

# Theological education and African cities

## An imperative for action

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### Abstract

Africa's urban explosion presents a clear challenge to the way theological education in Africa is done today. The backdrop of this article is a collaborative research project that involved 15 theological institutions across the African continent, contemplating what theological education and formation should look like, considering Africa's current and future urban realities. It proposes paradigmatic shifts in theological education, grounded in thorough conceptual and hermeneutical self-critique. It explores various approaches to urbanising theological curricula and concludes with a call for a new kind of African urban apostolate.

## 1. Introduction

If the African church is to be an appropriate witness to the redemptive and liberating mission of God, models of theological education need to be developed that give priority and centrality to urban African realities. Without the centrality of urban Africa in our theological education and formation, the next century will be known in history as the one in which the church and theology failed the continent collectively, and completely. This time, however, it would not be the doing of a colonial Christianity, but the failure of the African church and theological educators to place an urban agenda centre-stage, and to shape a new generation of faith-based leaders, apt in their presence and response to African urban contexts.

This article describes a collective research project that explored Africa's urban futures by 2030/50, and what re-imagined theological education/formation had to look like if it was to prepare a generation of African urban leaders able to appropriately facilitate flourishing urban environments. It considers a number of shifts in doing urban theological education, introduces concrete institutional forms that might embody such shifts, and provides a brief overview of current attempts at urbanizing theological education in the City of Tshwane. This is a rather introductory

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article, and – as part of a broader collective of research contributions to reimagining urban theological education in the African city – hopes to stimulate more deliberate reflection on how the city presents not only a challenge to how we do theological education, but also how the city as locale could provide the epistemic catalyst for liberating and transforming theological education.

## 2. Africa's urban explosion

The African continent has entered its urban century. Being slowest to urbanise, historically, projections are that Africa's rate of urbanisation is now surpassing that of other continents, including Latin America and Asia. Estimates are that Africa would have 1,2 billion urban dwellers by 2050, compared to the current urban population of 414 million people (Parnell & Pieterse, 2014).

The City of Kinshasa will grow from an already staggering 13 million people in 2019, to be among the seven biggest cities in the world by 2035, with an estimated 26 million people (Thornton, 2019). With its current socio-economic, physical, and institutional infrastructure, the city is hardly able to cope. With such growth estimates, it almost sounds like a horrific sci-fi movie.

Cities like Bangui in Central African Republic, Brazzaville in the Congo, and Khartoum in Sudan, count among the 10 cities in the world with the lowest quality of life – in terms of poverty, violence, political security and access to socio-economic and health infrastructure – with little prospect of hopeful change any time soon, and almost no infrastructure able to manage these cities into the future (cf. Brinded, 2016).

The Gauteng City-Region, arguably the wealthiest metropolitan area on the African continent, including Johannesburg, Pretoria/Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, and smaller municipalities, grew from about 8 million people in 2000 to 15,7 million in 2019 (GCRO, 2019), and is still growing exceedingly.

In addition, African urbanisation is largely informal, and places like Addis Ababa (Habitat for Humanity, 2017) and Kampala (Darmanin, 2012) accommodate 70-80% of their populations in urban slums and informal settlements. The precariousness of housing, health care, sanitation, and access to water and food, are often associated challenges of such communities.

What exasperates possible constructive responses to Africa's urbanisation, is the difficulty to establish an equal baseline to work from across the continent. Huge disparities exist, and this is as evident in terms of knowledge infrastructure, the availability of and access to reliable data on urban issues, and the existence of trans-disciplinary urban think-tanks that are able to imagine urban futures proactively.

Unlike the sophisticated data on quality of life, broken down per geographical area for the Gauteng City-Region, developed and archived by the Gauteng City-

Region Observatory,<sup>2</sup> similar data is simply unavailable in cities like Cotonou or Libreville.

In spite of the obvious challenges and shortcomings, though, African cities simultaneously offer vast classrooms for innovation, resilience and creative insurgencies. Pieterse (2013:24) speaks of the “lived vitalities of African cities”, particularly clear from “literary works, finely crafted anthropological studies, films, and, sometimes, investigative reportage” (Pieterse, 2013:24). Pieterse (2013:25-26) argues for “an alternative reading of the African city” that is not limited to victimhood, poverty, and violence, but able to also discern and articulate embodied forms of agency, identity making and socialisation, often very locally expressed, away from the gaze of generalised and disembodied discourses.

### **3. African cities: The context for theological education**

African cities should be acknowledged as the context in which much of our theological education today takes place. It is not just another challenge for theological education that can either be acknowledged and integrated into our agendas, or be discarded as one of too many African challenges. It is on the urban stage that power and precariousness are played out daily, in so many different forms. We seek to hide from the context we are in, or refrain from this context informing our theological agenda, at our own peril.

In spite of the rapidly changing African context, African universities, schools of theology, and religious institutions such as the church, are often way to slow in responding decisively to Africa’s urban explosion. Apart from the work of Rakodi (2014) who considers “religion and social life in African cities” in a rather coherent manner, and individual anthropologists, sociologists and others, from time to time considering the role of religion or faith communities in African cities,<sup>3</sup> theology has done little in the way of developing coherent responses to African cities and urbanisation.

The current status of theological education on the continent is an expression of dominant theological paradigms, with hardly any example of theological institutions, anywhere on the continent, taking the urban challenge seriously enough. Even worse, these traditional institutions often maintained an anti-urban, rural, or, at least in the South African context, suburban posture – if not explicitly then implicitly – struggling to create a viable and robust presence in, or to make sense of, the vast urban realities engulfing the continent.

<sup>2</sup> The Gauteng City-Region Observatory is a partnership between the Gauteng Provincial Government, University of the Witwatersrand and University of Johannesburg, doing research on dynamics and developments in and around the Gauteng City-Region.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the work of people like Winkler (2008); Nyamnjoh (2018); Ntaringwa (2016); and others; gave consideration to forms of religious life in African cities, reflecting on such from within their own disciplines.

