


Holiness and sustainable social transformation among neo-Pentecostal prophets in South Africa

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This article critically examines how African neo-Pentecostal prophets (ANPPs) address the pervasive issues of uncertainty and hopelessness in South Africa through controversial prophetic practices that challenge conventional notions of divine holiness. In light of South Africa's persistent state of uncertainty, despite its status as one of the most progressive countries in Africa, do ANPPs inspire and support actions that can transform this adverse context into a positive and sustainable one? The question is addressed by first describing how South Africa remains a context of uncertainty, even though it is one of the most progressive countries in Africa. The article then discusses the pivotal role of 'holiness' in fostering sustainable social transformation. Thereafter, it examines the ANPPs' attempts to transform the context of uncertainty and hopelessness in the country, analysing how the perceived unholiness in their activities obstructs sustainability in these efforts. Finally, the article concludes by affirming the importance of holiness in the quest for sustainable social transformation in South Africa.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article combines frameworks from sustainable development and systematic theology to call ANPPs to reform their religious practices in alignment with God's holiness, in order to make meaningful contributions to the contemporary quest for sustainable transformation and development in South Africa.

Keywords: sustainability; social transformation; prophets; holiness; South Africa; African neo-Pentecostal prophets.

Introduction

African neo-Pentecostal prophets (ANPPs) play a significant role in driving social change in South Africa. Numerous individuals facing poverty and powerlessness depend on these prophets to help them transform their circumstances marked by uncertainty and hopelessness (Banda 2020, 2023; Forster 2019; Van Wyk 2019). However, unholiness hinders the sustainability of their efforts. Therefore, ANPPs are challenged to pursue sustainable social transformation that is informed by the holiness of God. As will be defined in greater detail in the following section, holiness describes ethical morality that God demands from his people in line with this divine righteous moral purity. God demands his people to be holy like him (Lv 19:2; 1 Pt 1: 15–16) and through their conduct to transmit his holiness in their broken contexts and be the salt and light in a context of uncertainty (Mt 5:13–16). Holy conduct honours God and transforms societies through ethical conduct that includes aspects such as integrity, transparency and accountability.

The ANPP movement represents a nascent variant of African Pentecostalism. It aligns with the Prosperity Gospel tradition and is characterised by the prominence of self-appointed prophetic leaders who hold supreme authority within their churches, often referred to as 'ministries' (Kgatle 2022a). I describe them as ANPPs because they are a *new* movement led by *prophets* that holds on to the fundamental *Pentecostal* elements in form and practices. ANPPs distinguish themselves from classical Pentecostalism through the central role of prophetic figures. The prophets serve as the focal point around which their entire ministry or church revolves. Different labels have been used to describe these prophets such as New Prophetic Churches (Kgatle 2023), Fourth Pentecostal Wave (Kgatle 2019) and Afro-Pentecostals (Gathogo 2023), and many more. Essentially, African Pentecostalism has many strands, and the labels used by each researcher depend on what the particular researcher is looking at, looking for and their own theological biases.

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This article raises concerns about the ways in which ANPPs attempt to transform the context of uncertainty and hopelessness through questionable prophetic activities that contravene God's holiness. My focus is exclusively limited to the ANPPs, as the major actors in the new prophetic wave. Given the current climate of uncertainty in South Africa, the question arises: Do ANPPs inspire and support actions that genuinely transform this undesirable context into a positive and sustainable one? To answer this question, the article *firstly* describes how South Africa, despite being one of the most progressive countries in Africa, remains a context of uncertainty. *Secondly*, it defines 'holiness' and highlights its pivotal role in fostering sustainable social transformation. *Thirdly*, it examines how ANPPs attempt to address the uncertainty and hopelessness in South Africa. *Fourthly*, it analyses how the perceived unholiness in the activities of the ANPPs hinders the sustainability of their efforts to transform this context. *Finally*, the article concludes by emphasising the importance of holiness in achieving sustainable social transformation amid the context of uncertainty and hopelessness in South Africa.

South Africa as a context of uncertainty

South Africa is one of the most vibrant democracies in Africa, boasting a progressive national Constitution and a Bill of Rights that safeguard many human rights. However, a pervasive sense of uncertainty and hopelessness prevails among many South Africans. Despite maintaining a functional economy, the country grapples with serious problems such as high unemployment, business closures, poor service delivery, shortage of electricity and rising inflation. Additionally, although the government has implemented various policies to uplift the welfare of poor people, the majority of whom are black (Francis & Webster 2019:791), these efforts have not fully mitigated the widespread sense of despair.

