



# A ‘Radical’, Prophetic Ecclesiology? *Recovering Ecclesiological Insights from Archbishop David Gitari*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Archbishop David Gitari was a man who boldly critiqued any individual or group he believed were acting in ungodly ways. He described his calling as prophetic; others labeled him a radical. This paper explores Gitari’s implicit ecclesiology, seeking insights for self-identified evangelicals. One key influence on Gitari was the 1974 Lausanne Congress which concluded that verbal gospel proclamation was not opposed to social justice but worked in tandem with it. Therefore, Gitari preached about the holistic nature of the gospel and demonstrated it by pursuing community health care, for instance. He also expected that the calling to live out the gospel belonged to all of God’s people, not just church leaders. How does Gitari’s ecclesiology speak to today’s context? This paper examines Gitari’s writings and speeches, concluding that the church in Kenya today needs to adopt a holistic view of the gospel, a prophetic voice, and apply the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

## Résumé

L’archevêque David Gitari était un homme qui critiquait hardiment tout individu ou groupe qui, selon lui, agissait de manière impie. Il qualifiait sa vocation de prophétique ; d’autres le qualifiaient de radical. Cet article explore l’ecclésiologie implicite de Gitari, en cherchant à en tirer des enseignements pour les évangéliques qui s’identifient comme tels. L’une des principales influences sur Gitari a été le Congrès de Lausanne de 1974, qui a conclu que la proclamation verbale de l’Évangile n’était pas opposée à la justice sociale, mais qu’elle fonctionnait en tandem avec elle. Par conséquent, Gitari a prêché sur la nature holistique de l’Évangile et l’a démontrée en poursuivant les soins de santé communautaires, par

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exemple. Il s'attendait également à ce que l'appel à vivre l'Évangile appartienne à tout le peuple de Dieu, et pas seulement aux dirigeants de l'Église. Comment l'ecclésiologie de Gitari s'inscrit-elle dans le contexte actuel ? Cet article examine les écrits et les discours de Gitari et conclut que l'Église du Kenya d'aujourd'hui doit adopter une vision holistique de l'Évangile, une voix prophétique et appliquer la doctrine du sacerdoce de tous les croyants.

### **Resumo**

O Arcebispo David Gitari era um homem que criticava corajosamente qualquer indivíduo ou grupo que considerasse estar a agir de forma ímpia. Descreveu a sua vocação como profética; outros rotularam-no de radical. Este artigo explora a eclesiologia implícita de Gitari, procurando ideias para evangélicos auto-identificados. Uma influência fundamental para Gitari foi o Congresso de Lausanne de 1974, que concluiu que a proclamação verbal do evangelho não se opunha à justiça social, mas trabalhava em conjunto com ela. Por isso, Gitari pregava sobre a natureza holística do evangelho e demonstrava-a através da prestação de cuidados de saúde comunitários, por exemplo. Também esperava que a vocação para viver o evangelho pertencesse a todo o povo de Deus, e não apenas aos líderes da igreja. Como é que a eclesiologia de Gitari se relaciona com o contexto atual? Este artigo examina os escritos e discursos de Gitari, concluindo que a igreja no Quênia de hoje precisa de adotar uma visão holística do evangelho, uma voz profética e aplicar a doutrina do sacerdócio de todos os crentes.

### **Keywords**

David Gitari, prophetic, ecclesiology, Lausanne Covenant, priesthood of all believers, church and society, church and politics, holistic gospel

### **Mots-clés**

David Gitari, prophétique, ecclésiologie, Pacte de Lausanne, sacerdoce de tous les croyants, église et société, église et politique, évangile holistique

### **Palavras-chave**

David Gitari, profético, eclesiologia, Pacto de Lausanne, sacerdócio de todos os crentes, igreja e sociedade, igreja e política, evangelho holístico

The late Anglican Archbishop David Mukuba Gitari (1937–2013) was well-known for his outspoken critiques of the Kenyan government, as well as any other individual or group he believed were acting in ungodly ways. He repeatedly described his calling as a 'prophetic' one, not in the sense often used

today of predicting the future, but in terms of rebuking leaders for ungodly actions, as the Old Testament prophets frequently did.<sup>2</sup> For his socio-political activities, he was derogatorily labeled a radical. While some have focused on his political activities, this paper will explore Gitari's implicit ecclesiology, seeking insights for the present-day church, particularly those who self-identify as evangelicals.

