




Chapter 11

Liberating faith practices in an evolving African megacity: On transdisciplinarity, engaged scholarship and liberative pedagogies

Stephan de Beer 

Abstract

The explosion and complexity of African cities demand urgent and innovative action. Not only are urban dwellers across the continent challenged in terms of urban infrastructure, but policymakers and urbanists need to respond innovatively if Africa's urban futures are not all to be doomed.

African theologians have largely failed to engage urbanisation and related challenges in systematic, comprehensive and well-considered ways. This chapter considers the urgent necessity for liberating faith practices in responses to African cities, namely, faith practices that contribute to integral liberation and freedom of African cities and African urban dwellers, but that presupposes the liberation of faith practices, and the discipline of practical theology, themselves.

Departing from the lived experience of doing theology in an evolving African megacity – the Gauteng City-Region – it then proposes the expansion of the scope of African practical theologies, if we are to take African cities seriously, being shaped by a spiritual and theological method of liberation. It considers practical theology scholarship as engaged scholarship, and a liberating faith practice itself, fusing the elements of incarnation, imagination, innovation, impact

and collaboration; doing theology in transdisciplinary ways and practising the dual task of research as transformation, as well as liberative pedagogies. It concludes by asserting the city as a classroom and locale for doing engaged practical theological scholarship.

On liberation and freedom

In doing our theological work, I hold as a central motif, Paul's insistence in Galatians 5 verse 1, that it was for freedom that Christ has set us free.

The ministry of God's people should therefore align itself to this intention of Christ – for all people to be free, and, indeed, for all creation to be free from its bondage to decay (Romans 8:21).

Through his incarnate life, solidarity of suffering and death, and resurrection as rebellion against death, Christ sought to mediate the comprehensive liberation both of humankind and all of creation.

Gutierrez (1988:103) speaks of this as integral liberation – personal freedom from sin and communion with God; interpersonal freedom from dehumanisation; and systemic freedom from socio-economic-environmental and political shackles that subdue – indeed, enslave – us, our neighbourhoods and the entire creation to forces of death.

In all our theological commitments, theory-making, and actions, we have to measure our work in terms of how it facilitates liberating processes and spaces that could result in multiple freedoms for people, neighbourhoods and God's creation.

Further, our socio-pastoral accompaniment of people and communities, both inside and outside the faith community, should support and strengthen people, in the way Paul encourages us to 'not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery' (Galatians 5:1, New International Version).

Whatever enslaves a people (individuals, families or groups), a neighbourhood, a system, an institution, or a city, should be discerned and engaged in liberative ways that will cast down yokes of slavery or disablement. Only then can we think of our theological work as life-affirming, and death-protesting.

In African cities, we have our work cut out for us. Every imaginable form of mental, physical, psycho-social, economic, political, environmental, or spiritual enslavement, has squeezed the life out of people, cities, countries and regions for centuries – the result of colonial expansion and enslavement; paralysing international debt; successive forms of military dictatorship; postcolonial statism, privatising liberation for a small elite; famine and war; and, currently, urban migratory patterns far exceeding the capacity of local governments to provide appropriate infrastructure and services.

Yet, it is from every form of slavery or bondage to decay that Christ seeks to set us free. And upon freedom, the hard work of reconstructing us into a new people – with new psychology and new patterns of societal and inter-relational engagement – only starts. What are the theologies we need to foster to respond to centuries of enslavement, inscribed upon the psyche of a people, and landscapes across the continent? Do we have theologies potent enough to respond bravely, innovatively and convincingly to Africa's (urban) cry, or are we – upon the frankest of assessments – to be found bankrupt theologically?

Exploring faith in an evolving African megacity

How we do theology at the University of Pretoria should resist seeing our location as accidental. We are an African school of theology in what is part of an evolving African megacity, and both the gift of our locatedness, and the responsibility we have to steward it well, should be incorporated rather intentionally in how we do our theological work.

African cities today grow faster than cities on any other continent in the world (Parnell & Pieterse, 2014). Historically

being the slowest continent to urbanise, this has now changed, and by 2050, five of the world's largest twenty cities – Kinshasa, Lagos, Cairo, Dar es Salaam and Khartoum – will be on the African continent (Hoornweg & Pope, 2016:107).

Lagos only had a population of 200 000 in the early 1960s but today has more than 15 million people, and urban observers suggest that the growth of the past 60 years is nothing compared to what will occur in Lagos in the next 60 years (Vidal, 2018). The planning regime of the city of Kinshasa is the size of a city like George in South Africa with no more than 160 000 people, yet Kinshasa's population already stands at 14.3 million and is fast-growing. Its infrastructure is simply not keeping up with the vast rates of immigration. Long Africa's largest city, Cairo now has a population of 21 million and is projected to have 24 million inhabitants by 2030, with Lagos soon to surpass it (cf. Istanbul Africa Trade Company, 2018).

