

Religious Innovation and Competition amidst Urban Social Change: Pretoria Case Study

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Abstract

We are a group of 9 researchers curious to explore how local churches in two specific regions of Pretoria – Pretoria Central and Mamelodi East – respond to urban change and vulnerability, whether there are signs of religious innovation and competition, and whether there is evidence of churches in these regions contributing to the healing, or perpetuation, of urban fractures. In the article we engage critically the concepts of innovation, competition, vulnerability and urban change, recognizing that these are by no means neutral terms. We approach the research in a trans-disciplinary manner, outlining our specific research methods – mapping, surveys, focus groups, and the World Café – in a self-critical manner. We then describe the face of the locality, as well as the face of the broader context, identifying emerging themes surfacing from our research engagements. These include the different faces of migration; church members as distant consumers or vested contributors; ecclesiologies under construction; informality, innovation and the church; and youth agency. We reflect critically on both innovation and competition as we encountered it in these communities, appreciating the dynamism and fluidity of many of the churches but concluding that these churches held largely unfulfilled potential as agents of urban social change.

KEY WORDS: Urban (Social) Change, Urban Vulnerability, Religious Innovation, Religious Competition, Trans-disciplinary Research

Background

The fast-moving process of African urbanization is changing urban landscapes across the continent considerably. Migratory patterns as well as urban population growth leads to sub-Saharan Africa being one of the fastest growing urban regions of the world (UN-DESA 2012:12; Pieterse and Parnell 2014; Naudé 2015). South African cities are not unaffected; overwhelming migration coupled with the apartheid legacy of socio-spatial fragmentation, and the accompanying deep vulnerabilities, present unique challenges.

The primary interest of our research was to explore how local churches¹ in two specific regions of Pretoria - Pretoria Central and Mamelodi East – respond to urban change and vulnerability. We are concerned with whether religious innovation and competition are evident and whether such innovation or competition contributed to the healing or perpetuation of urban fractures.

In this article we will provide brief insight into the research context, the specific research questions, some of our conceptual and methodological considerations, some of the emerging themes, and map out what we see as the way ahead for our collaborative research journey.

Research Context

Pretoria is the administrative capital of South Africa and today forms the centre of the broader City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. This project focused on two regions within the city that have both experienced rapid, yet very different, changes and challenges over the past two decades.

Pretoria Central, or downtown Pretoria, was the centre of apartheid power and bureaucracy for many decades. Since 1994 it witnessed complete demographic and socio-culture change, and residential neighbourhoods in Pretoria Central changed from being 100% white in 1993 to virtually 90% black by the year 2000. Since then Pretoria Central became a catch-basin for thousands of migrants from many other African countries (De Beer 2009; De Beer 2012:252-259; Smith 2015a).

The second region that made for interesting comparative data was the Mamelodi East region of the Mamelodi Township, the largest black township in the old city of Pretoria. Since the 1960s Mamelodi expanded fast, mostly due to forced removals of black residents from other places to complete the implementation of the apartheid city. Mamelodi East is characterized by the more established neighbourhood of Mamelodi Gardens towards the west, and the sprawling informal settlements towards the east. The co-existence of established neighbourhoods and informality, very different housing typologies, and relative proximity to some of the wealthiest eastern suburbs of Pretoria, still predominantly white, accentuates the socio-spatial disparities and inequalities of the city (Steyn 2009; Gapp Architects 2010).

Both Pretoria Central and Mamelodi East are deeply shaped by on-going migratory patterns, both rural-urban and cross-border, accompanied by different forms of vulnerability, and limited capital investment (capital flight from Pretoria Central post-1994). Both regions experienced serious xenophobic events in recent years. As recently as March 2017 in Pretoria Central, the houses of foreign migrants were torched with tangible tension between migrants and locals.

¹ In this project 'church' was defined in a rather commonsense definition, subverting any church-sect-cult distinction. A church was any local expression identifying itself as such. This was a conscious choice also in the light of academic theology's bias toward so-called mainline churches (cf. De Gruchy 2013), often paying too little attention to the growing presence and impact of independent, non-denominational or African initiated churches. See also the article by Naudé (2015) focusing on 'the church in the church as institution being present at local urban level'.

