

Space, Place and the Church: Fostering a Consciousness and a Theology of Spatial Justice in South African Churches

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Abstract

Located within the wider questions that the South African church is asking about the relationship between reconciliation and restitution in post-apartheid South Africa, this article tracks the emergence of a movement of churches seeking to address the urban and rural land restitution question and puts it into conversation with the praxis of spatial justice. The authors introduce insight into the history of land and specifically church land in South Africa and explore what actions have been taken towards restitution of church-owned land and what this means for the development of a theology of spatial justice. Additionally, it includes an overview of South African churches' declarations on land over the last thirty years and what has been done since these declarations. Finally, the authors will look at how these actions help develop a theology of spatial justice for a renewed praxis on land and space in South Africa.

Keywords: South Africa; church; land; spatial justice

This article puts the history of the South African story of land dispossession into conversation with the posture and position of land-owning church denominations and congregations in rural and urban areas of the country and asks pertinent questions of spatial justice as part of this dialogue. The authors offer this transdisciplinary conversation as a critical contribution to a public theology discourse located in arguably one of South Africa's most pressing political and theological intersectional issues: church, land and spatial justice. Through this conversation we propose that 1) an understanding of our history, 2) an honest naming of the role of the church in this history, 3) a social analysis of the current status quo informed by theories and theologies of spatial justice and 4) the surfacing of hopeful church-based case studies of spatial justice can work together to foster a renewed and just praxis by churches in the public realm for the future of South Africa.

1 History of Land in South Africa

The history of South African land is one marred with conflict and dispossession. On the arrival of white settlers in 1652, the communal land values were erased in favour of market-related 'open' market.¹ In 1658, there was the first formal act of forced relocation, when Jan van Riebeeck said that the Khoi communities could not live on the west of the Liesbeeck and Salt Rivers.² The 1913 Land Act banned the purchase of land by Africans outside of the specified reserves.³ These reserves were then the only places where Africans could legally occupy land.⁴ This Act effectively reduced land that Africans could use and changed the landscape of ownership through legislature.

In 1991, roughly 80% of the South African population were banned from owning or leasing land in over 80% of the country.⁵ The white population (14% of the total population at the time) owned 83% of the land (including 16% owned by the then government and its agencies).⁶ It is this early dispossession and unequal distribution that contributes to the inequality of ownership today. Numerous people and groups who submitted restitution claims before 1998 have still not received land, despite signed settlement agreements in some instances, showing failures in the land reform programme started after 1994.⁷

2 Church Land History in South Africa

Land is central to the history of the church in South Africa. Large pieces of land were acquired for the formation of mission stations and, thus the church became the owner of large pieces of land in the rural areas.⁸ Land was acquired by settler/colonial churches through multiple means including purchase and grants from chiefs and/or colonial authorities.⁹ In terms of dispossession, the church cannot be seen as a homogenous group since there are sharp differences in policy between churches and between different sections of the same churches.¹⁰ However, it is clear that the church operated in and gained land space during the unjust acquisition of land pre-1994, and thus is complicit in the process of dispossession.¹¹ In the deeds search done by the Church Land Programme in the late 1990s, it is found that the mainstream churches (which include the Lutheran, Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and United Congregational churches) had an estimated 182983 hectares of land over 2053 properties, showing great extent of ownership.¹² So, what declarations has the church at large made over and about its land, in a country marred by dispossession?

The movement towards a more radical approach to land reform and how this relates to theological discourses in South Africa is powerfully explored by Takatso Mofokeng in *Land is our Mother: A Black Theology of Land*.

A brutal dispossession of African land has been legitimized and legalized in the Codesa agreement. This means that a white theology that attributes the criminal dispossession to God viz. that God gave them land, has been given State sanction. In this regard instead of calling that violent dispossession a sin, it has been turned into God's blessing. This further means that our dispossession has been turned into God's act of punishment which Africans have to painfully accept.... [W]e also have to conclude that socially speaking, a Black Theology of land that is developed upon the basis of the fundamental illegitimacy and sinfulness of dispossession, has to oppose the political compromise that provided the basis for legalization of the sin of land dispossession. That compromise is a sin because it legalized a sinful act of land dispossession. It is also a sin because it legalized the creation of a perpetual state of poverty and loss of culture and identity of the African people. It laid the political basis for the development of a heretical theology of land.¹³

There is much to be done to bring the South African church into meaningful conversation with and alongside people's land justice movements of our country who cry "Land for people, not for profit!"¹⁴ and "*Umhlaba – Izindlu – neSithunzi* [Land – Housing – Dignity]".¹⁵

