown; and of Jesus, the Godman, who accompanies them through this transformational journey and powerless situations such as GBV. The section continues with touching experiences of three teenage women describing their calamitous emotional responses to COVID-19: Luwelle James, Mahalia Khanya Naicker, and Tiara. A Zimbabwean mother, Martha Mapasure, writes of her sudden and unexpected separation from her son during lockdown as she sacrifices family life and comforts to advance her education in Belgium. The next story portrays the challenging journey of a migrant woman and single parent as she confronts misdiagnoses and ill-treatment from medical professionals, causing the unjust death of her husband. In "Physically Distanced But Socially Close", Esperande Bigirimana catches COVID-19 and struggles to look after her family whilst suffering the sorrow of her husband's passing. "Lament" ends with "Ashamed, Unearthed, Restored", a poem by Mpho Ashley Motene, wrestling in dialogical exertions with God, praying to restore her doubting faith.

In section 3, "Ministry Challenges", women clergy and laity share the difficulties faced during COVID-19. This section foregrounds arguments



concerning the consecration of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus by priests only, and provision of the Eucharist during lockdown, particularly where Holy Mass in the Roman Catholic tradition was celebrated online. Dianne Willman, a woman Catholic ‘priest’ relates her theology of the Eucharist and her experience and the experiences of her church members to the theology of inclusion in her article “Feed my Sheep”. The article offers insights into the act of spiritual communion in a non-traditional sense. It’s a new way of coming together and sharing the Eucharist, where the lay person performs their own act of consecration at home; however, the conception does not conform with the doctrines of the Catholic Church: woman priests are forbidden and a lay person consecrating Communion would be regarded as outlandish.

The subsequent stories by Nokuthula Dhladhla and Seipati Ngcobo express distinctive challenges to ministry during COVID-19. Dhladhla shares the experiences that exposed her own vulnerabilities and struggles with anxiety during lockdown, where the practice of deep breathing helped her face her own reality. Ngcobo shares her reflections on discerning her ministry, even after ordination, and an encouraging journey of embracing technological assistance and applying herself to online ministry.

The articles “Spiritual Accompaniment in a Time of Pandemic” by Annemarie Paulin-Campbell and “The Midwife” by Nicky Dickson reflect on spiritual direction and narrative therapy respectively. Paulin-Campbell speaks of coping with the same issues as those she directs: trying to grapple with her own complex mix of feelings in the public square and on social media comes with risks, but risks worth taking. Dickson uses the metaphor of a midwife to weave her own story through the ‘pregnant pause’ of the lockdown, where ministers and pastors offer spiritual care in times of anguish, providing assistance in bringing new life to their people. This section also ends with a poem: “Amidst the Chaos”, where Ebbah Dube writes of her combat with memories and emotions, looking for the woman she desires to be.

Section 4, “Trials and Faith”, speaks to all those who experienced their faith wavering under the overwhelming uncertainty brought by COVID-19. It begins with Madipoane Masenya’s (Ngwan’a Mphahlele) reflections on Job’s trials and suffering in “Reading the (Christian) Bible in a COVID-19 Infected Context”. The article speaks to those who read the times of lockdown eschatologically, observing the catastrophic effects that lockdown produced, and questioning the suffering of the righteous – of



concern since time immemorial. This enquiry is not restricted to this pandemic or any specific time in history, however, using COVID-19 as a conduit provides a means of consolation for many of us who were puzzled by the destructive events before us. An article by Zanele Makombe describes experiences that demanded the reimagining and redefining of her faith life. Where lockdown meant that many of us worked from home, we had the difficult task of adjusting to balancing family and professional lives under one roof. Where online meetings succeeded in keeping businesses going, they struggled in developing personal and social relationships. Adapting to these new ways of life and finding comfort in faith were experiences many will share.

In “Journey with Me Through My Unknown Winter”, Virginia Mafaralala shares her journey of grief with the passing of her father and grandfather whilst traversing her journey of faith and facing challenges at work and church. Following this are contrasting personal stories from Manazi Mncube and Nobesuthu Tom: Mncube shares examples of abuse within families, with faith being the only consolation; Tom writes about the challenging but promising relationship with her daughter during COVID-19. As Tom shows, for some families the development of deeper and more meaningful relationships is a noteworthy positive to come out of the COVID-19 restrictions. In “The Power of Connection During a Pandemic”, Najma Khota writes of the challenging relationships between counsellors and patients in hospitals. Khota’s story also reveals a hard-hitting reality experienced by terminally-ill patients who passed away without families surrounding them, separated from loved ones as they took their last breath. The song “Raped Girl”, about finding hope in defiance, is written by Healing in Harmony, a project of Phephisa Survivor’s Network; the closing poem, “I Will Speak”, is by Bulelwa Woolly.

Section 5, “Multiple Experiences”, is a series of stories, reflections, and poems concerned with the experiences of women and their outlooks, both positive and negative, during the pandemic. These exceptional exhortations of women, from contrasting backgrounds and professions, propel the reader into an appreciation of the vastness and depth of their experiences, as they embark on a journey of life that is infected by the virus. In “The Dark Night of the Soul”, Rooks Moodley juxtaposes her calling and vocation as a social justice activist with her zero-income status, worrying about making ends meet. In the silence of a pandemic, she entrusts her circumstances to God, reaffirming her faith and finding



supernatural provision. “My Story of Gratitude” is an account of Christine Assy’s difficulty in caring for children at home and looking for innovative ways of keeping them entertained, whilst teaching them about faith and hygiene. Ntusi documents struggles with her mental health, looking to God in her brokenness. Mapula G. Ngoepe writes about a family member contracting Covid and being terrified and confused about how to respond – waiting to hear her own results after the uncomfortable testing of nose and throat, praying that she and her family members would be spared. In “COVID-19, the Face of Real Pain”, Busisiwe Gasa writes of her experience of giving birth, using inappropriate humour to cope with the overwhelming uncertainty and pain of the process. Again, the section ends with poems: “Letter 01” by Duduzile Pila, and “Passion of Our Lord – Passion of our People” by Adri Sutherland. The closing article is a reflective piece by Frances Correia: “Into the Wilderness with Jesus”.

The sixth and final section, on “Hoping”, revisits the concerns of women in the face of both pandemics: COVID-19 and GBV. The introduction is the lengthiest in the book and serves as a summary of the experiences of women in South Africa. The women who share their ordeals also share their unifying hope in the Christian God, a gender-just society, and robust preventative measures for GBV. Selina Palm makes a case for practising social hope with one another to escape the negative and narrowing patterns that bring isolation, and encouraging us to approach hope with agency – offering practical tools for developing habits of nurturing hope through storytelling in communities. Palm’s article is written to make the reader an agent of hope who, after hearing stories of the suffering women of South African, will advocate for their cause. Closing the section, Tracy Bell provides “Meditations: Lockdown Rose Blessings”, while Janet Trisk authors a ‘Litany of Lament’. A postscript by Nontando Hadebe contains her own account of COVID-19 and provides a commentary on the reflections and experiences compiled within.

From the first article on, this book evokes deep emotions in the reader. The violence and sufferings of these women through GBV, perpetuated through COVID-19, leaves a harrowing imprint and compels us to act. The compilation of these experiences utilises the period of the pandemic to voice the prevalent anguish of South African women. These stories were brought together through invitation on social media. It is evident to the reader that many voices remain unheard and ignored by authorities with



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their own political agendas. This book is just the beginning of a process of bringing to light the issues of women suffering in a specific social context. The collection adds to our understanding of the range of human experiences during the pandemic, impacting people and their faith throughout the world.

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