In all these cities, religion plays a critical role, and whereas in Kinshasa and Lagos the prominence of neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic churches – in conjunction with traditional mainstream Christianity and African-initiated churches – are dominant, in Cairo and Khartoum, Islam is the dominant religious expression, with a minority of Coptic Christians and Christians from other traditions in Cairo, and about 5% of the population in Khartoum belonging to Christian churches. Dar es Salaam has sizable Christian and Muslim populations, as well as adherents of animism. Whether and how faith engages the African city and its future – from a planning and policy perspective – not only accidentally but intentionally, is a matter for critical appreciation and reflection.

Considering the current limited planning capacity of many such exploding African cities, one holds one's breath as to the staggering effects, and challenges, such rapid urbanisation holds for the continent. Cities could be places of promise in which the dream of realised Sustainable Development Goals could be made true. Cities could also increasingly be cesspools

of enslavement, decay, marginalisation and complete human and environmental collapse.

The City of Tshwane (and Pretoria in it) forms part of an evolving African megacity, known as the Gauteng City-Region. Encompassing three metropolitan municipalities and several smaller municipalities, all fluidly meshing into each other, the Gauteng City-Region already has 15.8 million people and it is still evolving (Gauteng City-Region Observatory [GCRO], 2022).

It is in this city region that our Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria finds itself. Once one of the authors of apartheid theology, we now have an opportunity to contribute to the flourishing of communities in South Africa and on the continent, as part of our restitutive and transformative responsibilities.

If we are to be committed to the African continent, and the ongoing liberation of its people and ecosystems, African urban futures should be one of our key priorities, as soon the majority of Africans will reside in growing African cities.

This is a critical theological, moral and political imperative, which we will only ignore at our peril. If African cities are not attended to boldly, generously, innovatively and sufficiently, they might present large-scale risks to Africa's entire populace and future. Currently, theological schools at large lack such foresight and fail to reimagine themselves for the urban futures Africa is facing. We continue to peddle theological curricula that work(ed) for us and our traditions, without acknowledging that much of what we focus on today concerns a church that no longer (or hardly) exists.

Our theological work should discern the unfolding expressions of Christian faith that are mushrooming across the African urban landscape, often far removed from the theological emphases of mainstream theological education. Not only should these expressions be acknowledged and engaged with, both critically and constructively, but we should also ask how far we can offer theological support to them.

The content of our theological work should be to participate in various platforms where people reflect on African urbanism; seek to construct life-affirming, inclusive and just local urban alternatives; and build collaboratives and movements that resist death-dealing urban practices. This will be, by definition, political or public theology, deeply committed to the shalom of the African city, and participating as an equal partner in the scholarship around African urbanism.

Implicit to such theological engagement should be to explore faith in an African city. This might be several things:

- Theologically it is our task to engage in faith formation, of students and theologians alike, that will set people free to engage freely and joyfully with African urban realities.
- It will be descriptive of the multiplicity of faith responses and expressions in the African city, often in disjointed and non-networked ways.
- It will reflect critically on dominant faith practices in African cities, and identify, document and amplify liberative faith practices that demonstrate the good news of Christ's liberation in very concrete terms.
- It will not only consider faith practices that are liberating, but will also support the liberation of faith practices that are stale, at best, or oppressive and exclusivist, at worst.
- It will serve as an incubator for innovative and liberating city-making practices, accompanied by theory-making, critical reflection and continuous documentation. Theological engagement in city-making processes is a profoundly ethical and moral vocation, to discern and uproot the undergirding gods of the city that spell death, and to foster a spirit of inclusion, humanity, dignity and justice, instead.

Whereas the preceding focused on the practices of religious faith in relation to African cities, we also need to ask whether we as a collective indeed have faith in the city:

- 'Is there faith in the futures of African cities?'

- 'Where can faith in the (potential of the) African city be found?'
- 'What kind of faith is required?'
- 'How can such an urban faith be fostered and sustained?'

Centring African cities in our theological education is not to deny the vast reality of rural Africa. In fact, on this continent, the urban-rural umbilical cord has not yet been cut in ways similar to North America or Europe, and we cannot focus on African cities without attending to the debilitating conditions in many rural African places that result in people's flocking to African cities. In the UK, urban-rural mission was used for a long time, and this continuum needs to be acknowledged in Africa today, as we consider Africa's socio-economic-environmental well-being, much more deliberately, and theologically.

Liberating faith practices

What distinguishes practical theology from other theological disciplines, is its focus on faith practices (Viau, 1999:xv). Here, I speak of 'liberating faith practices' (cf. Ackerman & Bons-Storm 1998), both as faith practices that liberate, but also the task of liberating faith practices if they are characterised by being insular, sectarian, exclusivist, introverted, anti-urban, dated, life-denying or outright oppressive.

