

# **‘Come and receive your miracle today!’ Advertising and ‘Gullibility’ in Selected Pentecostal Churches in Harare, Zimbabwe**

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## **Abstract**

The religious sector in contemporary Harare, Zimbabwe, is characterised by intense competition, rivalry and jostling for a share of the spiritual market. The emergence of ‘mega prophets’ who run ‘mega churches’ has changed the religious sector in Harare in a definite way. Whereas the historic mainline churches (also known as mission churches) did not advertise themselves in the media, the newer Pentecostal churches are quite adept at and aggressive in advertising themselves. This article examines the advertising strategies used by selected Pentecostal churches in Harare, Zimbabwe. It analyses the content of the messages in order to identify how the prophets seek to attract new members. Further, the article explores the role of television stations owned by particular prophets/ministries in the expansion of the same ministries. Overall, the article contends that advertising is central to the phenomenal growth of newer Pentecostal churches in Harare, Zimbabwe. It maintains that understanding the advertising strategies adopted by Pentecostal churches is central to appreciating their growth. This advertising often feeds on the ‘gullibility’ and desperation of clients who face pressing existential issues. The article concludes that the concept of ‘gullibility’ is problematic, as it overlooks or downplays the combined power of advertising and serious challenges that clients who patronise Pentecostal churches face.

**Keywords:** Advertising, Gullibility, Harare, Pentecostal Churches, Zimbabwe.

## **Introduction**

The concept of ‘gullibility’<sup>1</sup> is as important as it is controversial to the study of religion. In the specific context of the phenomenal rise of Prophetic Pentecostal Churches in most parts of Africa, it requires careful analysis and interpretation. Prophetic Pentecostal Churches have become a significant feature of Christianity in Africa. They are characterised by young, charismatic prophets who are associated with the gifts of healing, prophecy and powers to assist members or clients to access prosperity. Summarizing their presence in Southern Africa, Chammah J. Kaunda writes that the young prophets,

... present themselves as indispensable mediators of spiritual resources with great spiritual power to explain spiritual mysteries, perform miracles such as ‘miracle money’, ‘miracle marriages’, cure any kind of disease or sickness such cancer, HIV and claim to raise the dead, and have the power to protect their clienteles from any form of misfortune, especially witchcraft and explain future events ... (Kaunda 2016: 67).

In countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, Zimbabwe and others, Prophetic Pentecostalism has become a major player on the spiritual market. It has attracted millions of adherents (that is, individuals who have become members) and clients (that is, individuals who utilise services offered by prophets, but who belong to other religious traditions, or none). Central to the appeal of Prophetic Pentecostal Churches are the promises of prosperity (broadly defined). In this article, we contend that the quest for prosperity in Prophetic Pentecostal Churches increases ‘gullibility’, as individuals, families and communities seek to improve their situations in life.

The need to address ‘gullibility’ and its impact on clients of Prophetic Pentecostal Churches extends beyond Zimbabwe. For example, in South Africa, the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission) had ‘Hearings on the Commercialisation of Religion and Abuse of People’s Belief Systems’ (2017). There is a growing concern that some Prophetic Pentecostal Churches are subjecting their clients to different forms of exploit-

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<sup>1</sup> We shall use the term ‘gullibility’ in quotes throughout this article, as we do identify with its connotative meaning.

tation. Chimuka (2018) charges that Southern Africa needs to address ‘religious gullibility’ as a matter of urgency. On our part, we hesitate to accuse religious people of lacking intellectual rigour or sophistication to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Instead, we contend that the very phenomenon of ‘gullibility’, or religious people subscribing to beliefs and practices that do not immediately come across as making ‘sense’ from a (Western) rational perspective, is an expression of lived religion. Therefore, we are convinced that studying the advertising strategies employed by Prophetic Pentecostal Churches and responses by clients present us with an opportunity to study lived religion. Lived religion is different from reified, theoretical religion that is found in books. Instead, lived religion is what flesh and blood human beings do in their quest to make sense of their lives. Thus, this article enables us to appreciate that:

The study of lived religion focuses most intensely on places where people are wounded or broken, amid disruptions in relationships, because it is in these broken places that religious media become most exigent. It is in such hot cultural moments – at the edges of life, in times of social upheaval, confusion, or transition, when old orders give way and what is ahead remains unclear – that we see what matters most in a religious world (Orsi 2003: 173).