The churches in these two regions are rather different. Churches in Mamelodi are mostly poor, particularly in the informal settlement areas, and membership is predominantly South African. Churches in Pretoria Central vary between start-up shop front churches, small but growing independent Pentecostal churches, and the “old mother churches” or cathedrals that often host some of the new middle class, the new political elite, and important decision-makers within society. Inner city churches tend to be much more diverse in terms of ethnicity and nationality, hosting dynamic migrant churches in almost every corner.

Research Questions

Our research project was grounded and guided by a number of key research questions:

- Where and how has religious innovation and competition taken place within these two distinct contexts – Pretoria Central and Mamelodi East?
- How does religious innovation and competition, respond to urban change and vulnerability? Does it contribute to the healing or perpetuation of urban fractures?
- What role do religious innovation and competition play in these contexts in the increase of youth agency and the rise of urbanized popular culture?

Conceptual Considerations

We explored possible understandings of innovation as it relates to religious communities. Distinctions were made between innovation which aims to ensure the survival of the religious community (internal), and innovation which responds to the challenges of the broader community (external). We interrogated innovation and competition critically, considering the theoretical paradigms from within which these terms emerge and whether appropriation of these terms really have liberating potential for individual and societal well-being, or whether they perpetuate fragmentation mediated by increased individualism and concepts of success that are inherently exclusivist, fed by neoliberal capitalist paradigms².

The use of concepts such as urban vulnerability, urban fractures and urban change are also critically considered. Is the language of vulnerability and fracture in itself not perpetuating certain discourses about communities? How can we understand urban fractures through intersecting power relations in urban communities?

Are ethnic religious communities which assist in developing social capital for their members who are immigrants only contributing to urban fractures or to communal healing by assisting people towards self-reliance and social inclusion?

We recognized the diverse definitions or interpretations of human vulnerability described by scholars (Moser 2009; Egdhami and Singh 2014:71-82), never being disconnected from the living environments in which people find themselves. Our own use of the term fracture implies a prior moral or political position acknowledging the unequal distribution of power and resources, resulting in life-denying exclusions and oppressions (De Beer 2015).

² See Naudé (2015) describing the way in which cities are often co-opted into a kind of globalism in which the empire deals economic marginalization and a suppression of indigenous knowledge at the expense of the dominant socio-economic-political paradigm.

Methodological Considerations

As the project unfolded and we engaged diverse churches and religious leaders we were confronted with the limitations of theological and sociological language and categories, frameworks and methodologies, probably too often imported from the global North, and realized that we too needed to be “objects” of scrutiny and on-going critical self-evaluation.

A Trans-disciplinary Approach Using Different Methods

Collectively our research team brought insights from urban, black and liberation theologies, social and political sciences, narrative theology, and studies on community transformation. As the project developed we became increasingly aware of the importance to suspend judgment based on our own theoretical constructs in order for the emerging narratives to unfold authentically.

In this project we opted for a trans-disciplinary research approach, in the definition of Klein (2012; cf. also De Beer 2015), having people from different disciplines as well as church leaders from the two researched regions, work together in order to help refine research questions and generate insight and knowledge in response to these questions. We would like to continue locating our own research in a trans-disciplinary way but also within an epistemological understanding of what Edgar Pieterse (2014) and others speak of as ‘southern urbanisms’, seeking to find epistemological constructs that can do justice to urban innovations coming from the global South.

Insights from the social sciences and theology were merged into a qualitative research methodology and the research was structured around the contextual praxis cycle of Holland and Henriot (1983). We placed much emphasis on benefits for the communities in which the research will take place and therefore also made a specific effort to engage research methods that could facilitate participatory spaces for generating and sharing knowledge. We combined literature study and conceptual analysis, with mapping, surveys, focus groups and a number of World Cafés.

Mapping

We mapped 57 churches in a defined area of Pretoria Central and 40 churches in a defined area of Mamelodi East, within a 1km radius around the Mamelodi Campus of the University of Pretoria.

We started the mapping process merely as an administrative technique to identify churches before ‘real’ research could occur. In the process we realized that we undervalued the huge potential that mapping holds as a participatory method in urban neighbourhoods. In the next phase of this project we would like to explore this more.