In the African city, large percentages of urban dwellers are incredibly marginalised, vulnerable or resource-poor. The realities of urban informal settlements, in which 62% of Africa's urban populations reside (cf. Pieterse & Simone, 2013:19–35), present enormous challenges to how we conceive appropriate faith practices, life-affirming and liberating.

In a context where the majority of the population lives precariously, how and where we locate ourselves and our theological engagement is of particular importance. Unless we remain committed only to serving a small middle-class or elite population at the top of the urban ladder.

If our theological work is committed to integral liberation, it might require us to reconsider the priorities of the sub-disciplines in practical theology, or, at least, where and how we practice them, and with whom. How do we practice practical theology in the (South) African city today, in a way that will contribute towards psycho-spiritual, social, economic, spatial, environmental, and political freedoms?

Historically, in my own faculty, the sub-disciplines of homiletics and liturgy, pastoral care and counselling, congregational development, youth ministry, and the diaconate, were always centred. At times, we were slightly forgetful of the diaconal, centring the inward disciplines that are not as focused on the world beyond our ecclesial walls.

Whereas these might remain important disciplinary foci, the content we give to these sub-disciplines is crucial, as well as the interrelatedness between and among sub-disciplines, and across disciplinary fields.

I would propose pre-empting these, and other emphases, with a focus on theological method, and also spirituality. These are sorely missing elements in our theological formation, with theological method not intentionally presented, and spirituality being taught as part of systematic theology and ethics, but not as an important formational faith practice, or, even more, as the soil from which all our faith practices and disciplinary work should flow.

In my theological education, after six years of studies, I spent some time in Chicago as part of my postgraduate work. In one of my very first assignments, I was asked to describe my theological method in two pages. With shock, I realised that I did not have a theological method. We were offered the 'theological encyclopedia' which pretty much conditioned us into a particular way of theological thinking, instead of encouraging the embrace of our own theological method, through which we will develop independent and innovative theological constructs in engagement with our contexts. Over time, I developed a deliberately praxeological methodology

for doing theology, shaped by the work of Holland and Henriot (1983), and various liberation theologies.

Spirituality was never part of our intellectual endeavour, either as a subject to be considered in a systematic theological way, or as a faith practice, or – least of all – as the soil from which our theological work grows. It is the insistence of liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, that theological reflection is only the second step of our theological work. The first step, or moment, in our theological work, is our ‘lived faith’: how we seek to embody our faith in real-life contexts and practice our faith as ‘flesh-and-bone’ humans. Such ‘lived faith’ is the content of our spiritualities, and, for Gutierrez (1988:xxxiii–xxxiv) the first step – and ground – of our theological work. In much of Reformed theology, a preoccupation with Western rational thought has hindered us from the depths of immersion in imaginative theologies that are embodied, creative and Pentecostal in how the Spirit shapes our constructs contextually.

The different sub-disciplines within practical theology need to be revisited, enlarged, remixed or replaced.

The kerygmatic functions might now still include homiletics as the art of preaching (yet, whose preaching for which audiences?), but also the importance of evangelism, popular culture, faith formation and discipleship, complemented by being comfortable with the use of digital technologies. Mwenda Ntarangwi (2016) speaks of how hip-hop has claimed the ‘street as pulpit’ in the cities of Kenya, remaking the kerygmatic function in a way that connects to particular sections of contemporary urban youth culture.

The assertion of Moss Ntlha, General Secretary of The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA), is important in this regard. He states: ‘Good news is only good news when it is good news’. We have to consider the kerygmatic functions contextually, by asking whether what we present as good news is in fact good news in contexts where girls are raped trying to go to pit toilets in the middle of the night, or where housing is

perpetually precarious, or a simple plate of food once a day a huge luxury.

The liturgical aspect should include congregational worship, but also the ability to create public liturgies to be practiced outside of ecclesial spaces. In addition, the importance of inter-religious dialogue and collaboration in diverse urban contexts, needs to be addressed by curricula that want to be faithful to our contexts.

The content of theological work on youth ministry needs to expand in several ways. Much of youth ministry in mainstream theological formation focuses on young people inside ecclesial spaces but lacks a strong focus on large percentages of young people being perpetually precarious: an entire generation of young people who have little hope of gaining formal employment ever, who dropped out of school at a young age, and who lack basic infrastructure to support sustainable lives. Also lacking in much of our curricula is a much more specific focus on children and African child theologies. We remain largely silent, theologically, on the pre-adolescent. More than 70% of the urban populations of sub-Saharan Africa are under the age of 30 (Banks et al., 2022), often living in precarious contexts, and often socialised from a young age into a consciousness of victimhood. This needs to be broken. At the same time, such a youthful African urban population holds the promise of new perspectives, refusing to be beholden to dated and oppressive paradigms.