In this article, we problematize and relativize the concept of ‘gullibility’ by highlighting the effectiveness of the advertising strategies that Prophetic Pentecostal Churches deploy. Instead of regarding adherents and clients of Prophetic Pentecostal Churches as greedy, undiscerning and easy to manipulate, we place emphasis on the sophistication and appeal of the advertising strategies of Prophetic Pentecostal Churches. In the first part of the article, we discuss the concept of ‘gullibility’ in the context of Prophetic Pentecostal Churches in Harare, Zimbabwe. In the second part of the article, we examine the meaning of advertising and the strategies employed in advertising in general. In the third part of the article, we focus on how selected Prophetic Pentecostal Churches in Harare utilise the different advertising strategies to attract followers and clients. In conclusion, we argue that instead of dwelling on ‘gullibility’, scholars must invest more in understanding the ‘push-and-pull’ factors in studying Prophetic Pentecostal Churches in Africa.

## **Prophetic Pentecostal Churches in Harare, Zimbabwe and ‘Gullibility’**

After an initial hesitancy or paralysis, scholars of religion in Zimbabwe and from elsewhere have begun reflecting on Pentecostalism in general and Prophetic Pentecostalism in particular. Although a detailed review of the sources, approaches and challenges of historiography lies beyond the scope of this article, we shall draw attention to some of the key developments. First, the initial intervention by Paul Gifford (1988), who proceeded to become one of the leading commentators on African Pentecostalism, tended to focus mainly on ideological issues. Gifford regarded Pentecostalism in Southern Africa as a direct product of the religious right in the United States of America. Secondly, the study on the Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) by David Maxwell (2006), offered a detailed and informative account of one of the leading Pentecostal movements. More recently, overviews by Chitando, Gunda and Kügler (2013), Machingura *et al.* (2018) and Togarasei (2018) have brought Prophetic Pentecostal churches into greater focus. Thirdly, the focus on women’s experiences in Prophetic Pentecostal churches in Zimbabwe is another important development. Reflections by, among others, Mapuranga (2013) and Biri (2013) have helped to underscore the distinctive experiences of women within the movement under study.

While the works summarized above have contributed towards appreciating the significance of Prophetic Pentecostal churches, they have not grappled with the theme of ‘gullibility’ in a more direct or sustained way. Although they do address it in some ways, for example, by exploring reasons for the popularity of Prophetic Pentecostal churches, they have generally been influenced by a ‘religionist’ approach to the phenomenon. The ‘religionist’ approach tends to be gentle, sensitive, considerate and respectful when approaching religion. It is predicated on the integrity of religious people. It assumes that religion is a positive social force and that religious people are mature, serious and reasonable when they make their choices. Further, scholars operating within this paradigm make a claim about the uniqueness of religion (Fitzgerald 2000: 4) and regard the discipline of religion as special and not requiring non-religious factors to explain it (Capps 1995). Consequently, they have tended to minimise discussions on ‘gullibility’ or advertising.

While some contributors to the Chitando, Gunda and Kügler (2013) volume were willing to go beyond the religionist stance and ask difficult

questions about why some people end up utilizing the services of the prophets, there is need for caution. The tendency to regard individuals, families and communities that utilise the services of prophets (or traditional healers) as naïve, simple, unsophisticated, pre-modern, etc. runs the risk of placing the researcher above study participants. Consequently, we are quite hesitant to embrace the concept ‘gullibility’, as it suggests that religious people are not as mentally alert as they ought to be. It is quite telling that in one of the most informative reflections on gullibility, Stephen Greenspan (2008: 32) concedes that ‘gullibility often occurs in a complex and demanding micro-context, where various cognitive, emotional, and other challenges come together’. That is, we are convinced that instead of regarding those who patronise Prophetic Pentecostal churches as ‘gullible/s’, we should rather invest more energy into exploring the factors that propel them towards such movements, as well as the forces that attract them. In this article, we have chosen to dwell on the power of advertising demonstrated by Prophetic Pentecostal churches.