Despite numerous progressive social, economic and educational initiatives like social grants, affordable government primary and secondary education, and government-sponsored programmes like the National Student Financial Aid Scheme, which funds poor students at the tertiary level, many poor and powerless people experience life in South Africa as uncertain and even hopeless (World Bank 2022). Furthermore, even though three decades have passed since the fall of apartheid and racial segregation, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies globally. Much of the economy is still controlled by white individuals, while the majority black population continues to face extreme poverty and relies heavily on monthly social grants that fall significantly short of covering the cost of essential food items in a month. For instance, the Social Relief of Distress Grant amounts to R350, whereas the basic food basket cost R5 324.86 in January 2024 (Lechman 2024).¹

1.The Social Relief Distress Grant is 'a temporary provision of assistance intended for persons in such dire material need that they are unable to meet their or their families' most basic needs' (South African Social Security Agency [SASSA] 2024:n.p.).

The poor and powerless have to contend with corruption, cronyism, subpar service delivery and the ineffective implementation of government policies and programmes (World Bank 2022:45). All these negative factors contribute to a pervasive sense of uncertainty and hopelessness for the poor and powerless.

This context of uncertainty and hopelessness creates fertile ground for the emergence and growth of controversial ANPPs as agents of social transformation. These ANPPs engage in questionable practices such as making people eat grass, selling spiritual objects like anointed oil and water, and demanding exorbitant fees from individuals before praying for or blessing them (Dube 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Kgatle 2021; Ramantswana 2019; Resane 2017).

Holiness as a framework of sustainability in sustainable social transformation

African neo-Pentecostal prophets can and should contribute to sustainable social transformation by upholding the holiness of God. Holiness is a fundamental attribute that promotes certainty and hope in any society. Holiness can contribute towards the formulation of a Christian framework of sustainable social transformation because holiness entails ethical attributes such as integrity, transparency and accountability that are foundational to sustainable communities (Kretzschmar 2023; Mashau 2023; Slater 2023). The concept of 'sustainability' used in this article to challenge the ANPPs derives from Visser and Courtice's (2011:2 [*author's own emphasis*]) definition of a 'sustainability leader' as 'someone who *inspires and supports action towards a better world*'. My interest in this definition focuses on the aspect of inspiring and supporting actions that lead to a better world.

Sustainability is a complex and difficult concept to define succinctly. As Slater (2023:1) notes, sustainability holds diverse meanings in different contexts 'because it does not embody a comprehensive or universal definition that enfolds all scenarios'. Furthermore, the term continues to be redefined as new and different situations arise in the world (Slater 2023:1-2). Sustainability is not a new idea; past human generations have acknowledged the need to plan for the long-term future of the natural resources on which life depends (Seaman 2014). Although the term is predominantly connected to the physical environment, it has since been adopted into other sectors of life and practices such as development and leadership (Bosselmann 2016:1; Kretzschmar 2023:1; Slater 2023:2).²

The basic idea of sustainability is expressed in the widely accepted statement from the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Norwegian prime minister. The WCED report (1987) defined 'sustainable

2.For example, 'Sustainable leadership as a leadership theory is relatively recent among the other leadership theories or styles' (Slater 2023:1).

development' as development that 'seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future'. This concept envisions sustainability as the use of the environment and Earth's resources in a manner that does not deplete them but preserves them to sustain future generations. Visser and Courtice's view of sustainability as inspiring and supporting action towards a better world aligns with the WCED definition, urging people to use the environment in ways that foster a better world by conserving and preserving it for future generations.

However, a much clearer perspective of sustainability was expressed before the one made by the Brundtland Commission in the WCED. Bosselman (2016) notes that in 1980, Robert Prescott-Allen, a staff writer for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and principal author of the World Conservation Strategy (WCS), stated:

Ultimately the behaviour of entire societies towards the biosphere must be transformed if the achievement of conservation objectives is to be assured. A new ethic, embracing plants and animals as well as people, which will enable human societies to live in harmony with the natural world on which they depend for survival and well-being. (p. 1)

This earlier statement presented sustainability in ethical terms, emphasising a harmonious relationship between nature and humanity. Sustainability involves viewing and using the environment in a way that recognises the interrelationship and interdependence between plants, animals and human beings. Matijević (2020:70) expresses the ecological orientation of sustainability, stating that the concept is fundamentally about protecting the 'natural environment and resources through the consistent affirmation of social justice and economic equity principles'. Essentially, sustainability is 'about preserving and valuing life in its genuine wholeness' (Matijević 2020:70). Therefore, the core aspects of sustainability entail moving towards 'enduring prosperity and survivability' (Slater 2023:2).