Diaconal aspects should develop a sensitivity for all four generations of David Korten's (1991:113–132) development paradigm, including ministries of relief and compassion, but also community development and community organising; political ministries of advocacy, justice and policymaking; and global movement building (cf. also De Beer, 2019:95–101). Instead of a human-centred focus, the totality of God's *oikos* needs to be the locale for our theological work, which implies that our diaconal formation also needs to centre the care of creation much more vigilantly.

Social entrepreneurship, centring African cities in our theological work, and a focus on the art of city-making, are all important aspects to be integrated into our theological work if we are to make incisive contributions to African futures. These should not be seen as sub-sub-disciplines of practical theology, but as different expressions of the diaconate, thinking collaboratively with other disciplines, whilst providing all these elements with theological foundations, content and rigour.

Whereas pastoral care had traditionally focused much on the individual or nuclear family, we live in societies where families are wounded, differently structured, and often not found in the nuclear unit. Pastoral care and counselling need to be aware of the complexities of African urban communities and tailored in accordance. The reality of homelessness, refugees and migration, and a generation of isolated, abandoned older persons, need also to be considered as part of our pastoral care. In addition, peacebuilding and reconciliation need to be emphasised, in contexts where violence, conflict, (post-) war and trauma are rife. A focus on gender and sexualities is particularly important in African cities today, as these are now contested terrains and in many African cities the tools – theologically and otherwise – simply do not exist to accompany people and society at large, responsibly and in healing-liberating ways, in terms of issues of gender and sexualities.

The focus on congregational development needs to be expanded to include the diversity of the ecumenical church in its continuous emergence. The majority church today in the African city is Pentecostal-Charismatic and African-initiated, and, again, without shifting gears to understand, support and reflect theologically with those in these traditions participating in our theological formation, also as academic leaders, we are out of depth, and we do not serve justice to those studying in schools like ours. In addition, the disciplines of church planting and emerging faith communities need to be studied and introduced, as well as the church's role in fostering *koinonia* inside the church, but also beyond

ecclesial boundaries, in solidarity with the totality of the human community.

An immediate response to the reflections I offered above, would be that the time and space simply do not exist in curricula to cater for all the themes I raise. That might very well be true, yet what I am raising is something deeper than a list of items to be addressed: I argue that we should simply be stopped in our tracks completely, by the multiple cries erupting from the African (urban) soil. These cries should inform our discernment of what we need to keep ourselves busy with theologically in decades to come. These cries should also inform our pedagogical approaches, which, if practised inside and with communities, might automatically surface many of the themes, and more, that I have raised here. The context is the best classroom and should deeply subvert and transform the classroom of the suburban theological campus.

Shaped by a spiritual and theological method of liberation

Informed by Robert McAfee Brown (1988), Donal Dorr (1988), Dorothee Soelle (2001), Vuyani Vellem (2007), and others, the importance of a spirituality that is intentionally liberative, and of a theological method oriented towards integral liberation in all aspects of life, undergird the theological engagements I opt for, and the work in our Centre for Faith and Community at the University of Pretoria. We rather err on the side of not being conventionally orthodox theologically, whilst discerning the ‘right practices’ in response to societal fractures and injustices.

In both our course work and pedagogical approaches, as well as our engaged research in and with communities, our commitment is towards multiple freedoms in the city – of people, places, neighbourhoods and creation – facilitated either through the presence and actions of faith communities or through solidarity with various other communities and movements. We seek to write our content in ways that prepare

students for liberative/transformational actions that can ensure a deep change in the forms of healing and justice.

At the same time, we hope that faith communities themselves will experience an increased sense of freedom – from structural impediments, doctrinal rigidities, and institutional inflexibilities, to discern the wineskins appropriate for them in relation to contemporary urban-rural contexts in Africa.

Practical theological scholarship as a liberating faith practice

In this section I present practical theological scholarship itself as a liberating faith practice, encompassing several key elements, namely; being grounded in a spirituality of liberation; engaged in practical theological scholarship, fusing incarnation, imagination, innovation, impact and collaboration; doing theology in transdisciplinary ways; and practising the dual task of research as transformation, as well as liberative pedagogies.

Grounded in a spirituality of liberation

The enterprise of doing theology at a university can easily be understood as a purely intellectual endeavour void of spirituality. The notion of foregrounding the practice of spirituality, or of considering the spirituality of theological education, has some accuse one of wanting to turn a university-based theology school into a seminary.

This is a mistaken accusation, as what is at stake here is something much deeper – what is at stake is the very way in which we understand and practice theology. Shaped by liberation theological paradigms, the neat dichotomies between spirituality, reflection and action, do not exist, as they are fused into a coherent theological method. We do action-reflection, grounded in a spirituality of liberation and oriented towards integral liberation transformation of individuals, spaces, institutions, and society as a whole.

The intellectual rigour is similar, but it requires a kind of humility that is only possible if grounding one's intellectual pursuit in a spirituality that acknowledges imperfection, brokenness, and complicity with a status quo that often denies the other. Doing theology from such a place of humble repentance, and accountability to the same other who have been denied, becomes liberating both to those of us doing theology, as well as those who serve as our interlocutors and companions on the journey, and those with whom we do theology in communities.

