



AFRICA CENTRE FOR APOLOGETICS RESEARCH (ACFAR) KENYA

**STATEMENT ON THE SHAKAHOLA JUDGMENT AND THE
CONTINUING THREAT OF DESTRUCTIVE RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS**

*“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing
but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15).¹*

In April 2023, Kenya and the wider African continent began to learn of the devastating loss of life among followers of Paul Nthenge Mackenzie, founder of Good News International Ministries, at Shakahola, Kilifi County. Mackenzie founded the church in Malindi in 2003 and spread his teaching across Kenya through his preaching and television broadcasts. In 2019 he closed the church and withdrew with his followers into Shakahola Forest, where, cut off from family, school and medical care, they were taught that fasting to death was the way to “meet Jesus.” As investigators uncovered grave after grave, the scale of the tragedy became apparent.

More than three years later, the Africa Centre for Apologetics Research (ACFAR) Kenya notes with sober reflection the judgment delivered on October 19, 2026, by Hon. Lady Justice Diana Rachel Kavedza-Mochache of the High Court in Mombasa, convicting Paul Nthenge Mackenzie and his co-accused of the murder of 191 people, all but one of them children, at Shakahola. More than 400 bodies have been recovered, and most remain unidentified.² More than 600 individuals are still officially considered to be “missing.” In 2025, homicide detectives and pathologists recovered 53 bodies and 44 body parts from shallow graves in Kwa Binzaro forest, where Mackenzie is also accused of leading followers to fast to death. Only 14 have so far been identified through DNA.³

No verdict can return a child to a parent. In the court papers, many of the dead are recorded only as “unknown male child,” identified by the place and date their grave was found.⁴ We grieve with every family that has buried a loved one and with every family still waiting to do so. That a man who promised “Good News” twisted the Word of God to lead his followers, among them parents and children, to starve themselves and each other to death is a grievous offense against our Creator and against all those made in His image.

Shakahola now joins a sickening list of modern cult tragedies, among them Jonestown in Guyana in 1978, where more than 900 people died⁵, and Kanungu in southwestern Uganda in

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version).

² Thomas Mukhwana, “Kenya cult leader who told parents to starve children guilty of 191 murders,” *BBC News*, October 19, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckd6d2l3dz4xo>.

³ Emmanuel Masha, “Govt releases eight Kwa Binzaro victims’ bodies to families,” Kenya News Agency, October 16, 2026, <https://www.kenyanews.go.ke/govt-releases-eight-kwa-binzaro-victims-bodies-to-families/>. See also Dicksy Obiero, “Kenya exhumes 32 bodies as outcry grows over starvation cult deaths,” Reuters, August 29, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kenya-exhumes-32-bodies-outcry-grows-over-starvation-cult-deaths-2025-08-29/>.

⁴ Mukhwana, “Kenya cult leader.”

⁵ J. Oliver Conroy, “An apocalyptic cult, 900 dead: remembering the Jonestown massacre, 40 years on,” *The Guardian*, November 17, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/17/an-apocalyptic-cult-900-dead-remembering-the-jonestown-massacre-40-years-on>.

2000, where up to 1,000 followers of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God perished.⁶

Shakahola was not only a crime against the body; it was an assault on the conscience. Psychotherapist Daniel Shaw describes how “traumatizing narcissists” draw their followers into a “relational system of subjugation,”⁷ fostering extreme dependency, fear, shame and isolation until their victims distrust their own judgment. Psychoanalyst and cult expert Lorna Goldberg calls such leaders “moralistic narcissists”⁸: they present themselves as exceptionally holy, draw in sincere people at times of grief or vulnerability, and gradually replace the follower’s conscience with their own will. In her judgment, Lady Justice Kavedza-Mochache referred to expert testimony likening Mackenzie’s followers to “devoted actors,” a term that anthropologist Scott Atran uses to describe people “unconditionally committed to sacred causes” whose “personal identities are fused within a unique collective identity,” and who therefore “willingly make costly sacrifices.”⁹ In such a context, loving parents can be convinced that withholding food from their own children is faithfulness to God.

In light of all this, the Church must be alert to warning signs, which can include: a leader whose authority must not be questioned; Scripture twisted to serve his or her interests; extreme fasting or other unholy disciplines enforced as a test of faithfulness; followers controlled through fear and shame, cut off from relatives, schools and medical care; and a world divided between the saved few and the condemned outsider. Unlike such wolves in sheep’s clothing—who abuse trusting, unsuspecting Kenyans—our Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11).

We lament! We weep for the victims of Shakahola and Kwa Binzaro, starved in the name of a Lord they were forbidden to follow in grace and truth. And we lament the sustained abuse of religious freedom in our land, where men and women who style themselves as prophets, apostles, bishops and “men of God” continue to swindle Kenyans of their land, savings and homes, and to inflict deep psychological and spiritual harm on many—all in the name of God. The Word of the Lord stands against them: “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” (Jeremiah 23:1). “Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ... with force and harshness you have ruled them” (Ezekiel 34:2, 4).