We are especially curious about socio-spatial mapping (Takahashi 1997; Walks 2001; Smith 2010; Natarajan 2015), participatory action mapping (Chambers 2006; Literat 2013; Boll 2015), and participatory action mapping as critical mapping methodology (Boll 2015). It holds potential not only in terms of generating knowledge collaboratively and from below, but also as a local resource for information sharing, community organizing and collaborative action.

Surveys and Focus Groups

We set out to get a representative sample of churches, covering the broad spectrum of Christian traditions, in order to establish base-line information. To date 36 churches participated in the survey – 21 from Pretoria Central and 15 from Mamelodi East – which is 37% of the churches mapped. From the mapping and surveys, we selected 6 groups per region (12 in total) for more in-depth engagement through focus groups and unstructured interviews. Especially in Mamelodi East it was complicated to arrange focus groups, often due to the informal nature of the largest percentage of churches, as well as the fact that most of the ministers have other employment and are largely absent during the week. We were mostly able to access them on Saturdays or Sundays and then the programmes of the churches and their ministers are extremely full.

World Café

We decided to include a method used in open space technology, known as the World Café, as one of the methods in our research process, particularly emphasizing our desire to construct understanding and insight on local contexts together. The World Café is a process whereby participants engage in discussing a set of questions while transiting from one conversation table to another at each turn. It is 'a simple yet powerful conversational process that helps groups of all sizes to engage in constructive dialogue, to build personal relationships, and to foster collaborative learning' (Tan and Brown, 2005).

It is a participative method that invites members to take ownership in the meaning-making process, relying heavily on 'an appreciation of local knowledge' (Steier, Brown and Da Silva 2015:212). It is a dynamic rather than a rigid space with the ongoing movement around tables allowing for depth of interaction and knowledge sharing. Early in the process, preceding the surveys and focus groups, we hosted a World Café for participating churches in both Pretoria Central and in Mamelodi East. Two more World Cafés are still planned to discuss emerging themes with participants from both Pretoria Central and Mamelodi East.

The Face of the Local Church in Pretoria Central and Mamelodi East

Pretoria Central

In Pretoria Central the size of churches differed from 20 members in Grace Exploration Ministry to 1200 members in the Melodi ya Tshwane Uniting Reformed Church and 1500 members in the Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM) Word of Life.

The majority of members in most of the churches surveyed are women. In 4 of the churches 70% of members are women, 1 church (New Life for All Ministry) indicated that 80% of members are women, and 1 church (Grace Exploration Ministry) indicated that 90% of members are women.

Twelve of the 19 churches indicated use of English only, even though most of their members are diverse language speakers. The AFM Word of Life has 60% Shona speakers, the Grace of God Ministries has 90% French and English-speaking members and 10% speak Lingala. All the churches, with the exception of four, indicated that they are black only churches. In terms of nationality the Pretoria Central churches demonstrated

interesting characteristics. Four of the churches indicated that membership was mainly South African; Grace Exploration Ministry and Christ Populate Ministries indicated that membership was 50% South African and 50% other African. Deeper Christian Life Ministries is 90% Nigerian. Similarly the Redeemed Christian Church of God is 98% Nigerian and 2% South African. The Grace of God Ministries is 98% Congolese and 2% other nationalities. In addition, people from Malawi, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya and other African countries worship in local churches.

In terms of age composition the churches differed. 100% of membership of Grace of God Ministries is below 45 years of age. In AFM Word of Life 80% of its members is below 45 years of age. Christ Populate Ministries is 80% youth, New Life for All 60% is youth. Other churches had a more balanced composition with young people either 50% or 40% of the membership.

In terms of church activities most churches indicated standard forms of ministry such as preaching, worship, prayer and Christian education. Very few churches indicated any diaconal work with the exception of 4 churches who gave food to the poor, donated to orphanages and did hospital ministry. Four churches indicated some form of advocacy work. All the churches indicated traditional means of supporting their ministry: offerings, tithing and fund-raising. Grace Exploration Ministries indicated that they had no income or source of income.

Mamelodi East

The 15 completed survey forms represented a good balance of evangelical (2), Pentecostal /Charismatic (6), mainstream (5) and apostolic churches (2). Churches tended to be smaller – between 50 and 170 members with exceptions being denominational churches such as St Paul's Lutheran Churches with 1000 members and the Presbyterian Church with 640 members on their books.