This article and the collection it is part of, hope to help animate a network of African theological educators who are serious about fleshing out a more deliberate urban agenda. Swart and De Beer (2014), in highlighting how urban theological work is lacking behind in South African but also on the entire continent, called for a new agenda for doing urban (public) theology – what might this look like?

Firstly, the strongly rural and traditionalist bias that permeated much of Africa's theological discourse until now, prevented the creation of innovative, concrete and edgy theological responses, as innovative, concrete and edgy as only cities in Africa can be. It is high time we draw from various wells on the continent, to help inform urban theological engagement in Africa. The gift of African, black and womanist theologies; the rich and beautiful descriptions by African novelists of life in all its colour and hardship in African cities; and the contributions of popular culture through various genres, are all sources that can help shape an urban theological discourse that is uniquely African.

Secondly, unless our education in general, and our theological education in particular, are able to engage languages of informality, through locating itself in urban informal settlements – physically, emotionally and intellectually – we run the risk of failing the largest percentages of our urban populations. The patterns, struggles and hopes of these communities need to help shape our theological questions and engagements.

Thirdly, the complexities of African cities require complex and trans-disciplinary engagements, inviting theologians to engage in conversation with a range of disciplines and spheres, but – also – to incorporate into our own competencies, the use of methodologies coming from the social, economic or spatial sciences, to broaden our own theological horizons.

Obviously, this is by no means an easy feat. The complexities of African cities, and the often impoverished theological institutions on the continent, do not make this challenge easier. Fourthly, there is a challenge for innovations around the institutional and resourcing capacity of theological institutions themselves. If it is to provide cutting-edge education that lands the curriculum, students and professors, in 21st urban developments on the continent, both being critical about neocolonial forms of urbanity, but also entrepreneurial in how it reimagines expressions of faith and communal life in African cities, then it has to model critical and entrepreneurial traits in how it behaves as institutions.

The emphasis of the article is on African theological institutions embracing urban Africa in ways that can contribute constructively to what Pieterse and Simone speak of as African urbanisms; a deliberate articulation of African urban forms and languages expressing African urbanity (Pieterse & Simone, 2013:19-35). Although some of the examples I draw from in this article represent the global North, the

assertion here is that our theological education and local African urban contexts should enter into robust dialogue with each other, shaping each other's futures, and recognising our interdependence at so many levels.

We should be adamant about fostering African urban theological models, in dialogue with our global friends and partners, but also increasingly engaging in conversation with Africans from other disciplines and genres, seeking to make sense of the African city today, and into the future.

A heartening recent example was the initiative by the African chapter of the Church of the Nazarene, hosting a continent-wide denominational consultation on urban ministry (Church of the Nazarene Africa, 2019). This, to some of the insiders, seemed like a small thing. However, to those of us who journeyed with urban challenge for many years, it represented a major step in the right direction. To my mind, this was the first consultation of its kind, bringing a specific denomination from across the continent, for three days, to engage only on this one topic, which is the challenge of African cities to the church and theology. Others should surely take a leaf from the Nazarene book and do likewise.

The following section discusses the collaborative research project that sought to address the very concern this article is about – theological education and African cities.

#### **4. “Urban Africa 2050: imagining theological education/formation for flourishing African cities”<sup>4</sup>**

This article is part of a special collection of articles, flowing from a collaborative research project, entitled as in the sub-heading above. The project brought together 16 researchers from 15 theological institutions in 13 African cities, grappling with two questions:

- What will be the shape of their own cities by 2030/2050?
- How to rethink theological education/formation if it were to contribute to a generation of leaders able to mediate flourishing African cities?

The participating cities were the City of Tshwane (Pretoria), Johannesburg, Pietermaritzburg, and Cape Town, in South Africa; Kampala and Nairobi in East Africa; Kinshasa, Mbuyi-Mbayi, Libreville, Cotonou, Douala, and Porto-Novo, in Francophone Africa; and Enugu, and Accra, in West Africa. The project was endorsed by all 15 participating institutions, with an expectation from the institutions that the research findings could indeed contribute to a discussion about future curricula and the place of African cities in it.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from the 2018 research proposal with the same title: “Urban Africa 2050: Imagining theological education/formation for flourishing cities”.

Witnessing how the research associates<sup>5</sup> grappled with their cities, often in new ways, entering into conversations with city planners, politicians and civic leaders, often outside their conventional ways of doing theological research, was liberating.

In this article, I will not delve in depth on the research findings emanating from the various cities, because there are other articles in this collection doing exactly that. I only provide a concise overview.<sup>6</sup>

Firstly, the participating cities varied widely in size, geography, resources, and history. The theological institutions represented were as varied, coming from various traditions, some with strong local resource bases, and others struggling to make ends meet. Researchers were from large public universities, small private universities, renowned denominational seminaries, and smaller Bible schools.

Secondly, access to data and knowledge infrastructure in the various cities differed significantly. Some cities had very poor data infrastructure, and found it hard to project trends for the next 10-20 years accurately. Limited data infrastructure made some forms of research difficult and surfaced a challenge as to the responsibility of the urban theologian in such a context. It might require creating the kind of infrastructure that would usually be the mandate of the municipality, government census offices, sociologists or demographers. It might also mean more deliberate collaboration with others to proactively create more substantive urban knowledge infrastructure.