An 'implicit ecclesiology' is one which is revealed indirectly in words and actions, as contrasted with an explicit ecclesiology which is directly articulated. How did Gitari's theological commitments lead him into areas where others feared to tread? And how does Gitari's life speak to today's context, where some Christians continue to argue about the place of social justice and politics in the church? Though it was not often explicitly stated, this paper will demonstrate that Gitari held a particular view of how the church should function (not her structure, but her ethos), and that this is part of his legacy which evangelicals today can carry on. The question remains: what ecclesiological insights can be derived from Archbishop David Gitari?<sup>3</sup>

### Early Influences

A short biographical sketch indicates that the archbishop grew up in a household where his parents Samuel and Jesse — both first-generation believers — were deeply committed Christians. Gitari remembers, "My parents were so committed to the mission of the church that in our home compound there was a chapel and every day my father would ring the bell at 6.00am for morning prayers and again at 6.00pm for evening prayers. He would start the service whether or not there was a congregation in attendance."<sup>4</sup> Gitari also notes that his parents boldly acted counter-culturally due to their faith: "My parents were highly respected for enlightening and liberating the people from superstition, retrogressive culture and fear. For instance, according to Kikuyu custom if a woman gave birth to twins, the two children were abandoned to die as they were considered a bad omen."<sup>5</sup> The same would happen if a baby developed the upper teeth before the lower ones. In April 1923 when Samuel learned an infant was to be thrown out, he and his wife rescued and raised the child for some time, and remained involved in his life into adulthood.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, see the dedication paragraph in David Gitari, *In Season and Out of Season*, where some form of 'prophecy' is used three times (7), as well as his explanation that in the New Testament, prophecy refers to "forth-telling or the powerful proclamation of the gospel in such a way that the hearers are built up, encouraged and consoled;" David Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 5508–5509.

<sup>3</sup> I am deeply grateful for Prof John Karanja, who generously took time to offer feedback on this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 424.

<sup>5</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 422–438.

Another example of his father's willingness to stand against the norm was when he protested against torture of suspected Mau Mau collaborators.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that the archbishop was shaped by the strong character of his parents. He remembers, "My father, Mukuba, was man of extraordinary courage. To the best of my knowledge, he was the first person in Gichugu division to refuse to allow his daughter to undergo female genital mutilation (FGM)."<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, his parents' faith influenced their son. After reflecting, he concludes, "I must admit that my inspiration to join the full-time ministry of the Church came from my parents."<sup>8</sup> His parents also demonstrated a faith that applied to all areas of life, instead of subscribing to the false dichotomy of a sacred-secular divide; that same mindset will be seen in Gitari's life.

Gitari described himself as coming from a conservative, evangelical tradition, and that upon graduating from a theology programme at Tyndale College in Bristol, he had not been taught about how the church should relate to the political arena.<sup>9</sup> However, even before Tyndale, he already had a desire and willingness to advocate for the rights of others — as a teacher at Thika High School, he remembers the students demonstrating only once, "demanding the construction of an underground footpath across the highway. We had to cross the road dangerously at least four times a day."<sup>10</sup> Like his parents, the young teacher was an advocate for the rights and dignity of others.

### Theological Commitments and Influences

His willingness to confront injustice and act for the good of others was an established pattern before Gitari's church career began. What, then, of the major influences on him as a churchman? One major influence on Gitari's theology and praxis, specifically his view of the church's relationship with the world (in regard to social justice and politics) was the Lausanne Congress in 1974, at which evangelical Christians from around the world issued a statement that the gospel was not opposed to social involvement, but rather worked in tandem with it. The Lausanne Covenant included a clause on social responsibility, which says in part,

We affirm that God is both the Creator and the Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression. Because men and women are made in the image of God, every person, regardless of

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<sup>6</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 450–465.

<sup>7</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 457.

<sup>8</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 475.

<sup>9</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 218.

<sup>10</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 626–627.

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race, religion, color, culture, class, sex or age, has an intrinsic dignity because of which he or she should be respected and served, not exploited. Here too we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. . . . The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.<sup>11</sup>

Gitari's response to this conference and its statement was one of joy, as he saw evangelicals from around the world agreeing that the church has a responsibility to society which cannot be ignored and goes beyond evangelism alone.<sup>12</sup> This commitment to social engagement resulted from belief in God's roles as Creator and Judge, respect for the dignity of all people as bearers of God's image, and a desire to love one's neighbor which involves socio-political action.