With regard to gender it is clear that women are in the majority in almost all the churches. In a church like Golden Gate 86% of members are women and in the Lutheran, Bapedi, Forward in Faith and Wilderness of Faith churches 70-75% of members are women. Only in Leratong Faith Mission and All Saints Ministries did they indicate a 50/50 male/female membership.

Sepedi was a rather prominent language in 7 of the 13 churches, with a strong presence of Setswana, Zulu and Tsonga also found in at least 6 of the churches. The Golden Gate Ministries has a 60% Tsonga-speaking membership and in Forward and Faith they combined English with local languages. St Paul's Lutheran indicated that all South African language groups were present in their church.

All the churches surveyed in Mamelodi were black-only churches and 8 of the 13 churches only had South African members. Golden Gate was South African and Zimbabwean, and Omnipresent indicated being 90% South African and 10% Zimbabwean. The Lutheran Bapedi Church was 75% South African and the other 25% of their membership came from other African countries (unspecified).

Golden Gate and Omnipresent both demonstrated a strong youth presence with 50% of Golden Gate's membership being between 11 and 35 years of age and 80% of Omnipresent being between 17 and 35 years of age. In denominational churches, youth

membership was less. An example is the St Paul's Lutheran where an average member was 53 years old.

The majority of churches indicated activity in the areas of preaching, worship, prayer, hospitality and Christian education. Only 2 churches indicated involvement in advocacy issues without elaborating and 3 churches indicated a specific ministry with elderly people. Only one church indicated an alternative approach to sustaining themselves to the traditional methods of offerings, tithing and fund-raising.

The Face of the Context

Spatial challenges refer both to overcrowding in local neighbourhoods, whether informal settlements, apartment buildings or back yard shacks; the lack of access to ample parking (in the case of largely commuter churches), the allocation of spaces for churches in new settlements.

Socio-economic challenges that were repeatedly identified included crime and violence, poverty, unemployment, substance abuse and HIV and AIDS. The prevalence of violence was pointed out by many churches as one of the greatest challenges of their communities. They referred mostly to domestic violence occurring within households, but also to violence emanating from crime and a lack of safety. We found no evidence of any of the churches specifically engaging issues of violence, even though they identified it as a major concern in their vicinity, both in Mamelodi East and in Pretoria Central.

In addition a long list of other socio-economic challenges, vulnerabilities or fractures were identified, including political unrest, overcrowded apartments, commercial sex work, and children living on the streets. In Pretoria Central one church mentioned the challenges of homelessness, and another church the issue of refugees and asylum seekers. Two churches in Mamelodi East mentioned the challenge of morals and values and one church mentioned “unbelievers” as a challenge in the community.

Churches in the city centre focused more on issues of crime and safety in their narratives, but unemployment and substance abuse were also mentioned as local challenges. HIV and AIDS hardly came up in the churches of Pretoria Central. Churches in Mamelodi East also spoke of crime and safety but HIV and AIDS was mentioned much more frequently. It obviously still has devastating effects in their local neighbourhoods.

Emerging Themes

Different Faces of Migration

Migration in these churches took different forms but the transient and dynamic nature of most of these churches is evident. The reality of rural-urban migration is a strong theme in city centre congregations, particularly those with membership that is predominantly South African.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Pretoria Central lamented the out-migration of German members either to the suburban congregation of the same denomination or even back to Germany because of better economic opportunities. On the other side of the spectrum are churches in which the majority of members are foreign migrants from other

countries on the African continent, ironically often being economic migrants, and such churches not only being home to migrants but being migrant churches.

Churches in Mamelodi East did not describe migration in a similar way to city centre churches. The more established township churches experienced migration to a lesser extent. And yet, churches located in the informal settlements of Mamelodi East, at least initially, were all started in response to rural-urban migration and new settlement development. What was evident to us was the absence of churches from more traditional mainstream denominations in the informal settlements, something echoed in the research of Colin Smith about Pentecostal churches in the informal settlements of Nairobi, Kenya (2007: 206-225).

Distant Consumers or Vested Contributors

Marked differences appeared between city centre and township churches in terms of how churches were rooted in their local contexts or not.