Thirdly, thematically, the issues being surfaced from the various cities, although contextually different and some issues being more acute in some places than others, there were also huge commonalities. Urban inequalities and informality, environmental degradation and waste management, the neocolonisation of urban economies and governance systems, the youth predominantly belonging to the urban precariat, and similarities in how street homelessness start to express itself in places as diverse as Tshwane, Kampala and Accra, became threads running through all the participating cities. The expressed interest of urban planners to work more collaboratively with

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<sup>5</sup> Research associates in the project included Stephan de Beer (convener), University of Pretoria; Emmanuel Tshilenga (co-convener), African Operation/OPERAF; Jude Nnorom, Spiritan International School of Theology, Enugu; Sandiswa Lerato Kobe, University of South Africa; David Kpobi, Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon; Sheth Otieno Oguok, Centre for Urban Mission, Nairobi & Resonate Global Mission, Kenya; Phillip Wandawa & Emmanuel Akatukunda, Kampala Evangelical School of Theology; Ghislain Agbede, Francophone University of International Development, Cotonou; Micheline Kamba, School of Theology, Protestant University of the Congo, Kinshasa; Calixte Mbakere, House of Theological Formation of Bethel, Libreville; Claude Kalonji, Faculty of Protestant Theology and Religious Sciences of Ndoungué; Elzabad Tanko, Faculté Théologique Inter-confessionnelle du Bénin (FATIB); Selena Headley, Cornersstone Institute, Cape Town; Xolani A. Nkosi, Union Bible Institute, Pietermaritzburg; and Mike Ribbens, Institute for Urban Ministry, Pretoria & Resonate Global Mission, East Africa.

<sup>6</sup> Taken from an unpublished paper, presented at the African Theological Advance conference in Kigali, Rwanda, in March 2020.

theologians, and religious communities, in considering urban challenges and urban futures, provides promising and innovative possibilities for further engagement.

Fourthly, for most of the participating institutions, the urban reality was not sufficiently prioritized in their theological engagement – either in locatedness, curriculum or pedagogical approach. Even in cases where the majority of students came from urban informal settlements, experiencing first-hand the reality of urban exclusion, or where the institution is located in central parts of the city, the city still did not feature centrally in how it did theology. Theology is done a-contextually, instead of allowing the local contextual realities to shape the theological questions and interrogations we keep ourselves busy with.

Fifthly, as a result of the research process, every research associate made curriculum recommendations to their own institutions. This, again, varied, from a singular module being introduced at undergraduate level, to new Certificate or Diploma courses in urban theology or ministry being proposed, to the introduction of specialisation postgraduate offerings focusing on urban theology. This will be referred to in more detail in the next section. Stewarding these transitions into a dedicated urban agenda would be the responsibility of the individual research associates. To help sustain the process, we have launched the African urban theology network, as a way to continue the conversation, to build a cohort of African urban theological thinkers, and to support the implementation of dedicated urban theological curricula across the continent.

Finally, the last phrase of the research project's title spoke of "flourishing African cities". What would "flourishing" mean in a context where 75-90% of a city is informal? How would theological education speak of human flourishing (Graham, 2011:271; Volf & Croasman, 2019), or urban flourishing (De Beer, 2020), in contexts where exploitation of human life and the earth are often the norm?

"Flourishing", in this sense, is not only a theological, human or spatial imaginary, but also an ethical and political category, considering the removal of all those factors and conditions that make flourishing a current impossibility. The research team considered the concept of "urban flourishing" in their own contexts, but then specifically, what theological formation should look like, if it was to foster leadership in the direction of urban flourishing.

## **5. Let the city speak! Shifts for doing "urban theological education"**

### **5.1 *A theological contribution to African urbanism – and African urbanism informing theology***

African theological institutions would do well to heed the call of African urbanist, Edgar Pieterse, arguing for African urbanisms in response to the unique and complex challenges of African urbanization (cf. Pieterse & Simone, 2013:19-35).

African urbanisms are an expression of a broader body of knowledge known as southern urbanisms, unfolding in response to the cities of the global South. Well-articulated African urban theologies could contribute significantly to the production of African urban knowledge, able to advance and contribute to inclusive, sustainable, just and flourishing African cities. The absence of reflection from a theological perspective on vast faith or religious movements, contributing to shape African urban realities, would simply be too big a neglect. Simultaneously, the innovative work of African urbanists, writing and thinking the African city, can contribute enormously to stimulate and help shape theological deliberations and imaginaries about African urban futures.

## 5.2 Locating urban theology within a contextual theological framework

Doing theological education that is engaging African urban contexts seriously, appropriately, and accountably, requires several paradigmatic shifts. The nature of any authentic, contextual theological engagement, is that it constitutes an epistemological break with former approaches of doing theology. We do not practice contextual theology, just because we happen to be located in a context. Contextual approaches to doing theology are deliberate about reading of local contexts and critical methods of engaging such contexts. It challenges the notion of “neutral” theology, suggesting that theology “is always engaged for or against the oppressed” (Schaab, 2001:358).

Ernesto Cardenal (1975:3), in speaking of liberation theologies, argued that these were not an appendix to traditional theologies but a whole new way of doing theology, not from the perspective of the dominant classes, but from the perspective of those communities excluded from society.

An example is in the way in which Schüssler-Fiorenza (1984:26) speaks of feminist theology as a form of liberation theology, and, therefore, from the perspective of solidarity with women’s oppression, has to act with women in the interest of their liberation. Contextual theologies, from this perspective, will always be locating itself deliberately with those on the underside of history.

Urban theology can be practiced from above – from the vantage point of Empire; or it can be practiced from below, in close solidarity with those excluded and exploited by dominant urban systems. Urban theology, located within a contextual theological paradigm, would opt for the latter. Such a form of urban theology also would not be an appendix to traditional theologies but a new way of doing theology, from the perspective of those perpetually damned to the urban fringes.

Elsewhere, De Beer and Swart (2014) describe their understanding of such an urban (public) theological agenda, from a very specific conceptual or hermeneuti-



cal position, not to be co-opted into dominant theological frameworks. An urban theological agenda, as proposed by them:

Will lead to an ever-deepening urban public theological praxis-agenda giving impetus to action-oriented, problem-solving and normatively inclined discourses ‘from below’ in which different actors from the urban grassroots – linked to local urban communities of different kinds, urban social movements and not least urban faith communities – will become primary interlocutors (De Beer & Swart, 2014).