Scripture has already described what we are witnessing. Peter warned that deceivers would arise among God’s people, and that “in their greed they will exploit you with false words” (2 Peter 2:3); “They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption” (2 Peter 2:19). Paul exposed “false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:13), and rebuked believers for tolerating anyone who “makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you” (2 Corinthians 11:20). He warned against

⁶ Africa Centre for Apologetics Research, “A National Declaration,” March 17, 2026.

⁷ Daniel Shaw, “Understanding the Traumatic Narcissism Theory and its Clinical Utility,” *International Journal of Coercion, Abuse, and Manipulation* 8 (2025): 81, <https://doi.org/10.54208/0008/005>.

⁸ Lorna Goldberg, “The Moralistic Narcissist’s Impact on the Conscience of Followers,” *ICSA Today* 15, no. 1 (2024): 3.

⁹ Scott Atran, “The Devoted Actor: Unconditional Commitment and Intractable Conflict across Cultures,” Library of Social Science, October 11, 2016, <https://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/newsletter/posts/2016/2016-10-11-Atran1.html>.

those who take believers “captive by philosophy and empty deceit” (Colossians 2:8), and against religious practices whose appearance of wisdom includes “severity to the body” (Colossians 2:23). Jude described such victimizers as “shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds ... fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted” (Jude 12), and as those “showing favoritism to gain advantage” (Jude 16). Stolen property, psychological harm, divided families and the graves of Kilifi give terrible weight to Jesus’ warning: “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:16). And in response, the Church cannot remain silent. It must speak boldly and unequivocally against such abuse, no matter who commits it or what title they bear (Galatians 1:6–9).

Survivors of such atrocities—especially those compelled by their leaders to inflict harm on others—often carry moral injuries and deep shame, and struggle to place their trust in any Christian fellowship again. The Church must receive them with patience and compassion, recognizing the deception and coercion they have endured and holding those responsible for abuse to account.

As the courts do their part, we as the Church must ask ourselves:

- Did we recognize the danger signs while Mackenzie preached openly on television and across Kenya?
- Will we challenge exploitative religious groups and report abuse, especially where children are at risk?
- What biblically grounded steps will we take to protect our members from cultic leaders and ideologies?

These questions require honest examination of our own teaching and practice. As the Church of Christ in Kenya, we must ask ourselves whether we have...

- failed to ground believers in the essential doctrines of the Christian faith, so that they are always prepared to make a defense of the hope that is in them (1 Peter 3:15).
- failed to prioritize discernment, discipleship, and bringing believers to true maturity in Christ (Hebrews 5:11–14), instead leaving them vulnerable as “children, tossed to and fro ... by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14).
- failed to equip believers of all ages to read, understand and apply the life-giving Word of God, leaving them vulnerable to preachers who would exploit fear of the “mark of the beast” and apocalyptic doom to justify rejecting identity cards, schools and ordinary medical care.¹⁰
- failed to test all spiritual claims by Scripture (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22), even when someone claims to be the very mouthpiece of Jesus.¹¹
- failed to act when vulnerable believers and their children were being taken captive by deception (Colossians 2:8), and when “the ignorant and unstable” were twisting the Scriptures “to their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:16).
- failed to uphold the biblical standards and accountability required of pastors and all who lead in the Church (1 Timothy 3:1–7; 5:19–21; Titus 1:5–9).

¹⁰ Mukhwana, “Kenya cult leader.”

¹¹ Mukhwana, “Kenya cult leader.”

- failed—above all—to keep the centrality and supremacy of our Lord Jesus Christ at the heart of our teaching and practice (Ephesians 1:18–23).

There is hope in our Lord Jesus Christ! As we reflect soberly on the Shakahola tragedy, we must heed Scripture’s commands to recognize and resist deceivers, care for those who have suffered, and take concrete steps to prevent such a calamity from happening again.

As the Africa Centre for Apologetics Research (ACFAR) Kenya, we remain committed to equipping the Church for biblical discernment, the defense of the Christian faith and cult evangelism. We, therefore:

1. Commend the investigators, prosecutors and courts for their painstaking work in pursuing justice.
2. Call on the Government of Kenya to act on the findings and recommendations of the Commission on Administrative Justice and the Presidential Task Force, addressing the failures that allowed warning signs to go unheeded, while upholding the religious freedom guaranteed under Article 32 of the Constitution.
3. Urge churches to receive survivors with compassion, offering patient pastoral care and helping them access appropriate support as they rebuild their lives and rejoin the Body of Christ in healthy fellowship.
4. Urge believers to know the Scriptures for themselves, to beware of false prophets, to test every extraordinary spiritual claim by God’s Word, and to never unquestioningly surrender their conscience to a religious leader.
5. Pray for the bereaved to find comfort, for survivors to heal, and for all who died to be identified and laid to rest with dignity.

*“You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand,
take care that you are not carried away with the error of
lawless people and lose your own stability.
But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior
Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”*

(2 Peter 3:17–18)

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Africa Centre for Apologetics Research (ACFAR) Kenya

acfar.kenya@gmail.com