In focus group meetings in Pretoria Central participants felt that members were *mostly consumers instead of contributors* to the church's mission. This was mainly explained as a result of members not having vested interests in the city centre, only 'consuming' religion here on Sundays. For the rest of the week the vulnerability or changes of the city centre are not really affecting members' lives directly. Such churches often struggled to mediate a sense of home, and many members saw these as transitional faith communities with the home church remaining the church of origin (mostly rural). Having said that though, in the case of those city centre churches being made up primarily of members who are foreign migrants, churches tend to offer stability and roots, even though members do not necessarily reside in the proximity of the church. In these churches members tend to stay longer and experience something of 'home' (RD Smith 2015).

In Mamelodi East dynamics differed. Members were mostly South African and not foreign migrants. The township church in most cases seems to be experienced as home church, thereby mediating rootedness for its members, whether they are residents of Mamelodi or commuters. The pastors of these churches are mostly themselves residents of Mamelodi East, often with deep roots. The majority of members in the churches come from within the vicinity of the church. At the same time however we found that churches are often not very actively involved in the life of the local community, perhaps because of a lack of resources, the minister mostly working outside of the township during the week, or theological persuasions that are not necessarily emphasizing engagement with the community.

Ecclesiologies under Construction

Our point of departure sought to be free from fixed or rigid constructs of what constituted church, engaging the reality as we found it and considering all those who considered themselves to be church in whatever definition. We encountered a group of 20 women calling itself a local church. We also encountered a local church in Pretoria Central who preferred for us to engage their top leadership located in the suburbs, arguing that they as a local church did not deal with local societal issues as those functions were outsourced to a specialist non-profit agency. It became clear that there were probably as many ecclesiologies as there were churches in these two regions.

We have found a range of ways in which churches chose to define themselves: in terms of denominational tradition, as Pentecostal, Charismatic, African, evangelical, apostolic, Protestant, or Christian. None of the churches self-identified as African initiated or independent or informal and clearly markers from the north, which happen to be the dominant ecclesial differentiations, do not necessarily hold in these contexts.

Distinguishing between formal or informal churches became increasingly contentious during the enquiry, as we recognized this distinction as a product of a Western construct of materiality that fails to recognize the validity of forms of religious expression or church different to the dominant constructs. Decolonizing church and theology would have to include a reconstruction of our understanding of church, to be informed by the vast and often innovative grass-root faith expressions and experiences.

Churches located in informal settlements are shaped by the informality, mobility and vulnerability of their surrounding environments, but this does not make them any less legitimate than other churches in their response to their local contexts. In fact, in some ways they give expression to what Boff (1986) speaks of in *Ecclesiogenesis*, as the (re)birth of the church.

Informality, Innovation and the Church

A large part of Mamelodi East is characterized by informal settlements, whilst pockets of informal trade and informal housing exist in Pretoria Central. Smith (2007: 40-41), with reference to informal settlements in Nairobi, Kenya, wrote:

Just as the informal economy is the economy of the urban population which largely does not share in the benefits of urban citizenship, so informal churches need to be understood in terms of their marginalization both socio-economically and within the structures of organized religion in the city.

Although we argue against defining such churches as informal, we agree with his analysis of the socio-economic, and frequently even theological, marginalization of such churches. So-called informal religious activity or new or different expressions of religion often operate in ways that are more elusive to the untrained eye.

The pop-up nature of some churches only on days of worship, and the way in which existing structures – informal dwellings, school halls, and so on – are used for church purposes without it being identified so in an overt way, not only makes research more difficult but also makes one underestimate the actual presence of the church in a locality.

Many challenges exist in the informal settlements of Mamelodi East, ranging from city planning and policies guiding settlement upgrading, the lack of infrastructure, the ways in which parts of Mamelodi East were traditionally used as dumping sites for people being displaced from other parts of the city. In Pretoria Central lack of access to space is a constant reality, for churches seeking venues, informal traders in precarious situations, homeless people lacking access to shelter, and pressure on already limited housing stock.

A question emerging during the research had to do with how churches relate to, or live with, informality. Do churches resist, embrace, or engage informality? If engaging it, are they pursuing socio-economic transformation of existing circumstances, merely

succumbing to the status quo, or seeking creative ways to sustain life and mediate freedom within challenging contexts?