Since the announcement by President Cyril Ramaphosa in December 2017 that the ruling party has 'resolved that the expropriation of land without compensation should be among the mechanisms available to the government to give effect to land reform and redistribution',¹⁶ the questions of land ethics and praxis have crept back into the consciousness of the South African

church.¹⁷ We, the authors of this article, who are both church and justice practitioners and engaged theologians, became aware of many forums being held and hosted across the country, in theological institutes, local churches, para-church organisations and ecumenical gatherings to discuss theologies of land and an appropriate church-led response to these renewed public commitments to land reform. However, this is not a new conversation. While lacking consistency and perseverance, unity and widespread support from across the board, ecumenical and denominational church expressions have nevertheless had this question on their agenda for decades. A number of these are listed below:

The 1990 Rustenburg Declaration (that emerged from a gathering of delegates from 85 South African churches that was, to date, one of the most representative church conferences ever held in South Africa) stated:

After decades of oppression, the removal of discriminatory laws will have to be accompanied by affirmative acts of restitution in the fields of health care, psychological healing, education, housing, employment, economic infrastructure, and especially land ownership. For many years, greed has led to the taking of land from the poor and weak. But church and state must address the issue of restoring land to dispossessed people.¹⁸

Recommendations to the faith community from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission final report contained in Volume 4, Chapter 3 includes the call for a Church Land Audit.¹⁹ Furthermore, the ‘Consultation on the Effective Use of Church Land’ (released in 1998 by the South African Council of Churches; Surplus People’s Project; National Land Commission) developed an extensive policy framework including theology and outlines for the way forward to be adopted by churches.²⁰ Moreover, the 1999 Church Land Programme’s ‘Bulletin for Contextual theology: The Land Issue’, includes excellent scholarly work on the issue and the report of a preliminary church land audit.²¹

Professor Lungisile Ntsebeza, wrote on church land in 2005 in ‘Land Tenure Reform in South Africa: A Focus on the Moravian Church Land in the Western Cape’ and includes a summary of the response and follow up to the previous commitments, declarations and policy frameworks.²² Statements from the heads of various denominations on the role the church should play a role in South African land reform. For example, in 2018, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba of the Anglican Church made a call for the church to “Infuse land debate with Gospel values”.²³

In their report of an in-depth church land audit they did with nine mainline church denominations, Graham Philpott and Phumani Zondi state: ‘The type of land owned by the church ranges from small urban plots for a local church building to large rural farms for both residential and agricultural purposes.’²⁴

Philpott and Zondi’s assertion that for effective land redistribution to happen at the hand of the church in South Africa rural and peri-urban church land is a critical area of engagement due to the fact that the largest areas of unused or underutilised church owned land exists in the rural areas of the country which face the effects of poverty and inequality in devastating ways.²⁵ We affirm this emphasis on rural poverty and rural church owned land and to that end we include case studies of rural and peri-urban church land and property engagements across the country, as well as case studies from urban and suburban settings. These case studies and reflections have been gleaned through both formal research that has been undertaken as well as the authors

ongoing involvement with church land and spatial justice praxis and the emerging stories in the sector.

3 Actions Taken by Churches after Consultations and Declarations

After declarations on land were made, there were some churches that took these declarations to heart and began to do some work. The South African Catholic Bishops' Conference embarked on a land audit that was completed in 2012. In the audit, the South African Catholic Bishops Conference (SACBC) tasked various institutions to help them track the extent of their land ownership.²⁶ Then, they tracked the actions for key land pockets and any issues blocking reform in those dioceses.²⁷ After the audit, there were some pockets of land that were donated and a vision for land reform for the church was also developed.²⁸

One of the projects of land donation was that of the diocese of Marriannahill.²⁹ The project, begun by Bishop Mngoma in the late 1990s, ended up having 8 farms at a total of 2500 hectares donated in a partnership with the funding agent Miseror and Department of Land Affairs (now known as the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform).³⁰ This project included a complex action of land donation that inspired joy at ownership and disappointment at the continued lack of farming education to develop fruitful land.³¹

Another example of action is the land audit from the Methodist church. During the 1998 Triennial Conference on Land Reform Resolution, the following was confessed: 'the Methodist Church of Southern Africa was involved in land dispossession in the past, and the ineffective use of the glebes.'³²

The Methodist Church then proceeded to embark on an audit of the extent of their land and how it could possibly be used in a transformative manner.³³ The audit consisted of a review of legislation, policy documents and secondary literature as well as visits to provinces for the collection and analysis of data for the land sites.³⁴ After the land audit was conducted, the Methodist church did an analysis on the land use for the church.³⁵

These churches reflect actions based on declarations on land. Having had convictions on their role in land reform in South Africa, they made steps to play that role in society. However, what questions have arisen after 1994 on the church's role in land reform and is there a true emergence of churches that aim to address the urban and rural land question? To this we now turn.