One recurrent feature of critiques of ‘gullibility’ in relation to Prophetic Pentecostal churches is that adherents and clients are attracted by the promise of prosperity and success. In this scheme, adherents and clients are enticed/induced/compelled to part with their resources (for example, time and money) for the sole benefit of the ‘big man of God’, or the prophet. Thus, some Zimbabwean biblical studies scholars such as Zorodzai Dube (2015) and Nyasha Madzokere (2018), as well as theologians such as Takesure Mahohoma (2017) charge that Prophetic Pentecostal churches generate false hope, capitalize on ‘gullibility’ and must be understood within the context of hope deferred and a problematic economy. Essentially, they contend that clients of Prophetic Pentecostal churches have suspended the power of reason and have allowed themselves to be vulnerable to the promises made by the modern-day prophets. On the other hand, philosophers such as Tarisayi A. Chimuka and Lesedi Mashumba-Paki (2016) insist that critical thinking skills are vital. According to them,

The general goal of critical thinking is to free a person from dogma, superstition, and intellectual laziness, and this task demands a stringent, isolated effort of thought (Chimuka & Mashumba-Paki 2016: 124).

A longer narrative is required to probe why scholars of religion, biblical studies

scholars, theologians and others in Zimbabwe have been generally critical towards Prophetic Pentecostal churches. Here, we seek to identify two of the main probable reasons why a negative stance towards Prophetic Pentecostal churches has tended to be dominant in scholarly literature. These factors could also account for why the term ‘gullibility’ has found traction among Zimbabwean scholars at the same time that Prophetic Pentecostal churches have increased in popularity. First, we surmise that most of the scholars who critique peoples’ ‘gullibility’ in relation to Prophetic Pentecostal churches are predominantly members of the historical mainline Protestant churches and the Catholic Church. Therefore, they hold theological positions that do not put emphasis on miracles, prosperity, ‘breakthroughs’ and related concepts. We argue that the scholars’ own theological positions might be influencing the emphasis on ‘gullibility’. Secondly, the scholars’ academic and class backgrounds might be responsible for their critique of the rise of Prophetic Pentecostal churches. Although there are, indeed, some scholars on Zimbabwean Pentecostalism who are themselves members of Pentecostal churches, the majority of scholars belong to older Pentecostal churches. They tend to regard the newer churches as being too centred on individuals and catering for a ‘troubled and emerging’ social class. They share this position with church leaders belonging to mainline churches. For example, the South African Catholic Archbishop and black theologian, Buti Tlhalagale (n.d.), accounts for the rise of Prophetic Pentecostal churches in Africa by culling the socio-economic and political context in which they have emerged. We cite him at length below, as he provides a detailed sociological (and not religious) explanation. Thus:

There is a general consensus that the new religious movements place a heavy emphasis on *success*. Success refers to good health, good personal relationships, successful career, overcoming the odds etc. But the emphasis invariably falls on material prosperity such as big houses, luxury cars etc. It is said that God blesses a cheerful giver beyond his or her wildest dreams. But first, a worshipper must give before God can respond generously. The message preached in these churches is positive. They highlight progress, success, breakthroughs, victory, triumph, achievement, open doors, abundant blessings etc. They build confidence and self-pride in people. They create hope. They enhance the values of self-respect and personal dignity. They engender a positive attitude among the congregants. In these church

es, size counts. Hence the mega-churches. Numbers count. Hence the use of stadiums and cinema halls for worship. High modern buildings and the presence of thousands of worshippers are evidence of success.

People are attracted to the new churches because they respond to the aspirations of people. The poor are anxious to escape their abject poverty. The unemployed search eagerly for employment. Many are looking for new opportunities in life. Africans are a cure-seeking people. These churches promise a break-through in every aspect of life. To the upward socially mobile Africans, sermons of wealth are music to their ears. The African continent in general is in a sorry state. Years of neglect have crippled the infrastructure. Shortages of food are not uncommon. The political elite have stolen the resources of their own countries. Poverty is rife. The new churches offer an escape route; hence their popularity (Tlhagale n.d. *Italics original*).