The very spontaneity of informal settlement growth and the eruption of a multiplicity of small faith communities could be viewed as innovative urbanization from below. Spontaneously, people shape their own communities and futures. What we could not find in this research endeavour were signs of more deliberate, reflective and organized actions by churches in these areas to effect local change and to imagine possible alternative futures.

Youth Agency

In a number of churches membership was made up of predominantly young people between the ages of 16 and 35. Belonging to and participating in the life of a local faith community in itself contributes to building agency, capacity and confidence.

In one church, young people take the lead to organize events and dialogue between churches in order to foster unity. In another church young people lead the home visitation programme. In two city centre churches, we found that it was young people who led cell groups or facilitated liturgical elements during the worship service. Young people expressed a sense of having ownership of the congregation, compared to many other congregations of the same denomination. When specifically enquiring about the agency of young people, young people themselves spoke up in positive terms in the focus groups about some of their activities.

Some of our research team, though, felt that even where it seemed as if the youth were invited to take leadership, it was done so in rather patronising ways by the church leadership. Young people were often allowed to take responsibility but only on the terms of older leadership, without leadership being given away authentically.

Innovation and Competition of Churches in Relation to Contextual Challenges of Their Communities

We found significant, from our perspective, the large presence of diverse churches that spontaneously respond to changing urban environments, demographic changes and migration patterns. This correlates with literature suggesting that actors of faith in urban areas cannot be ignored. They are important for several reasons, such as the broad-based membership of faith communities in urban areas (Rakodi 2014: 82), the ways in which faith communities provide spaces for meaning-making, identity, refuge and hope (Bernstein and Rule 2010; Kuljian 2013; Rakodi 2014; Winkler 2008a; 2008b), and the 'entrepreneurial energy' found particularly amongst emerging (neo-)Pentecostal movements (Bernstein and Rule 2010: 123). A mere presence, however sizeable, is no guarantee, for mediating deep systemic change.

Contexts characterized by large numbers of churches in a relatively small area raise questions as to whether such dynamics represent innovation and a healthy form of competition or an expression of unhealthy striving and disunity in the church community. In research on similar lower social status communities with an abundance of small churches, scholars have argued that this represents an institutional redundancy that stretches scarce social resources within these communities too thinly (Mays and Nicholson 1933). What is encouraged instead in these instances is greater consolidation and

cooperation across ministry initiatives. Such arguments are countered, however, by growing inclinations (theoretically and practically) toward decentralization, non-hierarchical structures, and democratization of power and authority—which these diverse, individuated church ecologies within metro-Tshwane and across urban South Africa reflect in several respects.

Our research shed light on ways religious innovation and community are assessed at community levels.

Community Perspectives on Competition

Competition between churches is viewed as both negative and positive by different church communities. The more traditional and established churches viewed competition between churches as more negative whilst new churches regard competition as healthy, a given, and even an incentive for their own excellence.

Some churches spoke of what they perceived as negative competition: members are ‘stolen’ by churches of their own denomination in adjacent neighbourhoods, mostly because of music or liturgical styles being more attractive elsewhere. Streams of Living Water in Mamelodi East, coming from a very different tradition, stated that they were ‘rejecting the notion of competition’ and rather worked hard to build relationships with other churches.

The AFM church in Pretoria Central, however, regarded competition as positive, encouraging one ‘to up your own game’. They felt that the proximity of other churches spurred them on to take their own music and preaching to higher heights. The church in Salvokop felt that there were so many people in their area, they only had a certain number of people, therefore, the other churches were not in competition as there were ‘more than enough people to reach for all of us’.

One church in Pretoria Central adopted a deliberate strategy for recruiting new members, similar to the ethos of franchising: they ‘set up shop’ very close to a vibrant existing church. People think they go to the existing church, which has become known for its vibe, whilst they are actually attending the new church, still unknown, without knowing that it is not the church they intended to visit. And before they realize it, they are hooked.

Community Perspectives on Innovation

A central question of this research project is to understand whether there are innovations we can learn from. In response to that question one of our team members expressed a sense of feeling depressed and disappointed about the lack of articulation of churches with regard to vulnerable communities and the healing of urban fractures. He said: “It was painful to accept that reality”. He felt that further research had to be done to unearth whether churches did not actually contribute to address urban vulnerability and fractures in more visible ways than we could detect. Another team member found the research ‘depressing’, as he encountered the ‘same old thing; different people doing the same thing’.