Engaged practical theological scholarship

Genevieve James (2022) provides compelling and fresh perspectives on the task of engaged scholarship. For James, engaged scholarship, practised at an engaged university, is integrative, collaborative scholarship, transforming how we teach, do research or engage with communities. She insists on an open university which connects internal and external ecosystems or communities for mutual gain. It is a scholarship practised in the community and through ethical, communal accountability. Drawing from the cues she provides, I unpack engaged practical theological scholarship here below, rather tentatively, using five critical elements of incarnation, imagination, innovation, impact, and collaboration.

Incarnation

Our theological work is often discarnate. It takes people out of their contexts into sanitised spaces, insulated from the urban cry. An incarnational approach to doing theology would include professors of theology asking more self-critical questions about their locatedness – where they stay, shop, socialise, teach, preach, contribute, or do their research. It would also include helping students to think critically about their self-location, whilst at the same time, through our pedagogical approaches, requiring and enabling incarnations into new and unknown territories. It would consider shifting the classroom into the city, where the precarity of the majority will disrupt our theological comfortabilities.

Liberating theologies can be fostered in multiple local communities of practice – where deep reflection, committed action, and lived faith are brought into conversation. This could be deliberately fostered in local congregations; base ecclesial communities; groups of social activists; shelter managers of homeless communities; LGBTIQ+ support groups; art collectives; support groups for survivors of trauma, violence or abuse; social movements; housing cooperatives, and so forth.

Incarnation combines deep immersion and robust socio-ecclesial analysis, which are the first two steps in Holland and Henriot's praxis cycle.

Imagination

Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann (1978; 1986) has gifted us beautiful and prophetic language on the imagination. In protesting the dominant consciousness or imagination with its enslavements and exclusionary practices, it is our ongoing theological vocation to discern and foster a hopeful, prophetic and alternative imagination, which is to name death, to foster new imaginaries of life, to plan for translating such imaginaries into sustainable actions, to implement and sustain such actions, and to ground the process in a spirituality of liberation or freedom. These are not illusionary, disembodied or 'pie-in-the-sky' imaginaries, but concrete and realistic (even if daring and audacious) imaginaries, crafted with and in communities and about real-life challenges.

The communities of practice I mentioned above, or the theological classroom, should be spaces of incarnation – namely, immersion and robust analysis – but should never be paralysing. It should at once also be spaces where our theological reflection on our immersions and analyses, should break open imaginative possibilities that could break cycles of death and exclusion. The work of imagination, for me, corresponds with the third step in Holland and Henriot's praxis cycle, namely the task of theological reflection.

Innovation

Nothing can leave us as defeated as imagination without action. We simply need to find ways, spaces and people, who can help translate brave visions into sustainable actions. Innovation speaks of the translation of imaginaries into brave new actions that transform the old into the new. It speaks of new ways for tackling old problems; imaginative ways that change the narrative; radical ways that uproot oppressive systems, replacing them with inclusive, life-affirming systems; changing hierarchical institutional culture for optimal participation; and breaking cycles of poverty, exclusion or abuse through new ways of being together in neighbourhoods or society (cf. Baregheh et al., 2009; Morgan, 2015; Schumpeter, 1983).

Innovative faith practices are at once critical (of that which does not work), constructive (in crafting new possibilities) and contextually appropriate and responsive. Innovative faith practices would explore how to do church differently, where the church has failed to be good news; how to do community development differently, where our diaconal responses fail to break cycles of systemic exclusion; doing worship and Christian religious education differently if these disciplines sanction the status quo instead of forming us into communities of radical compassion and brave justice; doing youth and children's ministry differently, through broadening the base to include children and young people traditionally falling outside the church's catch-nets; and doing prophetic action differently, by refusing to wait for hierarchical structures to speak on behalf of all of us, but, instead, fostering local faith-based agency that can organise, act, resist, and speak in a collective fashion.

If our (practical) theological education fails to foster incarnate, imaginative and innovative people of faith, faith communities and faith practices, our (practical) theological education fails. Such people, communities and practices will only be fostered if our (practical) theological education itself – in where and how it locates itself, in its pedagogical approach

and research commitments, and in the commitments and modelling of those who teach it – is incarnate, imaginative and innovative.

Impact

It becomes important to ask hard questions about the impact, not only of the church in society, in relation to society's hardest questions, but also about the impact of (practical) theological education in preparing the church to ask the hard questions and to engage society in numerous liberative and transformative ways.

We have to continuously assess our curricular content and commitments, as well as how our research contributes ethically to society in terms of measurable goals, making ourselves accountable to the church at large but also to the communities in which, and for which, we do research.