The foregoing citation is helpful in terms of highlighting the context in which Prophetic Pentecostal churches have emerged in African contexts. These factors are also applicable to the popularity of these churches in Harare. Appreciating these factors is critical to questioning the applicability of the term ‘gullibility’ in explaining the popularity of Prophetic Pentecostal churches. However, the challenge with these explanations is that they do not probe the strategies that Prophetic Pentecostal churches employ to attract adherents and clients. Further, they tend to minimise the religious or theological appeal of these churches to adherents and clients. They concentrate on the overall context within which the phenomenon has developed. Thus, there is a need to appreciate how, for example, advertising promotes the growth of Prophetic Pentecostal churches and sustains membership.

At any rate, it is extremely difficult to expose ‘gullibility’. Teunisse (2015: 3) makes the telling observation that, ‘In defining gullibility, there are two elements to consider: (a) cues indicating an untrustworthy situation; and (b) the ability and willingness to detect those cues’.

In the case of clients of Prophetic Pentecostal churches in Harare (and, we would argue, elsewhere in Africa and globally), it is not possible to meet the requirements of these two elements.

*First*, the faith setting makes it difficult to detect an untrustworthy situation. Prophets operate within sacred space and time. They present

themselves within a setting that makes it difficult for clients (or anyone else) to be on high alert. Across history, sacred practitioners or holy persons have been treated with respect and trust.

*Second*, it is difficult to subject the claims made by Prophetic Pentecostal churches to critique, as there are individuals who give testimonies (putatively) confirming the claims made by the prophets. As we shall highlight below in relation to ‘gullibility’, clients are persuaded to utilise the services of the prophets due to the effectiveness of the advertising strategies adopted by the churches.

The emphasis on ‘gullibility’ glosses over the capacity of the creativity of the churches to attract clientele. Unfortunately, this tends to understate the various strategies that Prophetic Pentecostal churches have employed in order to attract their millions of followers. Thus,

Some unscrupulous Pentecostal pastors take advantage of African’s predisposition to believe in God’s miracles to expand their churches and extort money from their loyal and gullible faithful as they promise them cures to their illnesses as well as economic prosperity (Ndemanu 2018: 83).

Although the author has been careful to qualify his claim by making reference to ‘some’, it is important to acknowledge that the abuse of religion is not restricted to the new, Prophetic Pentecostal churches, but that it is found in all forms of religious expression.

### **Advertising in Prophetic Pentecostal Churches: An Overview**

Advertising church activities is a relatively new phenomenon in Zimbabwe though it is acknowledged to be an over a century old practice (Okwuchukwu 2018). Church organisations in Zimbabwe are increasingly finding marketing their churches an invaluable tool for disseminating church messages. Over the years, churches in Zimbabwe and elsewhere the world over have become big business despite the traditional tag of being non-profit organisations. In Zimbabwe, churches are now contributing millions of dollars to business through billboard evangelism. It is quite interesting to explore the various reasons that have compelled or are compelling church organisations to adopt, some with reservations, this phenomenon.



Research indicates that advertising or church promotion activities and strategies are becoming part and parcel of church organisations, with some churches employing personnel in public relations departments to promote their images. This growing interest in deliberate promotional activities seems to be a way of adapting to the realities of the environments churches are now operating in. Angheluta, Strambu and Zahara (2009) observe that the environment calls for newer strategies of survival in an environment that has become too competitive and characterised by a waning interest in traditional approaches to the gospel. We argue that, while the traditional churches were, and some still are, premised on the promise of a blissful life in heaven that corresponds with frugal earthly living, modern upcoming churches seem to shift from this ideology, to embrace an earthly life that seems to have abandoned the poor church minister mentality. ‘Men of God’, the young pastors of today, wear designer suits, drive expensive cars and live in million dollar mansions which previously had been the preserve of those who had made it in the business world. According to Angheluta *et al.* (2009), the world has become more and more secular, making achieving mission objectives difficult. This requires that churches change tact to grow and retain membership, and being business oriented for survival.