Freston describes Gitari as "a product of the Third World evangelicalism which came to prominence at the Lausanne congress of 1974, a sort of Vatican II of world evangelicalism both in the new vistas it opened up and in the subsequent internal battles over its interpretation. Gitari, like some Latin Americans, represented a more thoroughgoing socio-political emphasis than much establishment First World evangelicalism was prepared to swallow for very long."<sup>13</sup> In his own Kenyan context, Gitari did not fit in with many other evangelicals due to his view of church involvement in politics. For instance, Gitari believed that East African Revival (EAR) had "been weakened by introverted ministry, legalism and leadership conflicts."<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting what Gitari meant by 'introverted ministry': the EAR members stopped evangelizing and encouraging weaker Christians, instead focusing on themselves.<sup>15</sup> They refused to engage in the political arena in any way. The archbishop critiqued the movement for being "an inward-looking spiritual movement concerned more about the kingdom to come than about participating in the kingdom that Jesus Christ came to inaugurate here on earth. Christians are so concerned with their own individual souls that they show no concern for the corrupt and sinful world around them, except to invite sinners

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted by David Gitari, "You Are in the World but Not of It," 218–219.

<sup>12</sup> Gitari, "You Are in the World but Not of It," 219.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America*, 150.

<sup>14</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 551. The danger of introverted churches is also addressed in Joshua Robert Barron's "The Camel Has Four Legs: A Contextual African Practical Ecclesiology."

<sup>15</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 552, 5471.

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to come out of 'the sinking ship' and join 'the lifeboat' of the brethren."<sup>16</sup> Gitari viewed this as a deficient ecclesiology: God's people were not meant to be an isolationist, purely self-concerned group, but rather acting on behalf of all people; this shows Gitari's implicit ecclesiology. The critique of Gitari as a meddler and a radical was in part a critique of his willingness to comment on political and societal issues.

Going forward from the Lausanne Conference, the man who was soon to become bishop increasing pursued his vision of a church that was not inwardly-focused, but had a transforming effect on the world. In his own words, his participation at Lausanne "opened my eyes to understanding the holistic mission of the church."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Gitari both verbally preached about the holistic nature of the gospel and demonstrated his commitment to it by pursuing community health care, for instance.

In one of his last publications, Gitari clarified some of the theological truths that convinced him of the necessity of Christian social involvement: 1) the doctrine of creation, which teaches that humans have dominion over creation; 2) the doctrine of humanity, which clarifies that humans are social being and that their social relationships are of concern to God; 3) the incarnation and life of Christ, which led him to go out to where people were and get involved in all aspects of life and stand with those who are harassed and helpless; 4) the kingdom of God as being present among us though not yet complete; 5) and the role of the Old Testament prophets.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to clarify that when Gitari spoke of himself as called to prophesy or the church as a whole having a prophetic ministry, he was using the word differently than how it is often used today. He was not referring to foretelling the future. Rather, when he used the term 'prophetic,' he was referring to the calling of God's people to remind those in authority that God has granted them that position and that they are to use it in ways that please God.<sup>19</sup> Part of the church's calling is to hold leaders accountable.

When speaking of the incarnation and the Kingdom of God, Gitari is touching on the gospel story of who Jesus is and what he came to do, and this prioritizing of the gospel is an identifying mark of evangelicals. Yet other evangelicals opposed Gitari, such as the Africa Inland Church, which chose to support the government in most cases. Why was there such a drastic difference between Gitari's response and that of denominations like the AIC? Given that three of Gitari's five points are from the Old Testament, it is possible that a

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<sup>16</sup> Gitari, "You Are in the World but Not of It," 218.

<sup>17</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, location 1004.

<sup>18</sup> Gitari, "You are in the world but not of it," 219–230. John Karanja also mentions his theology of God as a factor prompting Gitari's activist approach; "Evangelical Attitudes toward Democracy in Kenya," 80.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., David Gitari, "The Claims of Jesus in the African Context," 18.

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serious weakness in systematic theology played a role here. A 2017 article in *Christianity Today* concluded that most theologians give too little attention to the Old Testament.<sup>20</sup> If an individual or denomination underutilizes the Old Testament, their understanding of Jesus, the gospel, and the kingdom would be skewed at best.

Other motives were also a factor. In Kenya under the rule of the second president, Daniel Toroitich arap Moi (1978–2002), evangelicals feared being deregistered by the government, or wanted to have a chance at influencing the government and benefiting from it. So insecurity or desire for benefits were other reasons for many evangelicals to refuse Gitari's approach. Another reason for differences between Gitari and some evangelicals was their interpretation of the gospel as personal and spiritual only. Gitari viewed the gospel as much broader than that: for him, the gospel spoke to all areas of life, without limit. A consequence of this view of the gospel is that if all areas of life are of concern, then it is understandable that Gitari was willing to work with other Christian denominations as well as non-Christians in areas where interests overlapped, such as politics. Unfortunately, for many evangelicals, Gitari's ecumenical involvement indicated that he was compromising the gospel.