Ethical research should not only be a way to protect the research institution or the individual being interviewed. Ethical research should be asking how far our research contributes to the long-term freedoms, viability and sustainability of local neighbourhoods and vulnerable populations. The commitment of many universities to support the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), despite valid critique against the SDGs, provides a good framework and point of orientation for measuring impact. Part of measuring impact would be to support local communities towards attaining the SDGs, but, at the same time, to engage critically with the paradigms that gave birth to the SDGs, especially in its persistent and uncritical focus on economic growth, and the prominence of technocratic approaches as driver of change, instead of an ethic of change at the core of the SDGs, as proposed by Pope Francis (2015).

If practical theology is about the study of faith practice, we have to insist that we cannot simply recycle religious practices without clear intent. The impact of our engaged scholarship – both our research and pedagogy – as well as

the faith practices incubated, accompanied or critiqued by our scholarship, needs to be assessed in measurable ways.

Are there fewer homeless persons on the street, or more sustainable pathways out of homelessness for people in our city, because of the work we do around homelessness?

Are faith communities and non-profit organisations better equipped to deal with matters of social justice and reconciliation, with patriarchal inclinations and race-based exclusions, because of the formational work we do?

Are we seeing city-wide change in terms of access to primary healthcare, because of the collaborative approaches between health sciences, theology, geography, local faith communities and non-profit organisations, and the residents of the city?

Is violence in all its forms on the decline in the spaces where our students of theology find themselves being peacebuilders in comprehensive, shalom-like, ways?

Collaboration

Engaged scholarship generally, and engaged practical theological scholarship in particular, require collaborative approaches of engagement, both in research and in pedagogy. Such collaboration is often in the first place with church denominations or local faith communities but can also be with faith-based organisations and religious institutions of different faiths.

Doing theology in transdisciplinary ways

Such collaboration should also be with a range of disciplines at the university and other universities, all committed separately and together, to imagining and co-constructing flourishing African cities. In the case of our centre at the University of Pretoria, we work closely with departments as diverse as geography, architecture, town and regional planning and archaeology, anthropology and development studies, but also

with health sciences, occupational therapy, music therapy, and education.

In seeking to make urban change, academic research alone cannot achieve that without depth of relationships with local communities and community organisations, civil society and the non-profit sector, government at different levels, as well as others committed to the project of urban change-making.

I subscribe to a form of practical theology that is deliberately transdisciplinary in how it understands itself. What I described here above is captured in the work of people like Klein, Pieterse and others who describe trans-disciplinarity as different disciplines, working with communities and practitioners, to find solutions for real-life problems (cf. Klein 2001). Their definition of trans-disciplinarity provided me with language that described and interpreted our approach to practical theological action.

Those who assert the complexity of systems would perhaps struggle with such a solution-driven approach. However, my understanding of trans-disciplinarity is not in the least to deny complexity but, to the contrary, an assertion of the importance of different knowledge to be hosted equally and hospitably, precisely because singular approaches fail to engage complexity well.

Collaborative approaches are very deliberate about breaking down disciplinary, hierarchical and institutional silos, embracing the insights of 'the other' in their diverse expressions. In my mind, nothing might contribute as significantly to liberating faith practices, as well as how we practise the discipline of practical theology, than transdisciplinary work in close collaboration with communities, practitioners and a range of people from diverse disciplines.

In our work on homelessness, people with lived experience of homelessness as well as practitioners who engage homelessness and housing, city officials and politicians tasked with homelessness, as well as researchers

from diverse disciplines, all participate to construct new knowledge, and recommendations for new interventions, together. In the process, how we think about faith practices are altered and own faith practices get informed in ways that could help mediate more liberating outcomes for those served by them.

Research as transformation

Drawing from the assertion of Conti (2005), ‘the goal of research is not the interpretation of the world, but the organisation of transformation’. Too often (so-called) critical theological work only serves to deconstruct, without helping to shape new imaginaries and without contributing to constructing new paradigms, practices and ways of being together.

As suggested above, the very notion of ethical research should be revisited, and framed beyond technocratic tick-boxes, by asking how far our research truly contributes not only to liberation from deadly forces but also to processes of societal, community and personal transformation.

Again, in our Centre for Faith and Community, we opted for the approach of Chatterton, Hodkinson and Pickerill (2010), speaking of solidarity action research as their preferred approach to being in and with communities. Their critique of participatory action research is that it could allow for engaging communities on our terms, almost ‘faking’ participation, but only for as long as it is required to generate data or produce publications, after which we withdraw again. Solidarity action research locates itself in communities for the long haul, serving from below and from within, and allows for the agenda of the community to shape our research agenda.

A solidarity action research approach is consistent with an incarnational theological posture, which I suggest should be the task of engaged scholarship. Instead of aloof, disembodied rhetoric, a society like ours – with its deep inequalities, fragmentations and sicknesses – needs a new kind of proximate, embodied scholarship.