Scholars proffer various motivations for more and more churches adopting marketing activities previously considered to be a preserve of profit making organisations. According to existing research, churches adopt advertising to help the church in image building through increasing public perception of the church. The other cited reasons are to attract new members and hence grow the church in terms of numbers, retain current members and reactivate dormant members (Garrison 1996; Joseph & Webb 2000). The other reason which churches seem to down play are the financial benefits that accrue from a larger membership (Iheanacho 2013). This, however, seems to dovetail with the drying sources of funding for churches. For instance, in Zimbabwe, traditional (mainline/mainstream) churches used to receive funding from capitals in the Western world where they originated. It is in that environment of diminishing external funding that churches increasingly have to devise means of attracting people to their churches, including those that were previously frowned upon. Media has become very helpful in that regard; hence the growth of billboard evangelism.

Churches use a variety of media to carry out promotional or advertising activities (Onwukwa 201; Eze 2011 and Okwuchukwu 2018). These range

from unobtrusive to obtrusive platforms, which include the television, the radio, newspapers, billboards, door-to-door campaigns, fliers, direct mail to non-members, events such as crusades and conferences, stickers, fliers, banners and posters (Webb *et al.* 1998). These media channels target the already converted and those that can be converted. In this article, however, we focus on Billboard Evangelism to explore the notion of gullibility and church marketing activities.

Billboard Evangelism refers to the spread of religious messages a billboard medium, a billboard being a large board on which the message is written. Church entities disseminate church related messages through these billboards that are strategically positioned on such public spaces as; sides of roads, at intersections, traffic lights and highways and entrances into towns and cities. It is a form of advertising that has been traditionally used by business. Members of the public read the messages as they go about their daily business. The communicative intent is that the public becomes persuaded to respond positively to the messages. Churches make use of the normal media organisations or own media departments in their churches.

When billboards are used for the spread of the word of God churches adopt advertising strategies that are used to achieve communication purposes that have similar promotional purposes as those deployed to market products and services. This makes the advertising strategies similar, though churches tweak them to suit their specific evangelistic purposes. A number of these strategies are evident in the billboard messages sampled in this article. These include graphics, images, celebrity endorsement and linguistic strategies such as naming, titles, biblical quotations and choice of themes/issues. This article considers the linguistic and rhetorical aspects of ten selected religious advertisements to analyse a sample of the advertisements displayed in Harare between 2011 and 2017. The advertisements carry messages that communicate church events such as conferences, celebrations, and prayer meetings. Below are the messages contained in the selected adverts:

Church	Advert	Event
1. UFI (United Family International)	<i>Freedom at last</i> <b>Judgement night 2</b> <i>Power! Power!</i> <i>As God judges poverty</i> <i>Lack sickness</i>	Prayer night

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	<p><i>Disease</i>  <i>Barrenness</i>  <i>Usaita zvekuudzwa</i> (Authors: ‘Do not be told’, literally, ‘Come and see for yourself’)  28 Aug 2015  National Sports stadium</p>	
2. PHD (Prophetic Healing and Deliverance)	<p>All-night Prayer  <b>Night of turnaround</b>  2 Chronicles 20  Acts 1:3</p>	Prayer night
3. Heartfelt International Ministries	<p><b>Miracle night</b> 20 December 2011  <i>7 days revival starting 2–6 January 2012</i>  Apostle T and Pastor C  Wutabwashe</p>	Service and Conference
4. Seventh Day Adventist Dr Teddy Wilson and team	<p><b>Revelation of hope</b>  A message of peace, health and wellness from the last book of the Bible  Your health is your wealth</p>	Conference
5. UFI Emmanuel Makandiwa Victor Kusi Boateng	<p><b>Two-week prophetic Conference</b>  <i>Breaking the cycle of negativities</i>  <i>Biblical father of our father</i>  <i>With father Prophet victor Kusi Boateng</i>  Don’t miss out!</p>	Crusade
6. UFI Emmanuel Makandiwa Victor Kusi Boateng	<p><b>Passover Conference</b>  14–16 April 2017</p>	Conference
7. Bethel Worship Centre of	<p><b>Tiyambuke Conference</b>  <b>International Christian Convention</b>  <i>Legends quotes</i></p>	Prayers