Not only did Gitari view the scope of the gospel more broadly, but he also disagreed with the manner in which many Christians in Kenya chose to relate to society, particularly with regard to politics. The Bossey Statement of Church and State Relations (1976) indicated four possible relationships between church and state: 1) active identification with the state and its goals, 2) withdrawal from the political arena, 3) critical and constructive collaboration with the state, and 4) resisting the state.<sup>21</sup> In deed and word, Gitari repeatedly advocated for option #3, likening this type of relationship to one's relationship with fire: get too far away and you freeze, get too close and you burn.<sup>22</sup> The church needed to speak out when it saw leaders involved in wrongdoing or engaging in actions that would harm people, and should encourage the government when it acted justly.<sup>23</sup>

By no means did the bishop favor abandoning proclamation of Christ. Rather, Gitari was convinced that both gospel proclamation and social involvement were aspects of the church's divine calling. Therefore, he critiqued the theology of presence for a variety of reasons; his first was that "the word 'presence' is rather passive and static. Christian evangelism cannot satisfactorily be expressed by this term."<sup>24</sup> Quoting John Arthur, the bishop emphasized that

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<sup>20</sup> Caleb Lindgren, "Sorry, Old Testament: Most Theologians Don't Use You."

<sup>21</sup> Gitari, "You are in the World but Not of It," 216.

<sup>22</sup> Gitari, "You are in the World but Not of It," 229–230.

<sup>23</sup> Karanja categorizes evangelical institutions in Kenya (from 1985 to the present) based on their responses to the political arena as being either activist, loyalist (to the government), or apolitical; "Evangelical Attitudes," 70.

<sup>24</sup> David Gitari, "Theologies of Presence, Dialogue, and Proclamation," 1117.

Christian presence is an approach with surety about its social goals “but so reticent about any explicit witness to Jesus Christ as Savior of the world,” an approach Gitari found unacceptable and unbiblical as per Romans 1:16.<sup>25</sup>

To those who claimed the church’s role in politics was prayer alone, Gitari disagreed. “Although every true Christian should pray for God’s help and guidance in his or her life, we must also rise up in the power of prayer and confront the evil in the world. God has given us a mind for thinking and working. When we pray he gives us directions to follow, and the power to confront evil in the world. We have to co-operate with God in bringing about a just, united, peaceful and liberated nation.”<sup>26</sup> He also rejected the argument that the church could not get involved in politics because it is a “dirty game”, noting that the game is made dirty by the players, it is not intrinsically that way, and that the church must be concerned about the welfare of people, which is what politics is.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to emphasize that by engagement in politics, Gitari was not advocating allying the church with one political party, or even with having an individual church leader take up a political position without first relinquishing their church position.<sup>28</sup> He was clear and consistent on those points.<sup>29</sup> Rather, he wanted the church to have a strong witness in society so that she would have a credible voice with which to speak about social issues, whether they were deemed political or not.

### A Participatory, Prophetic Church

Thus far, the emphasis has been on Gitari’s formation and his role as a prophetic leader in the church, a role in which he made a significant contribution to Kenyan history.<sup>30</sup> However, few have studied what kind of response the archbishop hoped for from fellow Christians, from lay Christians as well as fellow church leaders. In other words, Gitari preached and acted in hopes of producing certain responses from the government and from his Christian brothers and sisters. What was the ethos and praxis Gitari hoped to cultivate in the church?

The archbishop himself was exceptionally educated for a Kenyan in his day, despite the attempts of certain church leaders to hold him back.<sup>31</sup> This gave him

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<sup>25</sup> Gitari, “Theologies of Presence, Dialogue, and Proclamation,” 1118.

<sup>26</sup> Gitari, *In Season and Out of Season*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Gitari, *In Season and Out of Season*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> A helpful book on this topic is Bernard Boyo’s *Church and Politics: A Theological Reflection*. Interestingly, Boyo is a member of the Africa Inland Church; perhaps this book indicates changes within this denomination about their political role.

<sup>29</sup> Ben Knighton, “Introduction: Strange but Inevitable Bedfellows,” 38.

<sup>30</sup> Freston correctly discerns that both Gitari’s character and his specific context enabled him to bring about the results that he did; *Evangelicals and Politics*, 150.

<sup>31</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 872.



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global connections and solid biblical training, both of which were key factors in his ministry. However, Gitari's goal was not to be the sole voice or actor in the church. Rather, he envisioned and even assumed a participatory, prophetic role for other church leaders and indeed for all Christians.

As others have noted, Gitari was well-known for his fiery sermons. He was intentional in his popular, accessible, and biblical approach. Analyzing the Kenyan context, Freston notes that in the era of President Moi's *Nyayo* philosophy, evangelicals in particular were limited in their resources with which to respond to state control.<sup>32</sup> "What resources did evangelicalism have for resisting...? The church had a limited theology of secular power, but a well-developed tradition of evangelical biblical hermeneutics."<sup>33</sup> This, therefore, was a tool quickly adopted by Gitari.