The kind of research flowing from such an approach would document local processes and narratives, retrieve untold stories and unmask oppressive stories, capacitate local communities through skills transfer and collaborative knowledge generation, and participate in advocating for transformation that is also deeply systemic.

Over the past few years, one of the exciting discoveries for us was how becoming a research partner of local communities and activist groups – such as Lawyers for Human Rights, the Tshwane Homelessness Forum, the Tshwane Leadership Foundation, the Eersterust Housing Association, the Woodlane Village Community Leaders, and a host of local churches and community-based organisations, not only serve to support their on-going work for the city's shalom, but also provide vocational depth to how we understand liberative theological work.

Liberative pedagogies

If our theological education only serves to lead people out of communities of poverty and into middle-class numbness, we have failed dismally in terms of the mandate of Christ. If we are to equip (urban) faith-based leaders who can design and implement liberative faith practices in complex and broken contexts, our pedagogies need to be disruptive of the status quo, transgressive in design, and subversive in impact. Florence (1998) writes of Bell Hooks' pedagogy as follows:

Bell Hooks' (1994c) engaged pedagogy, explicated in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, goes beyond developing students to achieve a prescribed level of literacy, the development of professional skills and/or conformity to the status quo, to nurture a reflective and critical stance to social realities. (Florence, 1998)

Transgressive pedagogies are designed to challenge to disrupt patriarchal, class-based and neoliberal capitalist norms; the exclusivist city that guarantees rights only to some; and a profit-driven, human-centred society that subdued God's

good creation in its own interests. Instead, transgressive pedagogies allow for ‘the incorporation of passion’ (Florence, 1998) – both in the sense of deep solidarity with the passion/suffering of the world, but also of a deep commitment to the healing and wholeness of this world, replacing an oppressive consciousness with a life-affirming, liberating consciousness, and replacing profit-driven, human-centred imaginaries, with imaginaries that will celebrate the entirety of God’s new household (cf. Russell, 1987).

What our pedagogies should be doing, in line with gospel imperatives, is to consistently deconstruct the dominant consciousness – that is out to ‘kill, steal and destroy’, and foster an alternative consciousness – that is hell-bent on mediating ‘life in abundance’, for all people and creation (John 10:10). Theologising that is not about being disciplined into the mind, heart, commitments and passion of Christ – confronting vestiges of power that are life-denying – is a purely rational exercise, contributing to the death of the city.

It is almost impossible to foster such engaged pedagogy (Florence, 1998), without rooting it in a praxeological approach that insists on ongoing incarnational immersion; continuous, critical socio-ecclesial analysis; theological reflection that names death and imagines life; and proposals for how alternative theological (and urban) imaginaries can be translated through concrete socio-ecclesial practices, public policies, and collaborative city-making processes. At the core of a praxeological approach, however, both rooting it, but also propelling it beyond rigidities and orthodoxies, are vibrant spiritualities of life and justice.

Liberative pedagogies grounded in a spirituality of the resurrection will always see the possibility of justice beyond oppression, a voice beyond repression, dignity beyond violence or shame, and regeneration beyond decay. Liberative pedagogies grounded in a spirituality of the cross will help us remain humble, aware of our imperfections and complicities with death at work; indeed, with our own frail and dying selves; offering ourselves humbly as servants of processes

much larger than ourselves. Liberative pedagogies will continuously liberative all of us engaged in the classroom – students, teachers and communities alike – in awe of the grace that holds us, despite ourselves.

The city as our classroom

It is almost unthinkable that liberating faith practices in evolving African cities can be fostered away from the demands, cries and intensities of the city itself. It is in the city as a classroom that engaged scholarship, transdisciplinary creativity, and liberative pedagogy, can best be practised (cf. De Beer & Hugo, 2022:23–37).

We have to subvert the suburban classroom – and all it represents – by ‘shifting the geography of reason’ quite literally into contested urban spaces. What we fail to convey through our many words and gestures, the city can do in powerful ways, if we only allow her.

Mobile classrooms, urban studios and CityLabs, relocating ourselves and our families, relocating our theological institutions and research hubs, will all speak of a commitment to the majority populations of the African city – who are not the small suburban elites shaping urban futures, but the 62% living in urban slums and informal settlements.

Unless we do theology from within – and radically with – the spaces where the majority carves out lives, resiliently, yet against the odds, the futures of African cities might indeed be bleak. The disconnectedness of the urban elite, and elitist theological enterprises, can only insulate itself for so long. At some point, Africa’s urban revolution might not only be in terms of the swelling numbers of urban migrants, or the abundance of creative and exciting urban responses, but also in the anger of the dispossessed who have simply had enough and have nothing to lose.

Now is the time to act. Because tomorrow might be late.