4 An Emergence of a Movement of Churches Seeking to Address the Urban and Rural Land Question

After 1994, there was an emergence of grassroots movements around land rights and reform. An example of these is the Church Land Programme, which initially helped churches do audits on their land develop transformative ideas on its reform.³⁶ However, its mandate has now changed to communicating with and advocating for the poor and letting them know their land rights.³⁷ They also develop contextual bible studies on land. However, the radical nature of organisations like these have not filtered through to a majority of churches in South Africa.³⁸

Stephan de Beer writes extensively about the shortcomings of churches in developing a theology related to land. De Beer says that churches wanted to keep in touch with the land question but could not locate themselves as key players in and occupiers of space.³⁹ Neither do

they recognise the role they play unpacking future actions.⁴⁰ Furthermore, churches make theological statements with their space without realising it.⁴¹ A majority of churches have a seemingly missing consciousness about their spaces and no theology that would guide their thinking on space and land.

For city dwellers located in the comfort and relative isolation of the affluent and spacious (in terms of land and occupation density) suburbs that surround our cities, the land question may feel far away from home, or limited to decisions that the government might make on our behalf. However, the concept of spatial justice, or injustice, informs every aspect of our lives from how long it takes us to get to work and how long it takes for those who work in our homes to get to us; to who we really consider the legitimate citizens of our neighbourhoods and therefore who gets to make decisions about the spatial trajectories of our ever-morphing urban landscape. Urban and suburban areas have layer upon layer of history, the very streets, commons and buildings carrying stories of violence, displacement, homemaking and homecoming. Moreover, what stories do the church buildings and spaces that people of faith occupy in our urban and suburban landscape carry? And who is listening to and responding to these stories?

Ann Morisy, reflecting from the context of the suburban church in the United Kingdom, states:

The Church, like every other agency, finds it hard to challenge the dishonesty and denial that infect suburban and affluent living. Challenging ‘the mainstream’ risks biting the hand that feeds us, and risks onlookers inspecting our lifestyle and wagging their heads as they find it no different from their own. Talk is cheaper than authentic action in relation to the affliction of suburban life. So far, the Church has found it more acceptable to speak up on behalf of the poor than to confront the mainstream culture which forms us so excessively. Furthermore, the terrain of urban and liberation theology is more the stuff of drama and passion; in comparison, suburban theology sounds a little sad.⁴²

In order for the theology and praxis from suburban church spaces to answer the invitations issued by spatial justice, it will require the kind of leaders that are ready and prepared to confront this mainstream culture that shapes us as well as to listen to, imagine with and have their plans shaped by the stories and counsel of landless people in the cities where their suburbs exist as islands. Rudi Swanepoel, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in Johannesburg that has developed a residential community for vulnerable urban young adults using church owned property, reflects on the relationship of the church and church-goers in the urban setting with people for whom the city is an insecure and dangerous place:

Notions of normality are challenged, arguing that all bodies who seek safety in Christian communities should be welcomed, albeit that hospitality is not to be separated from processes of discernment. The main argument is built around the hypothesis that an adequate understanding of Christian hospitality in an urban (congregational) context centres around the notions of marginality, proximity and vulnerability.⁴³

As researchers interested in the full picture of the South African churches relationship to land, space and place, we have also endeavoured to also find case studies of an urban and suburban praxis that reflects liberation, transformation, restitution and restoration through the local church. Many of these case studies are hard to find as documented reflections and this is certainly an ongoing piece of academic work that could serve the South African church, enabling us to learn from unfolding praxis, past mistakes and stories to celebrate.