While in certain contexts a sermon may not be a powerful or effective tool, John Lonsdale highlights the pervasive influence of the Bible across Kenya, such that "Biblical texts and images give Kenyans a moral and political language that most of them share, so that no matter what their ethnicity, they can understand each other on matters of personal and public morality well enough to agree on what they disagree about."<sup>34</sup> Not just the Bible, but religion in general has a recognizable place in the public realm in Kenya, unlike its banishment to the private realm in many Western countries. This is a less compartmentalized view of life, and since religion is part of all aspects of life, "there is a religious angle to national debates, which should not be ignored. This creates the conditions for religious leaders to speak and be heard."<sup>35</sup> Therefore, by speaking in easily-accessible sermons, drawing upon a common 'language' of the Bible, Gitari was able to reach out to Kenyans across the socio-economic spectrum and mobilize them for action.

His sermons were at times attended by thousands, and his words repeated in national newspapers. Gitari's sermons roused the crowds, leading to debate and at times responses from the government. Cannily, the then-bishop took up this tool and honed it to a fine edge, delivering sermons that clearly and carefully expounded a biblical passage, then applied the passage's points directly — sometimes in great detail — to current issues of his day, such as his sermon on

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<sup>32</sup> President Moi's slogan was '*fuata nyayo*' (Swahili: 'follow the footsteps'), described as the way of peace, love, and unity. Freston notes that in practice the *Nyayo* philosophy produced "a totalitarian political culture." *Nyayoism* "treats the church as 'part and parcel of the government.' Church leaders are . . . just leaders; and all leaders must be part of the leadership corps . . . The church is not considered as an entity over against the state"; Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 147; quoting G. P. Benson, "Ideological Politics versus Biblical Hermeneutics: Kenya's Protestant Churches and the *Nyayo* State," 185.

<sup>33</sup> Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics*, 147–148.

<sup>34</sup> John Lonsdale, "Compromised Critics: Religion in Kenya's Politics," 80.

<sup>35</sup> Paddy Benson, "Faith Engaging Politics: The Preaching of the Kingdom of God," 103.

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Naboth's vineyard linking to the sin of land-grabbing in his own region. Whether he was viewed as friend or foe, Gitari was a formidable man. A Kiswahili poem describing him as 'bold' and 'dangerous' was not exaggerating his influence on Kenya.<sup>36</sup> Gitari's goal was to mobilize the *wananchi* (citizens) and provoke the government into doing what was right.

Nevertheless, the mobilizing of Kenyans was never at the expense of having trained leaders in the church. One example of this came early on in his days at a bishop, when serving in the Mt. Kenya East diocese. Noticing a dire lack of clergy, Gitari founded what is today called St. Andrew's College, Kabare in 1977. The bishop was concerned that the church should have well-trained leaders with in-depth knowledge and experience, and that any ordinand should have a 3-year training period.<sup>37</sup> That same year, CORAT Africa was invited to study the development needs of the diocese. Based on that report, and in line with his concern for a holistic approach, the college would train community health workers.<sup>38</sup> To Gathogo, it is unarguable that Gitari was a creative and critical (in the best sense of that word) thinker, as well as a leader who "rightly saw the danger of hiding behind the 'call to the ministry' in recruiting candidates who would not comprehend deep theological and contemporary concerns."<sup>39</sup> The archbishop also advocated at 4 synods (1979, 1981, 1983, and 1986) for the ordination of women; the motion finally passed in 1986.<sup>40</sup> Once again, Gitari had shown himself to be a thinker not limited by his own traditions and culture, but one willing to think more widely and to advocate for those he believed were being treated unjustly. His actions ensured that the women, who were already serving, would receive better treatment and equal training to their male peers.

In his autobiography, the late archbishop reflected on the role of the bishop and fellow clergy, noting that part of their calling is the "prophetic proclamation of the gospel," which includes challenging injustice, participating in transformation of society, and indeed even at times "holy defiance."<sup>41</sup> Gitari assumed that it was not just his calling to take a prophetic role, but indeed that all clergy should be doing the same. He did not want or intend to be the lone voice taking a stand against oppression; he perceived this to be the calling of each church leader.

Another example of Gitari's implicit goal of a participatory church is how he speaks about the prophetic role of the church as a whole, not just her leaders.

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<sup>36</sup> Julius Gathogo, "Meddling on to 2008: Is There Any Relevance for Gitari's Model in the Aftermath of Ethnic Violence," 147.