Therefore, if sustainability primarily focuses on preserving and valuing life as a whole, how does it relate to holiness, a theological concept? As mentioned earlier, the concept of 'sustainability' adopted in this article to challenge ANPPs is based on Visser and Courtice's (2011:2) definition of a sustainability leader. The statements mentioned above from WCED and WCS express a new ethic that aims to create a better world by balancing the present and future needs in the use of the environment. From a biblical perspective, there is a concept of 'holiness' that can be linked to inspiring and supporting action towards a transformed world.

In Christian theology, holiness exhibits sustainability qualities by highlighting the enduring nature of adherence to God's holy laws. Holiness stands as a foundational attribute of God that ontologically and morally distinguishes him from the ancient idol deities worshipped by the surrounding nations of Israel. The Bible proclaims God as the Most Holy

One (Ps 71:22). The prophet Isaiah (cf. Is 6:3) portrays holiness as God's unique and glorious essence, surpassing any claim made by other deities. Moses praised God after delivering Israel from Pharaoh, declaring, 'Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?' (Ex 15:11). Holiness, as God's ontological attribute, signifies his unmatched uniqueness, as Webster (2004:256) affirms, 'there is none besides the holy God; he simply *is*' (*emphasis original*).

Grudem (1994:201) perceives God's holiness to mean that 'he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honour'. This description underscores both the relational aspect of being separated from sin and the moral quality of perfect sinlessness and devotion to the honour and glory of God (Grudem 1994:201). Horton (2011:268) similarly emphasises that 'God's holiness especially marks the *ontological distinction* between Creator and creatures as well as the *ethical opposition* between God and sinners'. As an ontological attribute, holiness encompasses all of God's attributes, whether communicable or incommunicable, demonstrating his glory and moral excellence. Therefore, the holy God is eternally glorious, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent in his being, and morally righteous, just, faithful, merciful and good in his actions – among countless other attributes. The implications of this understanding for sustainability are profound.

The implications of sustainability in holiness are expressed by Horton (2011):

God has a moral vision for his creation, which is revealed in the various covenants that he makes with human beings in history, and his righteousness involves his indefatigable determination to see that vision through to the end for his glory and the good of creation. (p. 270)

In his righteousness and justice, the holy God sustains his creation by his creative power and through the commandments given to his covenanted people, beginning with Israel and now the church. In God's holiness, there is sustainability because God's holiness is a source and preserver of life. As Horton notes, the Holy God is indefatigably determined to fulfil his moral vision for his creation. Therefore, Moses celebrates God's deliverance of Israel from the Egyptian Pharaoh by acknowledging the event as an act of God's holiness (Ex 15:11). Similarly, Hannah praises God for ending her infertility by giving her a son, Samuel, as a demonstration of God's holiness (1 Sm 2:2). In these incidents, God's holiness is demonstrated by his actions, which no other deity can perform, ultimately showcasing his splendour and moral excellence in addressing the needs of his people.

As active recipients of God's holiness, God demands his people to be holy like him (Lv 19:1–2; Pt 1 1:15–16). God's people are holy both ontologically and practically. Unlike God, his people are not eternally holy; their ontological holiness is derived from God, who stereologically recreates them to be his people (2 Cor 5:17). The demand for practical

holiness requires them to exercise their holiness in compliance with their submission to the holy God and the holiness in which he has made them.

Therefore, holiness can be viewed as a framework for sustainability. It calls the Christian community to adopt a new ethic, similar to that suggested by Prescott-Allen's World Conservation Strategy. This ethic inspires and supports actions that lead to a better world, as noted by Visser and Courtice. Holiness expresses sustainability because Christians are called not only to live in obedience to God but also to radiate holiness in their conduct and activities, which Jesus described as being the 'salt of the earth' and the 'light of the world' (Mt 5:13–16). In a context of uncertainty, holiness empowers Christians to be agents of sustainable transformation by transmitting God's life-giving and life-protecting power.

Therefore, Christians and churches should strive to be sustainable communities. According to Kretzschmar (2023:2), '[S]ustainability requires persons to be rooted in God to align themselves with God's nature and purposes, as this is the ultimate means of sustaining life'. As agents of sustainability, Christians are tasked with reflecting the kingdom of God, which Christ heralded with the call to transformative power through repentance and belief in the good news (Mk 1:15). The kingdom of God is 'the scene of the redemptive acting of God' (Ladd 1993:80), urging Christians to act as agents of sustainability in their respective communities.

Holiness entails sustainability because it not only challenges stagnation but also challenges harmful elements such as the abuse of people and power, oppression and exploitation – in other words, all forms of evil that hinder the development of a healthy society. This critical role was played by the prophets in the Old Testament, who rebuked the ruling class in Israel and Judah for violating God's holiness through their rebellion against him and their oppression and exploitation of the poor and powerless (Am 8:4–14) (Kretzschmar 2023:3).