Consistent with other contextual and liberation theological frameworks, they also insist on doing urban theology “from below” – from the underbelly of the city – stating:

Ours is not a neutral contribution but locates itself very specifically in a praxis-approach that endeavours to engage the city through an on-going dance of action and reflection, asking: Whose city is it? Who has a right to the city? Whose knowledge shapes the city? And how do people and institutions of faith – particularly those of us who seek to embody Jesus – participate with a wide range of other partners, to reclaim the commons and make space for all, in order to make good cities that resemble good news in rather concrete ways?

In asking “whose city is it” and “who has a right to the city”, urban theology locates itself with those who are denied their rightful place, to co-inhabit and co-construct the city they try to live in.

### 5.3 Required paradigmatic shifts

Practicing and sustaining such un-neutral positionality, presupposes clear paradigmatic shifts.

Gloria Schaab (2001:357-362), in reflecting on feminist theological methodology, provides clues to some of the paradigmatic shifts occurring in contextual theologies at large. In feminist theologies, the point of departure is the historical experience of women, in a similar way to Black Theology’s point of departure being the experience of black oppression, or liberation theology’s point of departure being the experience of those reduced to being non-persons.

Having asserted such positionality, these different theologies then engage in “critique, retrieval, and (re)construction”.

Critique in the feminist theological process begins with a “hermeneutics of suspicion” that is wary of underlying prejudices and presuppositions that exclude women’s perspectives (Schaab, 2001:357).

Approaching texts, languages, and discourses, with a posture of suspicion, the task of such theologies is:

To analyze inherited oppressions through a deconstruction of texts and formulations, to search for women's alternative wisdom and suppressed history, and to risk new interpretations in conversation with women's lives (Schaab, 2001:357).

In critiquing and deconstructing dominant texts and narratives, women's experiences are "found between the lines, in the silences, and from alternative sources" (Schaab, 2001:358). Such experiences are brought into dialogue with deconstructed texts, as part of a movement of reconstruction: not only are texts, narratives or symbols critiqued or deconstructed, but in the process "one's personal ideology is criticized, which in turn leads to a critique of the societal ideology embedded in the text (Schaab, 2001:359)".<sup>7</sup>

These theologies differ from dominant Western liberal theologies, in that it refuses to be paralysed by analysis, rather directing its effort "toward the change or transformation of an existing interpretation or construct" (Schaab, 2001), or, indeed, the transformation of the city, or of society.

African urban theologies, considered from the above perspectives, would have a number of characteristics that might constitute a break from traditional modes of doing theology.

It would articulate a preferential option for, and solidarity with, those excluded from dominant urban processes. It will adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion, considering how urban texts (both written texts and the city as text) are embracing or excluding those most vulnerable, with the view of critiquing or deconstructing such texts.

It will be deliberate about retrieving alternative narratives, not only of those excluded from, or subverting, the city, but also of faith-based responses, social movements, and others, who are imagining and demonstrating alternatives to the status quo.

It will work to re-imagine African cities, faith and the church in relation to the African city, and African theological education geared towards flourishing African cities – marked by values of radical inclusivity, human dignity, the integrity of creation, and social, spatial, economic, political and environmental justice. It will guide processes of translating such new imaginaries, and alternative narratives, into transforming faith or socio-ecclesial practices.

Firstly, an *epistemological shift* is required, from an emphasis on so-called expert knowledge to a validation of diverse knowledge. Most theology professors

<sup>7</sup> Schaab here references Sandra Schneiders', "Feminist Ideology and Biblical Hermeneutics" (1989), pp.6-8.

might be ‘experts’ of narrow disciplinary knowledge, but lack depth of experiential knowledge, grassroot urban engagement, or political solidarity. To mediate such knowledge to students of theology or ministry, it is crucial for students to be exposed to diverse knowledge. This requires a validation of such knowledge located outside the narrow confines of theology classrooms. Such knowledge often resides in local civic leaders, urban ministry workers or pastors, non-profit leaders, vulnerable communities practicing resilience against all odds, and progressive urban social movements, working for justice and equity against many odds. Their knowledge and experiences can contribute immeasurably not only conceptually but also practically, to the formation of a generation of African urban practicing theologians.

Secondly, the complexity of urban contexts requires a *disciplinary shift*, from doing theology in the silos of a specific theological, confessional or ecclesial discipline, to learning how to engage African cities in transdisciplinary ways. I find the way in which Julie Thompson Klein (2001) defines transdisciplinarity helpful (cf. De Beer, 2014). She describes it as different disciplines, working together with practitioners and communities to find solutions for real-life problems. One can hardly do theology in the complexities of African cities, without drawing from the insights of urban geographers, urban planners, sociologists, economists, political scientists, or anthropologists.

Becoming versed in transdisciplinary methods requires not only of the practicing theologian to be in dialogue with other disciplines but could also mean fruitfully integrating some of the methods and approaches used in other disciplines, into our own theological engagement. How, for example, are the methods of the social sciences, or disciplines such as geography or public policy, helpful in shaping our own theological or ethical speech and actions?

Instead of losing our identity as theologians, it is in transdisciplinary conversations and actions that our contribution – ethically, morally, and pragmatically – can become useful and mutually liberating.

Thirdly, the most life-transforming educational models – and experiences – I am aware of, are usually marked by *shifting locations*. In my own life it was “extra-curricular” experiences on the streets of Sunnyside or Hillbrow, or in neighbourhoods on the south side of Chicago, that facilitated multiple conversions/liberations both personally, but also theologically, and in terms of professional self-understanding.