<sup>37</sup> Julius Gathogo, *Beyond Mount Kenya Region: 40 Years of Theological and Practical Education at St. Andrew's College, Kabare (1977–2017)*, 17, 50–52.

<sup>38</sup> Gathogo, *Beyond Mount Kenya Region*, 21–23; Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 1104–52.

<sup>39</sup> Gathogo, *Beyond Mount Kenya Region*, 52, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Gathogo, *Beyond Mount Kenya Region*, 87.

<sup>41</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 5595–5610.

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For instance, after emphasizing the importance of the church's prophetic role in a sinful, fallen world, Gitari switches to speaking of the Christian community, an indicator that in his view all church members, are part of this prophetic role. "The Christian community that does not live a different life — that within itself has hatred, division, quarrels, corruption, injustices — has nothing to tell others. The message of the Gospel as proclaimed by the church can only be heard if the church lives up to its calling."<sup>42</sup> It is significant that Gitari mentions the participation of each and every Christian, and that the church's prophetic voice has 'weight' only when the community of believers is living in ways which demonstrate the Gospel power at work among them. The archbishop expresses this view of the church more explicitly when he says, "it is not merely the top church leaders who can change the world — it is ordinary people if only they can be equipped and empowered. Sometimes people in Kenya ask: 'Why is the church not speaking?' They really mean: 'Why are the Bishops and Moderators quiet?'" Gitari highlights that Jesus chose twelve ordinary men to be his disciples, and made good use of their strengths while knowing their weaknesses. The archbishop concludes, "The church...cannot fulfill its mission unless it is willing to choose and equip ordinary men and women and then use their potential fully."<sup>43</sup> Gitari championed the Kenyan people and at the same time expected them to be active participants in God's mission.

Again, in terms of addressing Kenya's corruption, Gitari directly addressed the *wananchi*, the common citizens: "You, Kenyan voter, you vote for an incapable person to become a parliamentarian because he/she gave you Ksh 500. Consequently you suffer for the next five years, as your member has nothing to deliver for the well-being of the constituency and the nation" (Ksh 500 is less than US \$6.00).<sup>44</sup> Gitari was calling on each voter, noting their agency and their accountability for their votes. He charges the wealthy to stop being complacent, then continues, "Corruption is however a two way traffic. The giver and the receiver are both corrupt. Christians, who are now 82% of the population of Kenya, could transform this country if they pledged never to give or receive a bribe. It could be true that the culture of corruption has become the way of life in Kenya. If Christians were to say no to corruption, then this nation would be transformed."<sup>45</sup> This rejects the argument that one person cannot make a substantive contribution, or that one must be important and powerful (i.e. wealthy) to make a difference in Kenya's society. Gitari's charge to Kenyans was founded on the assumption that indeed one person, regardless of their social

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<sup>42</sup> Gitari, "The Claims of Jesus in the African Context," 18–19.

<sup>43</sup> David Gitari, *Responsible Church Leadership*, 47–48.

<sup>44</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 5658–5659. "Ksh" is the local abbreviation for "Kenyan shillings," KES in foreign exchange listings. In 2014 at the year-average exchange rates, Ksh 500 was equivalent to USD \$5.68, € 4.28, or UK £ 3.45. At the time of writing, Ksh 500 was the equivalent to USD \$3.24.

<sup>45</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 5675–5677.

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status, can have an impact in society, and cannot shirk their responsibility for society's state. As usual, Gitari bases his argument on biblical grounds, specifically Isaiah 32 in this instance.

Another example of Gitari's desire for individuals to have agency and responsibility is his view of relief work, which he believed should not focus primarily on hand-outs, but on equipping people so as to prevent the need for handouts in the first place. In "The Sanctity of Human Life: Priority for Africa," he urges

we should go beyond development and seek the root cause of poverty, ignorance and disease. Kenya grows enough food to feed all its twenty-six million citizens. But there are parts in this country where people are suffering from famine. It may be that poor distribution of food and corruption are the root cause of hunger. Going beyond development means seeking to transform society. Those in authority are quite happy when the church participates in education, health, agriculture, famine relief and other humanitarian activities. But the moment we ask what is the root cause of poverty, ignorance, disease and death, some politicians will tell us to keep away from politics and confine ourselves to purely spiritual matters. Our biblical understanding is that a human being is a psychosomatic unit. He is composed of spirit and body and the two cannot be separated.<sup>46</sup>

There are two points to notice here: one, Gitari wanted to move beyond relief work to addressing root causes of problems, which was yet another reason he engaged in the political realm. Secondly, that Gitari did not want to perpetuate unnecessary and unhealthy dependency; his hope was to move beyond handouts to enabling the people so that in future, such handouts would not be needed. So both in the church and society he sought to move away from a passive, dependent attitude of individuals, and move towards a society of empowered individuals exercising their agency. "The book of Genesis reminds us that, 'A human being is created in the image of God' and for that reason, every human being has an intrinsic dignity for which he should be honoured and respected, not exploited or eliminated. Every human being should be treated equally with the respect and dignity he or she deserves and be allowed to participate fully in civic society."<sup>47</sup> The Bible teaches humans are worthy of respect, and therefore the agency of each individual must be recognized, whether in the church arena or in the broader societal arena.