Glory Ministries	<p><i>Footprints of legends</i>  <i>Today Jesus is calling millions of people to come unto His and he will give you rest</i>  <b>Apostle Dr Ezekiel Guti H Guti</b>  <i>Your story has already been written</i></p>	
8. Enlightened Christian Gathering	<p><b>Black Billionaire</b>  <b>Breakfast meeting</b>  <i>With special guest speaker</i>  <i>Billion dollar impartation investment</i>  <i>Business interests mobile network, mines, universities, hotels, agricultural college Mumbai, UK</i>  <i>USA attendees government ministers, millionaires, influential people billionaires</i>  <i>Guest of honour Hon E.D. Mnangagwa vice President of the republic of Zimbabwe</i>  10 Nov  Stewart Rum Meikles Zimbabwe  Reg. Fee 2000 for table of ten  US 250 for individuals  <i>Register today space is limited</i></p>	Breakfast Prayer Meeting
9. Heartfelt Internal Ministries	<p><b>Catch the fire</b>  <i>Supernatural overflow</i>  Apostle T Wutabwashe Prophet E Makandiwa, Apostle Robert Kayanja Uganda  Mon 15–Sun 21 August</p>	Conference

One of the strategies utilised in the adverts above to attract audience attention and participation and attendance is naming of the religious events. The events are named thus so as to catch the attention of the audience. Heartfelt Ministries names its August 15–26 Conference as ‘Catch the fire supernatural overflow’

conference. Pastor Chris's Assemblies of God church calls its 15 May Sunday service as a 'Worship and Communion service', while Makandiwa terms his 22–26 May 2017 and the 16–17 April Passover Conference and 21–30 October 'Two weeks of Prophetic Conference'. The Heartfelt International Ministries refers to its 20 December 2017 service as a 'miracle night' and 2–6 January 2012 service as '7 days of revival'. Makandiwa calls his 15 August 2015 service 'Judgement Night'. Prophet Bushiri's Conference on a cruise ship to the Portuguese Islands is a 'Prophetic cruise with Major 1'. The Seventh-day Adventists call their conference 'Revelation of Hope Conference'. The reaction by mainline churches such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church confirms the tension and competition within the religious sector. There is the realisation that it can no longer be, 'business as usual', since the new Pentecostal churches are increasing their market share through aggressive and creative advertising. If the established denominations have been forced to join the competition, is it fair to still talk about the 'gullibility' of individual believers?

Topicalization or branding the various conferences is not incidental, but calculated to entice and thematise the events in a way that promises spiritual change after attending the event. The Heartfelt Ministries International promises miracles to those who will attend its conference. Miracles serve as attractions as they bring the audience closer to the spiritual realm as they are privileged to witness the power of God on display through the pastor or man of God. Such an experience is arguably proof that those who witness have walked in God's presence. Through miracles, the Bible is made alive as there is implicit reference to Jesus' miracles to those who may want to doubt their veracity, such as the infamous biblical Thomas. The promised miracles are therefore persuasive to members and visitors to the conference. Bushiri's cruiseship conference is quite enticing as it demonstrates those who have been blessed to afford it. Associating with the few who can afford to pay for the Cruise Conference puts the individual in a class of his or her own. Here, the advert seems to prey on people's desire to be different and being closer to the Pastor who is evidently rich. Hope in the attendees is ignited the belief that maybe cruise boating with those who have made it, such as Bushiri, will open doors for those whose prayers have not yet been fully answered.

The adverts also use titles to attract audiences to the respective churches' prayer meetings, services and conferences. Bushiri is 'Major 1', Pastor Boateng is referred to, as 'Father and Prophet', and 'Biblical father of our father', Makandiwa, host and Prophet E Makandiwa. A church leader from

Uganda is ‘Apostle Kayanja’. These are calculated titles that in adverts are not just titles but are meant to achieve specific communicative purposes. Titles play similar communicative functions as names. Bushiri takes a military rank as his title. This speaks to power as imbued in military titles, subtly emphasising that he is a prayer warrior who commands respect and power in matters related to prayers. Victor Kusi Boateng’s title, ‘Father to our father’ positions him closer to God. He has a rank above that of Emmanuel Makandiwa, who himself is a prophet, indicating that Makandiwa is above the other members of his church, as he can see where ordinary believers cannot see. The communicative intent of the advert is very clear here, that is, to entice through promise of God’s presence and the presence of his able disciples at the Conference.