Instead of captivity to classroom education, far away from the cries of urban dwellers, or banking style education where ‘experts’ transfer knowledge into ‘empty vessels’, I argue for a shift that acknowledges, validates and appreciates the city as classroom. It allows students to engage local communities, contested urban spaces, platforms where policies are debated and made, as spaces of learning and reflection. It invites the lived experiences of students, in some cases themselves residing in difficult urban spaces, as

valid narratives to be shared in the formation of knowledge. Shifting locations is meant physically and geographically, but it also calls for an emotional, intellectual, and political shift, to allow those excluded from the city as interlocutors and guides to see the city anew. This is a shift from doing theology from above, to doing theology from below, from inside urban slums and informal settlements, allowing the voices of those most oppressed and suppressed, to shape our theological questions, languages and debates.

Fourthly, it might often mean a *theological shift*, from confessional to contextual and ecumenical theologies. A commitment to liberation – or the integral freedom of all of humanity and creation – expressed in orthopraxy, or the right actions in solidarity with those places where humanity and creation are groaning for liberation, would often create new forms of solidarity. People come together around common commitments to justice, in spite of their confessional differences. The contextual challenges shape their theologies, and new theological languages develop in the process. In this case, the complexities of the African urban challenge, hold potential to bring rather disparate people together into fostering a shared sense of theological and missional vocation. Theological shifts should include the fusion of theological horizons but also of other conceptual or theoretical horizons (cf. De Beer & Swart, 2014).

African urban theologians would do well to draw from the wells of Black, African, liberation, womanist, eco-feminist and other such theologies, helping to gain understanding of multiple oppressions that also find their ways into African urban landscapes. A large body of literature calling the church to engage in urban mission, has failed to engage these forms of contextual theologies, thereby often failing to discern how patriarchy, race, neoliberal capitalism, colonial expansion, or other constructs, oppressed (and are oppressing) urban places and people alike.

De Beer and Swart (2014) argue for a fusion of horizons with reference to a number of urban discourses that emerged over the past decades, notably “southern urbanisms and the factor of unprecedented urban migration; ‘right to the city’ and urbanisation from below; a reclaiming of the commons; the making of ‘good cities’; and actors of faith in relation to urban social life”. A very exciting fusion would be to draw also from the ways in which popular culture, social movements, music, street art, or African literature, engage urban African realities. These sources, if approached respectfully, might offer prophetic insights theology and the church on the African continent sorely need.

#### 5.4 African urban theology is political theology

Urban theologies committed to shaping urban futures, in ways that name and overcome oppressions and mediate healing, dignity and justice, will by definition be overtly political. If we consider ‘politics’ etymologically, it literally deals with the ‘management of the city’, or, the ways in which the city’s resources are managed.

This is the concern of urban theology too: how the resources of the city, which theologically is considered to be God's resources, are managed in order to ensure the well-being and justice of all urban inhabitants, whilst also safeguarding urban resources for future generations. Jean-Marc Ela (1986:136), although being a rural priest all his life, states it succinctly: "the church must see that the demands of faith are largely rooted in the organisation of the city of earth".

Urban theologians deeply vested in urban contexts, would often be seen participating in civic organisations, social movements, or policy-making platforms, there to seek for the values of God's new household to infiltrate. Urban theology, as political theology, does not imply alignment to any particular political party, but an alignment to the values and commitments of Jesus, expressed in an embodiment of his radically new kingdom.

One can therefore rightly ask, can theological education in Africa, be serious about its urban contexts, be silent in the face of rampant urban abuses, exclusions and oppressions? Or, will theological work, responding to the groans of urban poor and creation alike, by definition seek expression not only in intellectual or verbal prophecy, but in personal and institutional actions of solidarity? We, urban theologians, would often find us in the company of people we historically might not have associated with church activity. Solidarity will now be expressed with informal traders, the urban precariat, and justice movements working for urban change.

Probably, often, such solidarity is absent, as we who are servants of Jesus and servants of our institutions, opt to comply with the demands of Empire, leaving Jesus out in the cold.

### **5.5 What is the spirituality of our theological education?**

Before moving on, considering paradigm shifts for doing urban theological education in Africa, needs to also engage the question of the spirituality of our education. Recently, I became surprised at the number of non-responses I received from theological educators, when asked what the spirituality of their educational vocation or engagement was. It seems as if there is a dichotomy between spirituality, on the one hand, and theological discourse, on the other. Our theological work and our embodied spirituality are not always congruent. We do not think through the spirituality that is holding, or failing, our pedagogical approaches.

In the last few years before his untimely death, Vuyani Vellem (2014a; 2018) thought and spoke more about the spirituality that should help sustain a black theology of liberation, if it wants to persist in making concrete in terms of the real liberation of a people. As much as he critiqued the managerialism of the University, he also contended against the intellectualisation of black theology of liberation, insisting that it has to find its soil in the experiences of the black masses living in *ekasi* (a Zulu term for township) (Vellem, 2014b).

In the African urban context, searching for an African urban spirituality, grounded in the lived experiences of the urban margins – which in African cities are often the dominant experience – and aimed at the integral liberation of people and places alike, becomes imperative. This could not be an otherworldly spirituality but has to find expression in how the child in the informal settlement accesses clean water, or not. It will be a political spirituality; a spirituality of justice; a spirituality that will infiltrate the corridors of theological discourse, and the veins of theological praxis; to circulate between the streets and the classrooms in an ever-connecting, ever-subverting, and ever-transformative way.

## **6. Approaches to urbanising theological agendas**

The sub-heading in this case is deliberately provocative and idealistic. Instead of an almost artificial add-on of an ad hoc module on urban ministry, somewhere in the curriculum, theological institutions serious about their local contexts, might have to ask more urgent and pervasive questions about a theological agenda, curriculum and ethos, that are in every sense reflecting the urban context in which it is located. In this sense, it would not be an artificial add-on but a more radical transformation of curriculum, allowing the city to speak.

Where attempts are made to place urban issues on the agendas of theological institutions, globally, different approaches can be discerned. Sometimes, these approaches are reflective of the relative priority of “the urban” in the institution, or the place in which an institution finds itself in relation to their own journey with an urban agenda. It could also be expressive of collaborative attempts to create urban knowledge infrastructure, often ecumenically held.