Upon reflection we concluded that our own biases might prevent us from seeing innovations. The tension between the utopian ideas of liberation theologians and the actual local communities of faith responding to felt needs and experiential challenges might blind us from seeing.

The fluidity and flexibility of particularly independent churches in the informal settlements of Mamelodi East or in Pretoria Central, distinguished them from more rigid and therefore inflexible structures of many of the more established congregations we have engaged with. Spatial innovation, in the face of little infrastructure, has been clear.

And yet, up to this point our research has found it difficult to trace many examples of innovation in response to the most pressing challenges identified by the churches themselves: violence, poverty, unemployment, HIV and AIDS and substance abuse. Responses were rather limited in terms of being sporadic, uncoordinated and mostly restricted to 'welfare'-type responses without engaging in more transformational programmes mediating longer-term systemic change.

The description of one church sums it up. This church suggests that they were getting along well inside the church. All the problems were outside, and that was not where they were present. Another church indicated that they had no response to their context. The focus group actually helped them to surface ideas or visions for children living in a small informal settlement in their area.

Why are churches able to respond innovatively to urban migration patterns, starting churches with little resources in challenging urban neighbourhoods, yet seem unable to respond innovatively to some of the greatest challenges they themselves have identified repeatedly in these neighbourhoods? Is it a theological or ecclesiological problem, having a narrow self-understanding of the church's mandate in response to socio-economic-political challenges of its context? Is it an institutional problem, lacking capacity? Or is it a problem of identity, shaped by a paralysing vulnerability or a lack of confidence to make change?

Three of the more traditional denominational churches in Pretoria Central reflected worship style and multilingual approaches as innovations, at least within their own denominations. A question that surfaced for us was whether that which is innovative today might reach a time when the context requires new adaptations and the very innovation might lose its power.

The broad spectrum of churches engaged in ministries ranging from teaching, Biblical education, forgiveness and healing, to evangelism and prayer. A number of churches – Omnipresent, Lutheran Bapedi, Forward in Faith and Wilderness of Faith indicated assisting the poor in addressing their basic needs through financial or in-kind donations. The Jubilee Baptist Church specifically identified families that needed support and Omnipresent had an outreach ministry in the local community.

Only a few churches seem to have developed more comprehensive responses. The Evangelical Lutheran Church taught people to plant vegetable gardens and had a specific emphasis on health issues such as diabetes, blood pressure, and so forth. Jubilee Baptist Church organized soccer for young people and various children's activities.

Two churches made us curious enough to want to continue journeying in conversation with them. At Streams of Living Waters, a very small church in Mamelodi East, the Bishop/minister provides arts training to children as a way to fight poverty. The bishop is also an artist who sells his paintings as a way to generate support for the congregation. Although a small church in an informal backyard structure, we sensed the seeds of social innovation in the way in which this church tried to sustain itself, using the little they had.

This particular community was owned by members and they intentionally broke down leadership that is hierarchical or exclusivist.

One of the most innovative expressions of church we discovered was the Golden Gate church in Mamelodi East. 90% of the members are poor women, the church leader / founder is a woman and she is assisted by her 3 'spiritual daughters'. They have created their own community from below in a way that is self-organized and self-managed. This is particularly significant in a patriarchal church and community context with predominantly male leadership. In this church they are trying to address their own issues through collective organizing and have developed a rather well articulated vision to eradicate poverty. Their vision to transform the church into a social business reflects language that is innovative anywhere. Instead of church leaders promoting materialism or being greedy, or waiting for God to act, in their words, they want to stand in the gap to address the lack of resources and vision. In order to do so they started, among other things, an education desk, a sports desk, business seminars and empowerment seminars for people in their community.

What we would like to explore more is whether the way in which this community is organizing itself differs from, or is an expression of, how grass-root organizations in Mamelodi East commonly organize themselves.

Tentative Conclusions: Making Sense

Signs of Innovation and Competition

Our initial sense would be that there are signs of religious innovation and competition in both regions investigated. The existence and proliferation of so many churches in the two regions that can rightly be viewed as tough places to work in, speaks of agency, resilience and creativity.