Therefore, with reference to the questionable activities of the ANPPs in South Africa, holiness as a framework of sustainability raises concerns. These prophets often engage in practices that ignore the sanctity of God's holiness, calling into question their ability to pursue meaningful social transformation. Understanding God's holiness and remaining committed to it will serve as a crucial 'bulwark against the controversial and abusive practices' of the ANPPs (Banda 2021:2). The following section focuses on ANPPs.

The transformative engagement of the African neo-Pentecostal prophets within South Africa's context of uncertainty and hopelessness

The climate of uncertainty and hopelessness provides a fertile environment for ANPPs to emerge and flourish with

their gospel of certainty and hope. African neo-Pentecostal prophets are deeply involved in addressing the daily experiences of uncertainty and hopelessness endured by many impoverished and marginalised individuals, particularly within black communities. According to Frahm-Arp (2018; 2021), ANPPs can be viewed as agents of sustainability in South Africa, as they attempt to bring sustainable social transformation in times of uncertainty, such as the recent coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) period, through sermons and spiritual rituals that empower people to navigate challenges and social insecurities. Frahm-Arp (2021:7) notes that practices such as the confession of sins to the prophet and the subsequent absolution give troubled individuals agency, allowing them to act as 'the agents of their own change by verbally claiming that no spirits or people controlled them'. Despite reservations expressed by organisations like the CRL Rights Commission regarding the authenticity of ANPPs, these prophets play a significant role in fostering social transformation by championing a 'religion of the marginalized' (Banda 2020:185; cf. CRL 2017). The fact that many Christians leave their conservative churches to join ANPPs is evidence of their impact. Individuals are drawn to the ANPPs' messages, rituals, healings and other practices that supposedly bring troubled and hopeless individuals into contact with God.

The ANPPs demonstrate their role as agents of sustainability through the diverse range of people they attract. Van Wyk's (2019) analysis reveals that while many followers of the ANPPs come from poor backgrounds and rely on social grants, there are also numerous affluent and wealthy adherents. Chitando (2009:42) affirms that ANPPs attract not only the poor and uneducated but also highly educated professionals who actively participate in their prophetic activities.

However, the ANPPs primarily preach a prosperity gospel that resonates with the impoverished, offering liberation from poverty, sickness and death. This gospel invites the marginalised with promises to uplift them from destitution into a life of abundance. Furthermore, ANPPs practice a socially transformative religion 'that promotes a vision of human flourishing' (Banda 2020:184). Forster (2019:n.p.) notes that poor people are drawn to ANPPs 'because they are offered the opportunity of getting out of poverty and becoming rich by means of God's blessings'. Thus, Masondo's (2014:4) description of 'healing' as 'the central recruitment strategy' of African Independent Churches (AICs) is equally applicable to ANPPs.

The social transformative intent of ANPPs is also represented in Masondo's comparison of AICs and mainline churches (Methodist, Anglican and Presbyterian). Masondo (2014:4) notes that many people from mainline churches temporarily leave their churches to visit AICs for healing purposes and then return to their original churches. This suggests that these Christians find a source of empowerment in the AICs that they do not experience in their traditional churches.

What is true for the AICs in this context is equally applicable to the ANPPs. Kroesbergen (2019) describes a similar situation, stating:

People in Africa often frequent more than one church or ministry simultaneously. In traditional mainline churches this sometimes leads to complaints by the leadership about what is called the 'double membership' of their congregants: people still belong to the mainline church and they may still participate in the Sunday morning worship service, but on Sunday afternoon they go to a local Neo-Pentecostal prophet, on Wednesday evening they pay a visit to the new ministry their neighbour founded last week, and on Saturday they have a look at the crusade that an international charismatic star organized in the football stadium. (p. 9)

Moreover, ANPPs serve as agents of social transformation by practising a religion that empowers the poor and powerless to confront and transform the public realm, including the political administration responsible for people's socioeconomic well-being. In essence, ANPPs practice 'a religion of engaging the public realm' (Banda 2020:187). However, they are frequently criticised for preaching a gospel of prosperity without adequately addressing 'the social and structural manifestations of evil' (Anderson 2005:69). While this criticism is valid, it is important to consider that ANPPs prioritise spiritual activism that addresses poverty, sickness and suffering through spiritual practices such as prayer, fasting, casting out evil spirits and praying against strongholds and evil principalities. They view these methods as more effective in combating economic marginalisation than engaging in political activism (Banda 2020:188–189).