At times, institutional approaches reflect the commitments or interests of individual faculty members, and if a particular urban champion leaves, it might leave the urban focus at risk of discontinuing. There are also instances where entrepreneurial approaches were followed by those outside formal theological institutions, creating opportunities for urban theological education in response to a lack of urban focus in the formal institutions.

In the next paragraphs, I refer to different approaches, both as proposed by the research associates in the “Urban Africa 2050” project, but also to practices in other parts of the world.

### **6.1 Introducing single modules**

In some institutions, a single module is offered dealing with urban issues, often as an Introduction to Urban Ministry/Mission. At Union Bible Institute, Xolani Nkosi would like to see the introduction of several modules in their undergraduate pro-

gramme, including an Introduction to Urban Ministry, Developing Multi-Cultural Ministry, Peace-Building in the City, and Gender in the City.

In Libreville, at the Complexe de Formation Théologique de Béthel, Calixte Mbakere is introducing a number of modules with an urban focus into their Licentiate of Theology programme. These might include A Theology of the City, The Urban Condition, Religious Pluralism in the City, Urban Sociology, the Church in the City, and Biblical Imperatives for Urban Ministry.

Elzabad Tanko is discussing the introduction of two new modules into the Diploma and Bachelors programmes of the Faculté Théologique Inter-confessionnelle du Bénin (FATIB) in Porto-Novo. His emphasis is on the concept of urban governance, and good governance in Porto-Novo.

In Douala, the Faculty of Protestant Theology and Religious Sciences of the University of Ndongué, through the intervention of Claude Kalonji, would operationalise three new modules over the next three years: Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Foundations for Urban Theology (year 1); God, the Earth and Humanity (with urban geographers, sociologists, etc) (year 2); and the African and the Crisis of the Earth (year 3).

## 6.2 Creating undergraduate specialisations

There are examples of curricula that offer an urban emphasis as an undergraduate specialisation, although this is not common. The Asian Theological Seminary (2018) in the Philippines and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (n.d.) are two examples, both offering Graduate Diplomas in Urban Ministry. Similarly, Xolani Nkosi in Pietermaritzburg is working on a proposal to introduce a 2-year Diploma in Urban Ministry at his institution.

David Kpobi in Accra proposes a Certificate in Transformational Urban Leadership, to focus on grassroot pastors and faith-based leaders. He would like to include themes such as the City and the Bible, Biblical principles for community transformation, urban evangelism and church planting, gender in the city, and ministry in urban slums.

## 6.3 Creating postgraduate specialisations

More common is postgraduate specialisations at a Master's, Doctor of Ministry or even PhD level, focusing on urban issues. Examples of this include offerings of the Bakke Graduate University (2019), Asian Theological Seminary (2018), Bethel Bible Seminary (n.d.) in Hong Kong, and the Urban Theology Union (n.d.) in Sheffield.

Micheline Kamba at the Protestant University in Kinshasa is responsible for the Master's Programme in Social Transformation. She is now planning to introduce

an emphasis on theology, urban planning and disability, into that programme, and recruited a cohort of doctoral students to work in this field.

Similarly, Ghislain Agbede, based at the International University of Development in Cotonou, Benin, imagines the creation of a Master's Programme in Transformational Urban Leadership. These are both programmes that will be hosted by theological disciplines but working trans-disciplinary.

#### **6.4 Creating specialised inter-institutional clusters**

There are cases where single institutions might feel they lack the competencies or experience to offer urban curricula by themselves. Different institutions might then collaborate to create an inter-institutional cluster, specialising in urban ministry.

One of the best-known examples of a cluster approach that have sadly since been phased out was the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE) (OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership, n.d.), based in Chicago. SCUPE was structured as a Consortium with, at times, up to 14 theological seminaries from the Metro-Chicago area and even Grand Rapids, and from a wide range of theological affiliations, as partners. Students enrolled for the Master of Divinity (MDiv) programme with these institutions, but with a desire to specialise in Urban Ministry, could in the final year of their MDiv studies enroll for the SCUPE programme as an urban specialisation. This programme was then accredited by these partner institutions with credits towards the MDiv programme.

Different contexts in Chicago served as classroom, and students engaged in creative urban theological course work, including a Biblical Theology of the City, Understanding Urban Systems and Powers, an Introduction to Community Ministry, and so forth.

In the City of Tshwane, the first steps were taken in animating such a cluster, through a Summer School on urban theology, hosted in conjunction between the University of Pretoria (UP), University of South Africa (UNISA), John Vianney Theological Seminary of the Roman Catholic Church, the Northern Theological Seminary of the Uniting Reformed Church, and the Full Gospel Theological School in Irene.

A strong theological cluster existed in Pietermaritzburg, being a vanguard for contextual theological engagement. Xolani Nkosi in Pietermaritzburg is hoping to connect his institution better with some of the historical cluster partners, as he champions an urban focus for theological education in his context.

#### **6.5 Creating independent urban institutes**

In several contexts, independent urban institutes for theological or ministry education were created. These included the Centre for Urban Ministerial Education (CUME), that has since been incorporated as the Boston Campus of the Gordon



Conwell Theological Seminary (n.d.), the Centre for Urban Theological Studies in Philadelphia (Lee, 2015), or the Institute for Urban Ministry (n.d.), in Pretoria.

In Kibera, Nairobi, the Centre for Urban Mission is a grassroots training centre for urban ministry leaders, located in the slums of Kibera. It belongs to Carlyle College and Sheth Otieno; leaders at the Centre are working to establish a programme for urban theological formation that will have a strong emphasis on Nairobi's vast number of young people living in urban slums, almost perpetually vulnerable.

The Institute for Urban Ministry, in Pretoria, South Africa, is currently revising a series of urban ministry workbooks, and has now decided to also translate it into French. Their workbooks are used in different schools of theology already, and they also offer short courses through UP.