Bibliography

- Ackerman, D., & Bons–Storm, R. 1998. *Liberating faith practices: Feminist practical theologies in context*. Leuven, Belgium: Peeters.
- Banks, N., Starc Card, K., Dessie, E., Marcus, R., & Nicolai, S. 2022. *Youth empowerment and development in African cities*. Manchester, UK: African Cities Research Consortium. Retrieved 20 March 2024, from <https://www.african-cities.org/youth-empowerment-and-development-in-african-cities/>
- Baregheh, A., Rowley, J., & Sambrook, S. 2009. Towards a multidisciplinary definition of innovation. *Management Decision*, 47(8), 1323–1339. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00251740910984578>
- Brueggemann, W. 1978. *The prophetic imagination*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Brueggemann, W, 1986. *Hopeful imagination: Prophetic voices in exile*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Chatterton, P., Hodkinson, S., & Pickerill, J. 2010. Beyond scholar activism: Making strategic interventions inside and outside the neoliberal university. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies*, 9(2), 245–275. Retrieved from <https://acme-journal.org/index.php/acme/article/view/868>
- Conti, A. 2005. *Research as a political method*. Metropolitan proletarian research. Retrieved from <http://www.ecn.org/valkohaalarit/english/conti.htm>
- De Beer, S. 2019. Liberating urban development and the South African church: A critical reflection in conversation with David Korten and Gustavo Gutierrez. *Concilium*, 2019, Issue 1, 95–101. <https://doi.org/10.1353/trn.2019.0008>
- De Beer, S., & Hugo, J. 2022. A university of the city: Shifting classrooms, emerging solutions, deepening change. In Crewe, M. (Ed.), *Institutional curiosity*, pp. 23–37. Pretoria; ESI Press, University of Pretoria.

Chapter 11

- Dorr, D. 1985. *Spirituality and justice*. Dublin, UK: Gill & Company.
- Florence, N. 1998. A critical analysis of bell hooks' engaged pedagogy: A transgressive education for the development of critical consciousness. ETD Collection for Fordham University. AAI9975348. <https://research.library.fordham.edu/dissertations/AAI9975348>
- Francis. 2015. *Laudato si'*: *Encyclical letter*. Vatican Press. Retrieved 20 March 2024, from https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html
- GCRO (Gauteng City-Region Observatory). 2022. *The Gauteng city-region*. Retrieved from <https://www.gcro.ac.za/>
- Gutiérrez, G. 1988. *A Theology of liberation: History, politics, and salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Holland, J., & Henriot, P. (1983). *Social analysis: Linking faith and justice*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Hooks, B. 1994. *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Hoornweg, D., & Pope, K. 2016. Population predictions for the world's largest cities in the 21st century. *Environment & Urbanization*, 29(1): 195–216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247816663557>
- Istanbul Africa Trade Company. 2018. *Top 25 largest cities in Africa*. <https://www.istanbulafrika.com/top-25-largest-and-fastest-growing-cities-in-africa/>
- James, G. 2022. *Engaged Scholarship* [Paper presentation]. The City is [NOT] a Tree: The Urban Ecologies of Divided Cities, 6 July 2022, Pretoria.
- Klein, J.T., Grossenbacher-Mansu, W., Hiiberli, R., Bill, A., Scholz, W.S., & Welb, M. (Eds.). 2001. *Transdisciplinarity: Joint problem solving among science, technology, and society*. Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser Verlag GmbH. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-0348-8419-8>

- Korten, D. 1991. *Getting to the 21st century. Volunteer action and the global agenda*. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press.
- McAfee Brown, R. 1988. *Spirituality and liberation: Overcoming the great fallacy*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Morgan, J. 2015. *What's the difference between invention and innovation?* Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jacobmorgan/2015/09/10/whats-the-difference-between-invention-and-innovation/?sh=6ec9489670f4>
- Ntarangwi, M. 2016. *The street is my pulpit: Hip hop and Christianity in Kenya*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press. <https://doi.org/10.5406/illinois/9780252040061.001.0001>
- Parnell, S., & Pieterse, E. (Eds.). 2014. *Africa's urban revolution*. London: Zed Books. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350218246.ch-001>
- Pieterse, E., & Simone, A.M. (Eds.). 2013. *Rogue urbanism: Emergent African cities*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media and African Centre for Cities.
- Russell, L. 1987. *Household of freedom: Authority in feminist theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Schumpeter, J.A. 1983. *The theory of economic development: an enquiry into profits, capital, credit, interest, and the business cycle*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Soelle, D. 2001. *The silent cry: Mysticism and resistance*. Minneapolis, MO: Fortress Pres.,
- Vellem, V.S, 2007. *The symbol of liberation in South African public life: A black theological perspective*. PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.
- Viau, M. 1999. *Practical theology: A new approach*. Leiden, Boston, Cologne: Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004665651>
- Vidal, J. 2018. The 100 million city: Is 21st century urbanisation out of control? *The Guardian*, 19 March 2017. Retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/mar/19/urban-explosion-kinshasa-el-alto-growth-mexico-city-bangalore-lagos>