This form of spiritual activism is informed by biblical texts like Ephesians 6:12, which imply that human struggles possess a spiritual dimension. Proponents of this viewpoint contend that individuals should not merely concentrate on physical concerns but also prioritise addressing spiritual dimensions. This spiritual approach to social transformation emphasises spiritual liberation, often referred to as 'deliverance'. Deliverance involves freeing individuals or places by exorcising evil spirits. African neo-Pentecostal prophets prioritise spiritual deliverance as a means of social transformation because they believe that poverty and suffering are caused by the influence of the evil spiritual world (Kgatle 2022b:2). As agents of social transformation, ANPPs perceive their role in deliverance ministry as serving as channels through which demons and other evil spirits, believed to contribute to people's poverty, can be expelled from individuals (Ramantswana 2019:5). In addition to being channels through which people are freed from demons, ANPPs also function as agents of social transformation by being 'channels of blessing and prosperity' (Ramantswana 2019:5). Therefore, they work towards social transformation as stated by Ramantswana (2019):

[P]ronouncing blessings and good into the lives of people – a season of plenty, prosperity, good health, business success or healing to which the audience responds by saying, 'I receive', or whatever formula is used in the particular church. (p. 5)

Therefore, rather than engaging in political activism against the social and structural manifestations of evil, ANPPs engage in spiritual activism by rebuking the evil realm and casting out demons. Ramantswana (2019:5) further emphasises the social transformation role of ANPPs by quoting Daswani (2016), who asserts:

Prophets act as spiritual brokers to link the market economy and economy of things with the spiritual world and the wider desires and ambitions of Ghanaians. It is in the efficacy of the words that the prophets utter, in their actions of prayer, and in the sacred things that they pray over and distribute that people come to believe that their economic realities change for the better and that 'God is there' [*Onyame ho wo*] – with the prophet or in the place where the prophet operates. Through their prayers and prophecies, prophets connect those 'without' with what they need or desire, transforming value across different realms – converting culturally recognizable spiritual power into economic power. (p. 115)

Daswani's observation, originally pertaining to the Ghanaian context, is equally applicable in South Africa, where numerous impoverished and marginalised individuals rely on ANPPs for spiritual empowerment to overcome their challenging circumstances, hindering them from experiencing abundant life. Upon closer examination, many disadvantaged South Africans turn to unconventional neo-Pentecostal practices in pursuit of God's power to break the chains of inequality they face daily. They seek out prophets because socioeconomic structural disparities leave them in poverty and powerless to flourish as human beings.

Unsustainability in the African neo-Pentecostal prophets replacement of God's holy vision with their anthropocentric vision

It is broadly recognised that ANPPs play a proactive role in addressing the environment of uncertainty and hopelessness in South Africa, positioning themselves as agents of social transformation. However, as mentioned earlier, the social transformation they promote within this context of uncertainty often contains elements of unsustainability. This is because ANPPs do not adhere to God's holiness, which is essential for inspiring and supporting actions toward a better world and a just and holy society. While a previous article examined how controversial activities within ANPPs violate God's holiness (Banda 2021), this article's critique shifts the focus to how these unholy practices hinder achieving the necessary sustainability to transform the South African context of uncertainty and hopelessness.

Although ANPPs are acknowledged for promoting sustainable social transformation through their prophetic ministries, a significant issue arises when considering the foundation of their sustainability. Rather than being rooted in God's holiness, it is based on a system that is plagued with various unhealthy elements, such as the abuse of power, exploitation and even sexual immorality. Consequently, the

ANPPs' agenda for sustainable social transformation in an uncertain South Africa becomes unsustainable because of the substitution of their own unholy interests and practices for God's holiness.

Frahm-Arp (2021; 2023), who recognises the ANPPs' endeavours towards sustainable social transformation in South Africa, conducted a critical study on the impact of the practice of confession and absolution on believers in an ANPP church called Rabboni Centre Ministries, led by Prophet Lesego Daniel. Frahm-Arp's (2023) study revealed that:

While believers expressed a sense of personal agency through the act of self-reflection and the writing down of confessions [...] the practice of confession and forgiveness has made followers believe that they are dependent on Prophet Lesego Daniel for their forgiveness. (p. 2)

In other words, confessing one's sins to an ANPP and receiving absolution from them revitalised the believer, yet it nurtured a spirituality centred not on God, but on the prophet's spiritual authority. This raises concerns about its sustainability. What Frahm-Arp described was essentially the replacement and marginalisation of Jesus Christ from the people's faith. Describing this replacement and the marginalisation of Christ by Prophet Daniel, Frahm-Arp (2023) stated:

[I]n the lived theology of the followers, Jesus played no role in their understanding of confession and forgiveness. They understood that God's forgiveness of sins was dependent on the Prophet forgiving them. The Prophet determined what was considered sinful, who was forgiven, and who had access to the gift of being reunited with the Prophet and the church community. (p. 2)

Thus, they replaced God's vision with their own idolatrous vision. This idolatrous nature is highlighted by Frahm-Arp's (2023:2) statement that 'in 2023 at Rabboni a 'theology' has emerged in which the Prophet became the agent of forgiveness'. In an earlier study on the same church, Frahm-Arp (2021:6) observed that for everyone who confessed their sins at Prophet Daniel's Rabboni Centre Ministries, 'absolution from the Prophet was what they [*earnestly*] wanted'. In other words, confessing believers found assurance of forgiveness more in the prophet than in God. Therefore, as Frahm-Arp (2021) observed, the common refrain among the confessing people was:

All I ask Papa is for the spirit of Christ to forgive me and for you to forgive me Papa. I plead. I choose Christ above all things. (p. 6)

According to Frahm-Arp's (2021:6 [*author's own emphasis*]) observation, even though *most* of the congregants asked God the Father and the Holy Spirit for forgiveness, '*everyone* asked that the Prophet forgive them' and 'they all wanted to hear that the Prophet had absolved them'.

The question raised by Frahm-Arp's scenario concerns how Prophet Daniel's practices amount to replacing God's vision

with the prophet's unholy activities. Essentially, prophets like Daniel remove God and his holy ways, replacing them with their own, which often conflict with God's holiness. It is debatable whether ANPPs assume the role of God in the lives of their followers, as many still preach a gospel that calls people to turn to and worship God. However, in the examples described by Frahm-Arp (2021) regarding ANPPs like Daniel, they operate in ways that distance believers from God, portraying the prophet as closer to God and spiritually more powerful than ordinary believers. Consequently, Frahm-Arp (2021) indicated:

At the end of each confession, the pastor reading out the confessions assured the person that the Prophet and God forgave their sins, and they were now restored and renewed. (p. 6)

This results in a religious system that effectively displaces God and his holy reverence, replacing them with the prophets and their abusive fear. As noted by Frahm-Arp (2021:6), ANPPs like Daniel assume an intermediary role between believers and God, giving them the power to grant absolution. This arrangement may draw parallels to Catholic theology and practices, where priests embody Christ and act on his behalf as both judges and healers. Contrary to this, the ANPPs' intermediary role stems more from the 'Man of God-Prophet' syndrome (Frahm-Arp 2021:6). In terms of the latter, the prophets portray themselves as descendants of a select few chosen to stand before God and shared in his authority (Gunda & Machingura 2013:21).

It is essential to note that the prophets conceive of themselves as more than just human beings. They see themselves as divine-human beings because they embody an amalgamation of their mortal nature and the immortal nature of God, sharing in the fate of humanity yet exercising the power and authority of God (Gunda & Machingura 2013:22). Among the ANPPs, the prophet, or man of God, functions as the intermediary between believers and God, acting and speaking on behalf of God. He is believed to be more connected to the divine than ordinary people, which has led to the abandonment of the Protestant conviction that no one is needed to mediate between the believer and God, resulting in a theology of mediated absolution (Frahm-Arp 2021:6).

In what ways has this led to a vision that replaces God's holy vision and promotes unsustainable social transformation? The replacement of God's holy vision is illustrated not only by religiously damaging unholy conduct by prophets but also by socially harmful activities. For example, Prophet Daniel became famous for commanding his followers to eat grass as a way of 'bringing them closer to God' (Reilly 2014). Many news outlets reported on this incident, showing photographs of Daniel's congregants eating grass under his command (Reilly 2014). The problem is that the prophet, who claims to have the power to absolve a sinner, also commands the sinner to participate in a humiliating, dehumanising and dangerous spiritual activity. In one session, the prophet demands that the congregant accounts for their wrongdoing, and in another session, the same prophet commands the congregant to perform lewd acts that violate God's holiness.

Similarly, another ANPP, Prophet Penuel Mnguni, is recorded by Kgatle (2021) as using inappropriate sexual acts to bring his congregants closer to God:

Penuel Mnguni asked his members to undress in church and start masturbating until they reached orgasms. According to the pastor, the Holy fluid of masturbation would produce a sacrosanct fluid which would make the church floor as sacred as heaven. Church members, both males and females, were heard screaming in sexual excitement and they reached orgasms in church during masturbation. Some fell into a deep sleep after the act. (p. 98)

This serves as a clear example of replacing God's holy vision for his people with something unholy, thereby creating social unsustainability. Such immoral actions turn both the church building or place of worship and the assembly of God's people into a profane mockery and a social curse. Even in non-Christian communities, such orgies are not only frowned upon but also seen as signs of social decay.