### **6.6 Urbanising the entire curriculum**

Examples of seminaries urbanising the entire curriculum include New York Theological Seminary (2014) and the City Seminary of New York (2019).

New York Theological Seminary has a rich tradition of serving minority pastors, providing flexible theological education to people who are ordinarily working in a full-time day job whilst pastoring an urban church after hours. Their students generally come from challenging urban neighbourhoods, and their lived contextual experiences feature strongly in the classroom. Here, theology is never done in a vacuum, whether reading Micah through the lenses of Brooklyn or the Bronx, or considering church history against the backdrop of transnational migration and neo-Pentecostalism in New York City.

City Seminary of New York is a younger institution that was set up expressly to offer seminary education, utilising New York City as the classroom and equipping ministers and faith-based workers with urban savvy. Similarly, the Bakke Graduate University was established with a singular mission to equip transformational leaders who can impact global cities.

In Kampala, Philip Wandawa and Emmanuel Akatukunda are committed to urbanise the Kampala Evangelical School of Theology, both bringing the city into the classroom, but also taking the classroom into the city. Their central location in Kampala and proximity to vast urban slums, qualify them uniquely to develop a robust urban school of theology. Apart from urbanising the undergraduate programme, they also consider a Diploma in Urban Ministry and positioning their School as an urban research hub.

### **6.7 Research hubs**

In some cases, institutions have both an urban research as well as teaching focus. There are also cases where institutions do not necessarily offer any accredited pro-

grammes but act as a resource to the urban faith community through appropriate research. An example of this is the Manchester Urban Theology Forum out of Manchester University (Lincoln Theological Institute, 2018). The Metro-Urban Institute at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (n.d.) offers a similar research and advocacy focus. It also enhances the formal degree programmes with an urban specialisation.

The Centre for Faith and Community at UP not only pioneers specialised urban offerings at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, but also serves as a research hub focusing on issues such as street homelessness, housing and spatial justice; faith-based responses to transnational migration, and urban theological education.

Jude Nnorom is in conversation with the Brottier Centre for Research and Development at the Spiritan International School of Theology, to consider hosting an urban research focus, a local urban research repository, as well as the possibility of urban ministry consultations.

### **6.8 Informal programmes**

There are examples of institutions offering informal programmes that do not necessarily lead to accredited qualifications. These can be in the form of learning spaces for reflecting on the church in the city, or non-accredited certificate or other courses. This often happens in urban communities, and the participants and local contexts become co-teachers and classrooms for urban reflection. In Nairobi, Sheth Otieno and associates are building a curriculum to equip grassroot leaders to engage the youth living in Nairobi's slums. This will be a not-for-credit programme in association with the Centre for Urban Mission in Kibera.

### **6.9 Online, classroom, blended**

Most of the above examples place a high premium on relationships, peer-based education, and the city as classroom. Pedagogies will therefore focus much on collective classroom reflection, mobile classrooms shaping the ability of participants to read urban contexts critically, but also exposing them to case studies of local neighbourhoods, faith-based responses, and urban innovations.

The Northern Seminary (n.d.) in Lombard, Illinois develop strong blended models of education for urban community development, fusing incarnational community locatedness, with classroom engagement and online lectures. The Institute for Urban Ministry, based in Pretoria, is now also contemplating online and distance education models, complementing their short, intensive on-site courses.

### **6.10 What are the continuities in the above programmes?**

In many of the above programmes, both those already existing and those currently being developed or implemented, there are continuities in terms of thematic foci:

the centrality of the urban reality; spanning the distance between theology and the city; the importance of location; an emphasis on inter- and trans-disciplinarity; a focus on transformational change; evidence-based teaching, allowing for research and change-making to come together in creative pedagogies; and groundedness in an incarnational spirituality.

## **7. Discerning our cities; discerning our institutional biases**

Different contexts require different contents. One can therefore hardly develop a generic urban curriculum. What occurs in the urban contexts of Kinshasa, Lagos, Pretoria, Bujumbura, Blantyre, Lusaka or Luanda, are not replicas of each other, although certain trends might be similar. Also, the process and content will also be shaped by the distinct nature and ethos of a certain institution, and their theological tradition, as well as by the expertise, theological biases or interests of those involved in the curriculum development and teaching processes. In an earlier section, describing different approaches to urbanising curricula, the above became clear.

### **7.1 Themes that warrant unpacking might include:**

- i. Reading African urban contexts: introductions to the African city and urbanisation; colonisation, decolonising, and postcolonising cities; the city as neo-colony; creative urban irruptions;
- ii. Doing theology in the city: conceptual, hermeneutical and epistemological frameworks; contextual, African, black, womanist, and liberation theologies in the city; reading the Bible in the city; theological method;
- iii. An introduction to urban ministry: understanding urban fractures; different faces of the urban church; the person of the urban minister; rethinking urban ecclesiologies;
- iv. The church and urban culture: understanding urban culture; the church and popular culture; inter- and multi-cultural ministry; inter-faith collaboration; understanding religious diversity; ecumenical collaboration;
- v. The church, urban poverty and community transformation: understanding urban neighbourhoods; urban diaconate and community development; unemployment and labour; economic development; land, housing and informal settlement upgrading; infrastructure development;
- vi. The church and urban justice: understanding urban systems; understanding urban governance and policy; ministries of advocacy, community organising and justice; building common power;
- vii. The church and urban healing: understanding urban fractures and trauma; holistic pastoral care and counselling; peace-building; gender and sexuality; migrants and refugees; care of the earth;

Of primary importance, however, before embarking on developing elaborate urban curricula, institutions should engage their own theological positions and institutional biases in relation to the city self-critically. Their epistemological points of departure and the conceptual and hermeneutical frameworks used for engaging the city, would shape the way in which many of the themes highlighted above are unpacked (cf. Swart & De Beer, 2014). It is therefore important that institutions reflect on their own frameworks, pedagogies and spiritualities of education, as these – translated into urban theological engagement – might either reinforce exclusivist urban forms, or help foster urban imaginaries that are radically inclusive and life-affirming, in every sphere. Adding urban modules without doing the hard work of conceptual and hermeneutical self-critique, might at times be worse than being silent about the city.