Yeast City Housing is a Christian Housing Company based in Tshwane that has, over the last twenty years developed 1261 affordable housing units in the inner city, 198 of these in creative partnerships with churches: church owned land, buildings or space (including the sky above the church buildings).⁴⁴ An inspiring example of this is the Methodist church in inner city Pretoria that made roof space available on the first floor of their property for the development of 27 communal housing units, one institutional housing unit – complementing its creative combination of worship facility and a home to small enterprises, a day care centre, a HIV/AIDS care centre and a refugee office.⁴⁵ The complex is called Living Stones and George Mokadi, a resident of the complex and caretaker of the property, describes it as more than a building: ‘This is a safe place and we look after the people who live here well. Some come for one year, some for three, and then they leave when they are able to. And some call this home – they say they feel safe when they are here.’⁴⁶ When describing ways of dealing with community conflict, he says: ‘We have a meeting and discuss it, there is process, a graceful process. That is something I brought from the village which helps us here. And many people here are from the villages actually, and they ended up here. we have a good atmosphere where people care’.⁴⁷

In another example, the Christian Reformed Church in Salvokop, Tshwane, sold their church far below market prices to Yeast City Housing who created a multi-purpose community centre, day care centre and a high quality block of flats with 88 self-contained housing units on the plot.⁴⁸

At the Andrew Murray Dutch Reformed Church in Johannesburg, young people without community in the city live with other young people who feel compelled to share their lives with others.⁴⁹

This ‘community’ are housed on the church premises in what was previously a retreat centre. The centre consisted of 20 rooms, each with a sleeping area, built-in cupboard and washroom. Initially, the idea of starting a community of young people on the church premises was met with resistance. A few concerned church council members struggled to understand how we could possibly encourage (and welcome) people to live on the premises, a public space, churchgoing people’s territory, while their pastor and his family were living there too! They wanted to know whether it would be fine with me if we basically shared the same living space. Yet another group thought it improper that we take in complete strangers and anticipated that safety (of church staff and people attending church services and meetings) would be a challenge. Were we prepared to expose ourselves to the uncertainty, the risk? Finally, after much deliberation and discernment and with very little structure in terms of management, the decision was made to ‘welcome strangers into our community’. Echo@work was born, a Christian hospitable community where disconnected young people were to find a home and a supportive family. Following in the footsteps of the Pretoria Echo communities, Echo@work started to host a monthly supper where anyone from the congregation is invited and welcome to attend. It is normally a simple meal, where there is absolutely no expectation other than to spend time together. Congregation members are still getting used to the idea that they do not need to show up at these suppers with a plan to change the world, but that it is good enough to simply be with the Echo@work people, sharing a simple meal.⁵⁰

In another example in Cape Town, the Central Methodist Mission owns a building that over the years has been used for various ministry uses including as a home for vulnerable girl children, but in 2016 had been standing empty for some time due to lack of funds available to

the church. Through a partnership between this church, other churches responding to the needs of vulnerable students that were highlighted during the student protests of 2016 and the local Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) that ministers at the nearby Cape Peninsula University of Technology campus, it was decided to seek investment to transform the building into affordable community housing for students. Finances came via another church partnership, and the student residence was launched by the end of 2016, with local pastoral care offered for the students living there from the Methodist church and YMCA.

The emergence of a strong grassroots-led social movement for spatial justice in the inner city Cape Town has met a mixed response from churches, but over time bonds of true friendship, solidarity and mutual support are growing between the movement, churches, faith based non-governmental organisations and individual Christians. As these bonds and bridges grow, trust grows and people in the church and faith-based sector have started to look to the movement as teachers and voices of growing consciousness, seeking assistance in addressing their own complicity with spatial injustice. In some sectors of faith in the city, especially amongst younger Christians seeking a praxis of liberation, such social movements are even experienced as a strong prophetic voice for transformation although they do not use religious language or rhetoric. Reciprocally, leaders in the movement have been able to turn to the faith-based sector for psycho-social support, conflict mediation, holding sacred space at inter-faith events and presence at life celebration moments.

In all these examples, sometimes unlikely alliances and courageous counter-stories to the status quo, something deeper than just social housing emerges. Something that speaks perhaps more to a sense of space and place in the city, a departure from traditional models of church-based charity or even community development and an interdependent movement more towards Soja's principles of spatial thinking: the essential spatiality of being; the social production of spatiality and the mutual shaping process of the social and the spatial.⁵¹