Can a church that engages in such reprehensible behaviour claim the moral authority to be the light and salt of the world and condemn sexual immorality in society? This conduct undermines sustainable social transformation by fostering and normalising sinful behaviours that erode the moral fabric of society and contribute to societal decay.

Such acts by ANPPs not only deviate from God's holy vision for society but also blatantly disregard his divine laws, as they shamelessly commit acts that God has explicitly forbidden. However, as Grudem (1994:201) asserts, God's moral purity and excellence mean that he 'is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honour'. Associating sexual orgies and acts of dehumanisation with God's name dishonours him. Therefore, God cannot be associated with the controversial activities reported among some ANPPs. As a result, the social transformation they seek in society is unsustainable because it does not promote a social ethic that honours God. Instead of inspiring and supporting actions towards a better world based on a just and holy society, these activities detract from God's honour and undermine his moral standards.

Holiness as an inspiration and support for sustainable social transform in the South African context of uncertainty

How can holiness guide ANPPs to act in ways that promote sustainability and inspire transformative actions within the uncertain South African context? While ANPPs frequently convey messages of hope, the analysis above indicates that these may predominantly offer emotional solace rather than genuine, sustainable social transformation. This section proposes ways in which holiness can inspire and empower ANPPs to cultivate sustainable social change amid uncertainty in South Africa.

The contribution of holiness to certainty

Holiness contributes to certainty by its life-affirming and life-protecting power. Biblically, where there is God's holiness, there is life, as true holiness is life-affirming, life-protecting and life-promoting. In the Old Testament, prophets acted as agents of sustainability by condemning the sinful exploitation and oppression of the poor and powerless by the rich and powerful, which brought high levels of uncertainty in Israel and Judah. Motivated by God's holiness, these biblical prophets promoted sustainable social transformation through their 'messages of repentance, hope and return that counteracted despair' (Kretzschmar 2023:3).

According to Stevens (2012:28), Old Testament prophets often served in the royal court, advising kings on divine directions. While some prophets acquiesced to kings, telling them what they wanted to hear, most of the prophets spoke 'truth to the power of the monarchy, calling the kings to account for their greed and exploitation of the populace' (Stevens 2012:28). They addressed the unsustainability resulting from covenant violations with God (1 Ki 19:10, 14; Hs 8:1) and warned of God's judgement on those who oppressed the poor, practised injustice and lacked mercy (Am 8:4-14) (Kretzschmar 2023:3).

Significantly, the biblical prophets demonstrate the interplay between holiness and sustainability, inspiring and supporting actions towards a better world (Visser & Courtice 2011:2). The context of uncertainty and hopelessness in South Africa calls for Christian solutions deeply rooted in God's holiness to challenge the dominance of evil and unjust structures perpetuating inequality and corruption, which undermine the certainty and hopefulness of life. For ANPPs to contribute effectively to sustainable social transformation, they must do more than offer emotional support and absolution to sinners. They should actively confront and condemn the systemic evils that breed poverty, suffering and inequality in South Africa.

Holiness challenges the church to provide an alternative sustainable vision for society

Holiness serves as a foundational framework for sustainable social transformation, urging Christians to confront the sinful aspects of the world with an alternative, transformative vision guided by God's ontological and moral excellence. African neo-Pentecostal prophets should be agents of God's holy vision for a transformed society. Sustainability involves inspiring and supporting actions towards a better world, balancing present needs with future considerations and necessitating a new ethical framework as an alternative to the widespread exploitation and oppression of the poor in South Africa.

From a theological standpoint, God's holiness inspires and advocates for a new vision rooted in divine and moral excellence. When God commanded his people, 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy' (Lv 19:2), it signalled

that God's holiness is the standard to be mirrored by His people in the world (Grudem 1994:202). Christ reaffirmed this command by instructing His disciples to be the salt and light, demonstrating God's holiness in society.

Regrettably, many ANPPs have neglected this solemn charge to be holy and to inspire a new ethic for sustainable social transformation in their communities through their unholy behaviours. Instead, they actively work against God's holiness by promoting a vision of social transformation anchored in sexual immorality, greed, abuse of authority and other vices that contradict God's holiness. Any religious system that promotes beliefs such as making impoverished and vulnerable women believe that engaging in sexual activity with a prophet will save them from evil possession or fulfil God's will in their lives (Agazue 2016:10) will not lead to sustainable social transformation but will perpetuate the culture of exploitation and oppression. African neo-Pentecostal prophets and their followers need to take God's holiness seriously, embracing a godly vision that contrasts with prevailing societal norms.