## **8. The Pretoria/Tshwane process**

In Pretoria, the capital city of South Africa, and part of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, a rather intensive, ecumenical engagement in relation to urban change, occurred over the past 25 years. This came about in response to the rapid changes of the post-apartheid city, prompting collaborative ministry responses.

The Tshwane Leadership Foundation (TLF) started off in 1993, and the lack of theological training or reflection on urban realities led to the original team of TLF reading articles together and reflecting informally on these articles and their ministry experiences, as part of an informal formational process.

Around 1995 the Foundation gave birth to the Institute for Urban Ministry (IUM) (n.d.), wanting to come alongside urban ministry workers in a more deliberate manner, to equip and empower them for the work they felt called to. The Institute never grew big but did a few important things over these years. This is reflected in another article in this same collection, written by Mike Ribbens. Its contributions included a biennial consultation on urban ministry, hosted since 1996; a series of seven resource workbooks on urban ministry; formal partnerships with UNISA and UP; and supporting a cohort of postgraduate students of urban ministry towards completing their Master's and doctoral programmes.

Much of the ecumenical urban theologising occurred not in institutions of higher learning, but in the urban trenches, on the urban fringes, away from the formal articulations of theological discourse.

An exception was the missiologists at UNISA. They provided a hospitable space for an emerging 'brand' of urban theology that was deeply committed to a praxis-based approach and the liberation of both church and poor, in the context of post-apartheid cities. They embraced the courses on offer by the Institute for Urban Ministry and for almost a decade the large institution on the hill, through their

then-Missiology Department, and the small Institute at the inner-city grassroots, forged an innovative partnership.

Today, the following are on offer in South Africa's administrative capital city:

- At UP, a single module is offered to MDiv students entitled "*Church and City*". A second-year module, entitled "*Engaged Communities*", is a formational one-year module, exposing students to 12-15 local contexts where urban ministry or social change is facilitated.
- At postgraduate level, a one-year specialisation is offered by the Centre for Faith and Community,<sup>8</sup> carrying credits into the Postgraduate Diploma, Honours or Master's programmes, but with a focus on transformational urban leadership. Some students have used this programme as preparatory work for doctoral studies. This one-year programme has the potential to migrate into a MTh/MPhil offering.
- A cohort of between 12 and 15 students are currently enrolled at UP for their Master's and PhD research and theses on urban theological issues across the globe.
- A dedicated research project entitled "*Faith in the City*", hosts sub-themes focusing on street homelessness, transnational migration and precarious housing, and urban theological education.
- At UNISA, there is still an in-principle commitment to urban mission and some of the missiologists are active urban ministers. Although the accredited urban courses are dormant, there is still potential, perhaps through a cluster of sorts, to have UNISA more deliberately engaged in this space. They are partners in an on-going homelessness research project, through their "*Meal of Peace*" and contextual Bible study initiatives.
- The Institute for Urban Ministry has sustained its Biennial Consultations on Urban Ministry since 1996, in 2018 hosting its 12th Consultation. This has become an important space for networking the urban church, and for exposing urban practitioners to a wide range of voices and models of urban ministry or social action.
- In addition, the Institute has registered a bouquet of courses with the Centre for Faith and Community at UP, which include *Introduction to Urban Ministry; Starting and Sustaining Community Projects; Approaches to Community Transformation; and Building Sustainable (Urban) Community Organisations*.

<sup>8</sup> Previously known as the Centre for Contextual Ministry (CCM), the Centre for Faith and Community merges the CCM and the Centre for Public Theology, to engage in research and continued education in and with communities. The Centre is based in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria.

- Also hosted between the Centre for Contextual Ministry at UP and the Tshwane Leadership Foundation, is what has become known as the Urban Studio, being deliberate about using the city as classroom for action, reflection, dialogue, and research (cf. De Beer, 2014). This is a thoroughly transdisciplinary project supporting several contested urban spaces through research, advocacy, and policy contributions. Recently, this partnership expanded to also include Lawyers for Human Rights, furthering an agenda around land and housing rights in the City of Tshwane. This is an expression of how we understand doing theology in an African city.

## 9. Conclusion

Pragmatically speaking, those who are committed to engage in urban theological education in Africa, or in theological education that seeks to engage cities constructively, should foster relationships and networks of learning and collaboration. These could include on-going joint research projects, learning collaboratives that help shape curricula, sharing of good practices continentally, and building cohorts of postgraduate students focusing on doing theology in African cities.

In the absence of such dedicated continental collaboration, we might continue to transplant curricula from the global north, often uncritically. Such programmes; however, beneficial in terms of structure and content, should never replace the contextual rigour that we should apply ourselves in African urban contexts. Vast inequalities, unstoppable migration processes, the complexities and sheer magnitude of informality, coupled with neoliberal capitalist extraction and neo-colonialist forces vying for the soul of African cities, demand urgent and authentically African urban faith responses.

It is for this reason that we conceptualised the collaborative research project introduced in this article. Our hope is that the intensive process the researchers embarked upon, will continue to animate innovative urban theological education responses in the majority of the 13 cities that participated. We further hope that these could become learning spaces, that – if networked together – can inspire other institutions and cities across the continent to follow suit.

We created an *African Urban Theology Network* as one of the outcomes of our collaborative research project. Such a network holds the possibility to read and discern contextual challenges together, developing collaborative theological responses, scanning continuously what is available in terms of potential urban theological resources, and working diligently on developing resources and recommendations for urban theological curricula in Africa.

The sheer magnitude of Africa's urban challenge requires a new kind of African urban apostolate.

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