5 An Emergence of Spatial Conscious, Spatial Justice and Reimagined Living

In the context of the wide and sometimes overwhelming conversation about church and land reform in post-colonial contexts such as South Africa, it is possible to begin to develop a lived theology of spatial justice. But what is spatial justice? Edward Soja, a thought leader in urban planning says that space is a strong influencing force in society and in every context.⁵² If spaces are socially created and are shaped by human actions, then they can also be positively transformed by human intervention.⁵³ Spaces are not unchangeable. They can be transformed through action seeking justice by increasing positive consequences of spaces for people of a nation or context. Therefore, spatial justice is found in positive spatial consequences for those who live in said spaces. The Centre for Contextual Ministry at the University of Pretoria defines spatial injustice as the 'ways in which socio-economic injustice, political injustice, gender injustice and all other forms of injustice are often expressed spatially, especially in a post-colonial and post 1994 South Africa'.⁵⁴ They also ask, 'How can local churches and people of faith contribute to socio-spatial justice through (i) creative solidarities with different people's movements, (ii) availing or sharing their own land and property, and (iii) participating in acts of restoration / restitution?'⁵⁵ de Beer notes:

[s]hould a theological agenda for spatial justice be embraced more fully, it would out of necessity have to start with critical self-reflection, acknowledging theological and ecclesial complicity in colonial constructs of power, capital and city-making. This would include the way in which the church benefited unjustly from the 1913 Native

Land Act without having done serious introspection or reflection on the possibility or imperative of engaging in acts of restitution, as well as current ways in which churches are stewards of land or property, but also how individual Christians contribute to spatial (in)justice through everyday practices.⁵⁶

South African spatial injustice is very much linked to the unequal land space dynamics in South Africa, which aid negative ownership consequences in a country which has a majority still owning the minority of land.⁵⁷ Churches have the opportunity to begin unpacking the spaces around them and developing a theology of spatial justice by looking at examples of a lived theology of spatial justice. Examples like the Catholic Church land audit, donation of land and creation of an agricultural program for beneficiaries show living conviction that church land must have a positive effect on spaces around them.⁵⁸ These types of examples are lights that illuminate the road to a theology of spatial justice.⁵⁹ Additionally, churches can develop a consciousness of the spaces around them by locating themselves in the story of oppression and begin to track their possible story of oppression. Finally, churches can begin to develop a theology of spatial consciousness through a spatial consciousness in biblical reading and tracking life giving acts in the bible.⁶⁰ Spatial consciousness in biblical reading can include looking critically at God's words on land, with special reference to how God builds land power dynamics within Israel.⁶¹ Also, spatial reading of the Bible could include looking in-depth at how Jesus Christ traverses the Holy Land and what and how Jesus Christ speaks in each space. Moreover, seeking out and leaning on acts in the bible that act against empire and capitalist style of shaping space. These acts can include the radical horizontal living of the early church in Luke-Acts⁶² and the inverted asset living amongst the disciples and early believers of Jesus Christ. These can help develop characteristics of a non-oppressive way of living that feeds into spatial justice.⁶³

6 Conclusion

Spatial justice is an emerging concept in urban planning. However, it serves a true purpose in guiding convictions on the need for space to be life-giving for all who exist in it. This spark should be used to create a (lived) theology of creating just and non-oppressive spaces. A combination of examples and a lived theology fleshed out can be a possible guide for an emergence of space reform in and through churches in South Africa and other contexts.⁶⁴ Public theology relates intricately with the public square, or rather public space, and this article addresses the possibility of a theology of spatial justice in churches in South Africa. Space, equity, and justice for all is very much linked to the public square and thus public theology. As theological researchers who are also people of faith, churchgoers, and justice practitioners in our own contexts, we found each other in this quest to explore a land and spatial justice praxis with faith communities in South Africa. Through our partnership we consistently need to acknowledge the vastly different worlds of our country that our lives represent and how our family histories, life experiences, current realities and even our physical presence and bodies come to bear in the spaces and places we occupy both separately and when we work together towards this common vision. We believe that there is a growing movement and community of people from across the spectrum of the South African church context who are hungry to see land and space returned, redeemed and renewed from within the heart of the church, fuelled by a deeply theological conviction and a desire to see the deferred hope and longing of the land realised in our lifetime. As the authors of this article, we hope that our offering and ongoing partnership can contribute to fostering this national movement that will see the many convictions, declarations and commitments find true expression in all aspects of South African society, and that the church of South Africa will find herself as an integral part of this story. It

is also our conviction and hope that all who engage with these stories and reflections from the South African context will be able to draw the lines of connection to the histories and current stories of the Church in their own spaces. As the South African land story is in fact a story of spatial injustice seen globally, the effects of globalisation on local economies, land and spatial justice come to bear on space and place across the globe. As churches across the world continue to own and occupy contested spaces, there is a compelling opportunity to join the movement towards embracing a praxis of spatial justice in practical and public ways, starting with what is in their hands.

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