Holiness demands that relational spirituality replace functional spiritualism

It is noted that many ANPPs in South Africa attempt to address the issue of uncertainty through functional spiritualism rather than relational spirituality. In other words, instead of seeking to transform the context of uncertainty by leading society towards a personal relationship with God, ANPPs seek to bring about societal change through dramatic activities. For example, instead of teaching people to develop a personal relationship with God and depend on him through faith and prayer to experience a closer walk with God, Prophet Daniel of Rabboni Centre Ministries instructs his followers to eat grass (Reilly 2014) and write letters of confession to him in search of absolution (Frahm-Arp 2023). Similarly, instead of disciplining his congregants to develop a deeper personal relationship with God and experience a closer presence of God, Prophet Penuel Mnguni reportedly made his congregants perform lewd sexual acts in church (Kgatle 2021:98). The list of unholy activities demanded by the prophets on congregants seeking God's intervention in their lives is extensive.

God's holiness opposes such actions, affirming that Christianity is a relational faith, not a functional spiritualism dependent on questionable dramatic religious activities. Therefore, rather than focussing on ritualistic religion centred on dramatic performances, ANPPs should disciple their followers to become godly, Christlike, and spirit-filled believers through practising sound spirituality.

Holiness leads to sustainable social transformation by instilling a fear of God in people

A crucial element in sustainable social transformation is the reverent fear of God. Holiness in life testifies to a religious

practice grounded in this fear of God. Therefore, holiness affirms the prophet's role as an agent of sustainable social change, demonstrating that their conduct is guided by a reverent fear of God.

A critical deficiency in the response of ANPPs to the context of uncertainty in South Africa is the lack of fear of God among both the prophets themselves and their followers. The question arises: how does a prophet of God use the name of God to coerce a congregant into sexual acts under the guise of administering miraculous healing? This question applies to all instances where ANPPs exploit the name of God to extract something from their congregants. It is bewildering how prophets can instruct congregants to consume grass or compel them to donate their livelihood to fund personal luxuries, all in the name of blessing believers.

Conversely, how can congregants justify engaging in questionable sexual activities or other acts in the name of God? In all these scenarios, a crucial missing element is the fear of God, both in the prophet and the congregant (Banda 2021:5). Fear of God entails 'both the sense of being terrified and the reverence for God because of his holy nature' (Banda 2021:8). Because of a lack of fear of God, the prophets treat God's people and his church as a playground for lewd entertainment, instead of showing holy reverence to God.

It is disheartening that many desperate Christians readily believe and submit to false prophets despite glaring signs of unholiness in the prophets. Holiness is essential in sustainable social transformation because 'an understanding of God's holiness can function as a protective mechanism against abusive and dehumanising religious practices conducted in the name of God by regulating behaviour in the church' (Banda 2021:2). When believers uphold God's holiness, they can resist empty threats from unscrupulous prophets who exploit the name of God for personal gain. Without the restraining influence of the fear of God, ANPPs' radical agendas often lead to extremism and licentiousness (Resane 2017, 2021).

Kretzschmar (2023:2), therefore, reminds Christians that true biblical prophets were not self-appointed but were called by God to deliver his message, and not their own. She adds that the prophets 'acted under divine compulsion; their message was not their own'. Consequently, 'the *personal integrity* (righteousness) of the prophets was important, lest their behaviour invalidate their message' (Kretzschmar 2023:2). Hence, it is important for Christians to pay attention to holiness as a mark of validation of prophetic authenticity.

Conclusion

This article attempted to critique the response of ANPPs to the context of uncertainty and hopelessness in South Africa, emphasising the essential role of holiness in achieving sustainability. The environment of uncertainty and

hopelessness often allows controversial ANPPs to thrive as agents of social transformation, employing questionable practices such as instructing people to eat grass, selling spiritual items like anointed oil and water, and demanding excessive fees for prayers or blessings. It is argued that the unholy practices of ANPPs cannot lead to sustainable social transformation in the context of uncertainty and hopelessness in South Africa.

The holiness of God challenges all those who claim to represent him to embody his holiness. This entails acting in ways that demonstrate his liberating and life-giving presence in the midst of unjust circumstances, uncertainty and hopelessness. Therefore, ANPPs are urged to promote sustainability by integrating holiness into their efforts to transform South Africa's context of uncertainty and despair. Holiness fosters sustainability by enabling them to authentically reflect God's true light and salt in a world where the impoverished and powerless endure oppression and powerlessness.

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