The adverts use metaphor to attract the public to the church events. A metaphor as a cognitive linguistic tool depends on comparison to encourage a language user to see an event or object in terms of another (Charteris-Black 2004). Advert 1 tells that attendees are ‘getting freedom at last, power as God judges poverty, lack of sickness, disease and barrenness’, ‘A message of peace, health and wellness from the last book of the Bible, Your health is your wealth’. Another advert refers to ‘Breaking the cycle of negativities’. Metaphors are subtle tools of persuasion in that the audience may not be aware that they are being persuaded to view an object or event from a preferred perspective. Statements such as ‘getting freedom at last, power as God judges poverty, lack of sickness, disease and barrenness’ force one to think of the conference in terms of the biblical freedom accorded the children of Israel after suffering under the rule of Pharaoh. The claim that the conference is designed to solve a number of problems that trouble people is both literal and metaphorical. God here is metaphorically presented as a judge who has to sift through evidence to arrive at a verdict. It is such persuasive strategies that lead some clients to become ‘gullible’ as they anticipate their own breakthroughs.

Literally, the messages from the adverts suggest that those physically suffering from sickness or disease or conditions such as barrenness can be healed. At another level, barrenness is used metaphorically to suggest lacking spirituality as poverty, some kind of malaise and a condition that the conference can remove through spiritual empowerment. The reader is persuaded to think the conference as where the power of prayer is utilised to ‘free’ those who attend. It promises a new beginning that is devoid of suffering. Considering the socio-economic and political environment during which these were displayed, the designers of the billboard may have been promising even

economic freedom. What is ingenious here is that the freedom could be anything; spiritual, economic, social or political. This, therefore, preys on the reader's beliefs; therefore the church cannot be accused of misleading the-would-be attendees as it is possible to argue for the metaphorical meaning. We argue, therefore, that when an issue assumes double meaning and is ambiguous, then it is difficult to prove 'gullibility'.

The messages in the adverts show strategic thematization of issues to focus readers and potential attendees on the benefits that would accrue to them for rhetorical purposes. The messages purport to present the church activities as spiritually designed to address what can be regarded as pressing issues. UFIC promises (Advert 6) that the 2011 Conference would heal poverty, sickness and barrenness. This is a practical and very pertinent issue to a variety of audiences. It was in 2011 and Zimbabweans had just emerged from a rollercoaster economic meltdown characterised by hyper-inflation. At this time, most people were battered financially and were therefore desperate to reclaim their lives. The theme or subject is just what the doctor ordered, how to get out of the abject poverty brought about by the 2007–2008 widespread impoverishment that left the majority of Zimbabweans surviving on less than two dollars per day (Tawodzera 2014). Coupled with that were the perennial problems of unaffordable health services which most people could not afford. The promise of protection against sickness, disease and conditions such as barrenness is attractive, as it persuades people experiencing such problems to seek the help of prophets or men of God who are a welcome alternative to an exorbitant health system. In such contexts, it is unfair to make references to 'gullibility'.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have questioned the applicability of the concept of 'gullibility' in reference to the quest for miracles, healing and prosperity in Zimbabwean Pentecostal churches. Due to innovation and competition on the spiritual market, Pentecostal churches have utilised the media in order to attract clients and members. Testimonies by individuals who claim to have benefited from the services of the men of God serve to entice many people to attend their services. Further, we maintained that the advertising strategies adopted by Prophetic Pentecostal churches are quite effective. When it is considered that these strategies are employed in trying socio-economic conditions, it is

possible to understand why individuals would strive to ‘receive their miracle’ on specific occasions. While the concept of ‘gullibility’ suggests that individuals who patronise Prophetic Pentecostal churches are motivated by greed and lack of critical analysis, in this article we have highlighted the problematic aspects of the concept, as well as highlighting the effectiveness of the advertising strategies employed by the media and publicity departments of the new churches.

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