Evangelicals may not agree with Gitari's interpretation of Scripture in all areas, but it cannot be denied that he did seek to base his words and actions in the Bible. Therefore, if one is to disagree with Gitari, it should be on

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<sup>46</sup> David Gitari, "The Sanctity of Human Life: Priority for Africa," 21.

<sup>47</sup> Gitari, "The Sanctity of Human Life," 21.

hermeneutical grounds, not on his commitment to Scripture. Gitari ruffled feathers for his willingness to speak directly, confront societal norms, and act on behalf of those both inside and outside of the church. But if his detractors were honest, they would have to admit that he was consistent in his beliefs and actions, and that those beliefs were derived from the clear teaching and examples of the Bible. That is one reason why he consistently made use of sermons to produce change and used Scripture to exhort others. In retirement, he pondered, "It may be that those who are leaders of our churches have come to their present position at a time like this. These are the days of tribalism, corruption and impunity. They can save the situation if only they do not keep quiet. Study the situation carefully and preach the gospel in season and out of season, 'correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instructions' (2 Timothy 4:2)."<sup>48</sup> Preaching, rebuking, and correcting were actions to take toward fellow Christians and indeed all whom a Christian had contact with, in Gitari's view.

Earlier five of Gitari's key theological commitments were mentioned: 1) the doctrine of creation, 2) the doctrine of humanity, 3) the incarnation and life of Christ, 4) the kingdom of God as present though not yet complete; 5) and the role of the Old Testament prophets. The doctrine of creation was a reminder that all humans are entrusted with dominion of creation, which in turn was a reminder that those serving in non-ecclesial callings were also participating in a God-given calling. The doctrine of humanity emphasized the social nature of humans, and God's concern with human relationships. Again, this relational, social view of humanity means that each Christian has a part to play in working towards peace, reconciliation, and just relationships with their neighbors. Christ's example of going out to where people were and addressing their concerns applies to church ministers, but again validates the calling of Christians who are primarily engaged in work outside the church walls. The point is that in each of Gitari's key theological commitments, the mission and witness of the church rely upon each Christian playing their particular role and working together for the sake of God's kingdom.

Studies of church organizational structures have their value, and also of value is the study of a church's culture, and whether that culture seeks to value and empower each Christian. From Gitari's example, one can envision a church that prioritizes the kingdom of God and values each member's role in witnessing to that kingdom in their various ways. It is common to describe Gitari as a brave individual, which he certainly was, but he did not desire to stand alone. Rather, he longed to see an active, participatory church, in which each Christian is called to witness to and engage with the world.

In considering a bishop's work, he concluded that "when a bishop visits a parish, then his main work is the ministry of the word and sacrament. When a

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<sup>48</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 5708–5710.

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bishop visits a parish then all those who have been baptised and are already partakers of Holy Communion would be invited to come forward and the bishop would lead a special liturgy *commissioning them to lay ministry, for we believe in the priesthood and witness of all believers*. So the bishop could *commission all those who were baptised and those who were already communicants to lay ministry and witness.*<sup>49</sup> Though Gitari does not use the phrase often or note it as one of the key doctrines he draws from — it occurs just once in his autobiography — the doctrine itself is important in understanding Gitari's implicit ecclesiology. It shows that he did not view the church as solely a hierarchical structure, where only leaders were called to ministry and witness.

From the example of his parents and also from major theological influences, we can deduce that Gitari expected that the calling to live out the gospel's transformative power belonged to all of God's people, not just the church leaders. These commitments call for a particular ethos and praxis in the church. What would it take for the evangelical church to become a church that radically embraces God's mission, prophetically speaking truth to those in power and living as a witness to the inaugurate-but-not-yet consummated kingdom? What kind of ethos would such a church need?

Such a church needs leaders who are unthreatened by those around them or beneath them in the church hierarchy, for one. It needs leaders who will equip lay Christians to live out their faith wherever they are, reaching across cultural barriers of gender and ethnic group for the common cause of the Kingdom. Such a church culture calls Christians to be bold and courageous, knowing that standing for the truth will bring with a painful cost — including attempts on one's life, in Gitari's case.<sup>50</sup> As Paul says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Col. 3:23–24). Gitari threw himself wholeheartedly into his prophetic calling and counted the cost more than once in loss of friendships, attempts on his life, attacks on his integrity, and more.