The presence of the church, particularly migrant churches, seems to contribute both to home-coming and rootedness, and in the process also to the agency of individuals and families, enabling them to break certain negative cycles.

Neighbourhood or Systemic Impact

However, the same could not necessarily be said of such churches' impact on a community, neighbourhood or systemic level. Whereas individual agency seems to be mediated quite significantly, the proliferation of churches in relatively small areas, and the competition between them, sometimes seems to perpetuate disunity and reinforce the existing status quo of a fractured church and fractured communities instead of mediating drastic local transformations.

In relation to socio-spatial fractures our initial conclusion is that the churches we were investigating exhibited little in terms of overcoming socio-spatial fractures in any meaningful way.

Naudé (2015) describes this challenge for the oneness of the church in urban (South) Africa in a poignant way:

In the city, the disunity of the church is amplified in the ambiguous synergy between two forces: Urban divisions and insular closed identities find a spiritual home in ethnically defined churches; and (second) the fast spreading of African Independent and Pentecostal type churches – specifically in poor areas – show a lack of ecumenical sensibility and fractious leader-centred-ness which leads to a proliferation of the institutional church itself. If one adds urban apartheid, the legally enforced race-based suburbs and townships still lingering today in South Africa, the challenge for the visible, institutional unity of the church becomes even more pronounced.

Commuter and Resident Churches

We wondered whether the direct impact on the neighbourhood differed between ‘commuter churches’ and ‘resident churches’. The narratives from two focus groups were telling: one church was predominantly comprised of members within walking distance of the church; the other church predominantly a commuter church. Someone from the church in Salvokop was on the local Community Forum. Another person was concerned with the people living in Baghdad, a small but growing informal settlement in Salvokop, and wanted to start a pre-school for the children from this community. Members of the Salvokop church spoke about play parks for children and the conditions of walking across the foot bridge from Salvokop to the Central Railway Station and city centre. In contrast, in the focus group with a nearby commuter church one of the greatest concerns mentioned was not play areas for children, or the safety of the streets – in other words, issues affecting the local neighbourhood – but, rather, the lack of parking spaces around the church for those driving in and out.

At least two denominational churches in Pretoria Central, with the largest memberships ironically, felt overwhelmed by their surroundings. One member said: ‘We can’t help everyone’ and another: ‘We are vulnerable because of all these people wanting help’. Their identity in relation to their context became one of internalized vulnerability, paralyzed for action.

Youth Agency

With regard to youth agency, we contrasted our experience of a resurgence of socio-political youth agency nationally, on university campuses, and also in local vulnerable communities, such as Mamelodi East, with the agency of young people found at the churches. Although we saw that churches contribute significantly to the personal and spiritual agency of young people who are members, and young people taking leadership and ownership at different levels in the church, we did not get a sense that churches are necessarily the institutions activating the kind of socio-political agency or change-making capabilities evident in the student movements, or that churches even seek to be in solidarity with emerging youth agency or popular social movements as they unfold in their own communities.

Churches as Agents of Urban Social Change: Unfulfilled Potential?

On the one hand we were struck by the dynamism and fluidity with which churches in both regions are able to respond to very dynamic and fluid urban contexts. On the other hand, however, we sensed that these same churches have largely unfulfilled, and probably

undiscovered, potential as social agents in contexts where people are often marginalized and striving towards greater inclusion.

In this regard we would consider placing greater emphasis on *social science research as emancipation* (Schwartz 2011; Nkoane 2012) or *theology as conscientization* (Freire 1970; Allen 2008; Glassman and Erdem 2014) in the next phase of our research: both allowing our research to be shaped more directly by the questions, concerns and aspirations coming from local churches themselves; and desirous of seeing our research contributing more directly to churches articulating a more concrete role for themselves as agents of local urban social change.

Concluding Thoughts

In researching urban religion in Africa, one encounters contexts characterized by a pronounced fluidity and change. What partly accounts for this dynamism has been the momentum of African population mobilities and migrations, resulting in rapidly changing neighbourhood and institutional landscapes and new conceptions of social and religious identity, interaction, and practice. Confronted with such fluidity, urban researchers are contending increasingly with the limitations of previously established research paradigms and methodologies in their explorations of these contexts. The contextual analysis and research methodologies outlined in the present study hopefully assist in navigating key aspects of these current frontiers of urban religion research.

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