His life also reminds evangelicals that we need to think more deeply about our ecclesiology, specifically how the church relates to the socio-political realm. As Karanja notes, the main evangelical institutions in Kenya could be grouped into three categories "1. 'Activist' institutions, or those institutions that have openly criticized some state activities; 2. 'Loyalist' institutions...that have allied themselves with the state; 3. 'Apolitical' institutions... that have largely kept aloof from politics."<sup>51</sup> Gitari's life challenges evangelicals to reconsider whether options #2 and #3 are truly viable options for the church. Karanja notes that the Anglican church in Kenya has historically held "a holistic theology that seeks to

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<sup>49</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 3203–3207, *emphasis mine*.

<sup>50</sup> Gitari, *Troubled but not Destroyed*, Kindle loc. 4574–4604.

<sup>51</sup> Karanja, "Evangelical Attitudes," 70.

address the physical, spiritual, and intellectual needs of humanity. It emphasizes that God is concerned with every sphere of human life, including politics and economics, and that all systems of government are ultimately accountable to God.<sup>52</sup> Examining Karanja's words as a fellow evangelical (though not an Anglican), these statements are hard to disagree with!

Karanja's own conclusion — with which Gitari would have agreed — is that deep divisions among evangelicals will remain as long as some evangelicals offer uncritical support of the government.<sup>53</sup> Yet Karanja, again like Gitari, holds out hope that evangelical churches in Kenya can yet effect change in the political and social sphere: "the willingness of evangelicals from mainstream churches to forge political alliances with people of other faiths bodes well for the evangelical contribution to democracy for two reasons. First, democratic practice requires cooperation with people who do not share one's religious beliefs. Second, evangelicals are more likely to have a significant influence on the government in a democratic direction to the extent that they work in concert with other groups."<sup>54</sup> If evangelical ecclesiology is willing to wrestle with how to engage culture and politics, and work for the good of the nation without compromising her witness to the gospel, it would doubtless change Kenya.

From a certain point of view, Gitari *was* radical, in that he expected Christians to take a stand and count the cost of representing Christ, in that he fearlessly engaged in the political arena, in that he worked with ecumenical groups. Yet the call to following Christ has always been radical.<sup>55</sup> And while some will continue to disagree with certain choices the late archbishop made, he still serves as a reminder that Christians need to think deeply about what the gospel of Christ consists of and what it asks of Christ's followers. Gitari's life also challenges evangelicals to think more deeply about ecclesiology, and how the church relates to those outside itself. Further, though Gitari does not refer to it often, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is implicit in much of his work, and this doctrine too deserves more attention from evangelicals, regardless of their denominations' ecclesial structures.

## Conclusions

The Lausanne Covenant begins by confessing that God calls a people out of the world to be his own and sends them back into the world as witnesses. The Covenant continues, "We confess with shame that we have often denied our calling and failed in our mission, by becoming conformed to the world or by

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<sup>52</sup> Karanja, "Evangelical Attitudes," 70.

<sup>53</sup> Karanja, "Evangelical Attitudes," 88.

<sup>54</sup> Karanja, "Evangelical Attitudes," 88.

<sup>55</sup> As Joshua Robert Barron noted, "Evangelicalism was radical in its very roots . . . E.g., Wilberforce's call to nominal 'Christians' in (middle and upper class) Britain to become 'real Christians' was nothing if not radical, a 'return to the roots';" personal correspondence, 15 March 2023.

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withdrawing from it.”<sup>56</sup> Gitari sought to awaken the church to her calling in the world — neither conformed nor withdrawn, but shining her light, with each church member actively witnessing to God, in line with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Gitari was radically committed to applying the gospel and Christian witness to every area of life. He envisioned a church committed to God’s purposes in the world, boldly standing for what is true.

Late African-American civil rights activist John Lewis (1940–2020) once said, “Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”<sup>57</sup> In regards to her distinctive, gospel-shaped witness, the Kenyan church seems at times to have lost her way. Today, out of love for neighbors and a desire to show them a glimpse of the nature of God’s good kingdom — present in seed form though not yet fully mature until Christ returns — it is past time for evangelicals in Kenya to follow the example of the late Archbishop and get in some good, necessary trouble.

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<sup>56</sup> “The Lausanne Covenant,” 3.

<sup>57</sup> From a June 2018 tweet; quoted in Joshua Bote, “Get in good trouble, necessary trouble’: Rep. John Lewis in his own words.”



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