Engaging Theological Education with Young People for Urban Flourishing: a Case Study in Nairobi

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Abstract

This article situates theological education within the strategic vision of contributing to an emerging, thriving African city. It examines the challenges and opportunities that face urban youth, particularly in Nairobi, and then offers creative strategies that theological education can employ to empower and engage young people to take an active role in shaping the futures of their cities. This article does a case analysis study intended to bring in insights and suggestions for churches, para-church organisations, and theological training institutions desirous of effectively equipping the young person with the necessary knowledge, character, and skills needed to demonstrate the love of Christ and produce a meaningful Kingdom of God impact on African urban growth and well-being.

Introduction

In the dynamic city of Nairobi, a vibrant representation of African cities' struggle and aspiration for life-giving urbanism, attention to the critical place of theological education in nurturing young people for Jesus and guiding their ambitions and contributions toward urban flourishing is urgently needed. The same can be said of all rapidly growing urban spaces in modern times, like Nairobi; engaging meaningfully with the youths through churches and equipping them for community transformation has great significance. This article, therefore, looks at theological education in relation to the aspirations of youth in Nairobi to show how theological education could contribute toward making youth take up active responsibility in shaping and flourishing their

cities. With due consideration for the peculiarities of Nairobi, this paper attempts to give valuable lessons from theological institutions and explore how theological education might be able to prepare and involve young people in a manner that could ensure the flourishing of urban communities in Africa and beyond.

The large youth demographic in African cities indicates that engaging them is a necessary and strategic imperative. For instance, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs has highlighted the magnitude of this population. It states,

> In Africa, the number of youth is growing rapidly. In 2015, 226 million youth aged 15-24 lived in Africa, accounting for 19 per cent of the global youth population. By 2030, it is projected that the number of youth in Africa will have increased by 42 per cent. Africa's youth population is expected to continue to grow throughout the remainder of the 21st century, more than doubling from current levels by 2055. (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2015:1)

However, despite the huge population, the church and theological institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa have not stepped up to meet the needs of the growing population. Bariu (2017:309) points out that

> Many reasons have been considered as to why Christianity in Kenya and Africa as a whole has a minimal transformation in societies. Some of the reasons are a lack of adequate discipleship, lack of sound biblical doctrine and theology, weak leadership, and limited incarnation of the gospel message into African culture.

This article captures the story of the Mathare Youth Forum (MYF) journey as a critical case study in responsive, contextual Christian theological education that interconnects the church into urban life and contributes towards transformation in the urban space. Therefore, it reviews literature within the scope of theological education and engagement of youth in cities in conjunction with its associated effects and impacts on urban development and

African city experiences. It also presents the views of theological educators, young people, and community leaders about engaging youth for urban flourishing in Nairobi.

MYF had 40 participants from informal settlements, representing various African Instituted churches (6), the Anglican Church (5), Independent Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, (27), and the Presbyterian Church (2). The Independent Pentecostal churches and other AICs are the most prevalent congregations in these informal settlements, which explains their numerical strength within MYF. The Anglican and Presbyterian churches also have a notable presence in the area and were invited by some Pentecostal and AIC congregations' participants.

Defining Theological Education in Informal Settlements

From the outset, it is important to outline what theological education implies in this article. It does not carry the same meaning attributed to the term 'theological education' in an academic institution. In this case, a concept of theological education for informal settlements and institutions of theology demonstrates a process portrayed by two paradigms informed by their contexts, audience targeted, and purposes.

On the one hand, theological education in slums and informal settlements is from below, drawn from the lived experiences of the community members, seeking practical solutions to their issues and changing their communities. On the other hand, theological institutions approach it in a more structured and scholarly way, putting emphasis on predetermined frameworks, professionalism, and doctrinal accuracy. According to Plantinga et al (2010:28), 'Theology has the reputation of being an abstract and arid intellectual discipline, divorced from *terra firma* and all too often speculating in matters far removed from everyday concerns.' This has been the focus of theological institutions. These differences show how people think about and practice theology differently in privileged and marginalised spaces. To create a contextually transformative theology, it is important to talk about and combine these different approaches.

Theological Education as Theological Reflection

Theological education in and with slums and informal settlements must take the shape of theological reflection. In this way, it does not emphasise knowledge transmission; instead, it becomes a dynamic process in which faith, scripture, and lived experiences intersect in a real and honest dialogue. This reflective approach will enable the learners to confront the real-world challenges and understand God's presence and purposes within their contexts. Education does not stop at abstract theories but fosters critical thinking, spiritual growth, and practical application by emphasising theological reflection, thus enabling individuals to respond faithfully to life's complexities. In such a way, theological education turns into a journey that shapes mind, heart, and actions, and that equips learners for significant and impactful living of the gospel.

Paver (2021), through his book *Theological Reflection and Education for Ministry: The Search for Integration in Theology*, puts forward his assertion that theological reflection offers an integration of theory with practice or theology with experience, starting from real-life experiences, with pastoral supervision being used as the vehicle for reflection. While his aim is to inspire reforms in theological schools and seminaries, his ideas are quite relevant to the context of theological reflection for urban transformation. The process of theological reflection effectively connects the theological academy to the realities of urban life.

The practice of theological reflection, which leads to missional action, transforms abstract ideas and theologies into practical steps. As Pillay (2015:4) points out, 'the Kingdom of God is an abstract concept yet becomes personal and known when it is transformative.' Thus, theological reflection serves as a methodology for practical theology designed for youth forums, churches, parachurch organisations, and theological institutions. Pillay introduces two essential concepts that aid in understanding theological reflection: naming and weaving.

Years ago, Trokan (1997:144) noted that 'theological reflection is an excellent tool to enable students systematically to explore life's experiences, to reflect

critically upon their meaning, and to theologise explicitly about the God event in their lives in light of the Judeo-Christian tradition.'

Harnessing Africa's Young Population

> With a median age of 19.7 in 2020, Africa's population is already the youngest in the world. This is a significant age gap compared to 31.0 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 32.0 in Asia, 33.4 in Oceania, 38.6 in Northern America and 42.5 in Europe, the oldest continent. Currently, around 60% of Africa's population is younger than 25 years, and more than a third between 15-34 years old. By 2100, Africa should still have the youngest population worldwide, with a median age of 35. (Rocca and Schultes, 2020)

To devise good strategies for the engagement and empowerment of the youth, one needs to understand the statistics and dynamics surrounding the young population in Nairobi in the bigger context of Africa, seeking to create thriving cities across the continent.

For instance, Hall (2017:9), quoting the United Nations demographic estimates of 2017, writes, 'the Republic of Kenya in the year 2017 is a "young" country, with an estimated 61 per cent of its population being either children – age 0 to 14 – or youth – age 15 to 24.' On his part, Kashoi (2024:1) observes that 'Kenya is a country of the youth according to the 2019 Population and Census results, which shows that 75% of the 47.6 million population is under the age of 35.' Most importantly, the 2019 national census shows that the 'population pyramid for urban areas indicates that the largest proportion of population falls between ages 20 and 34 years for both sexes.' (Gitogo 2020:5). Therefore, it would only be befitting to conclude that Kenya is a youthful nation.

Notwithstanding what the church and theological institutions do with these findings, others are also paying attention to this fact. The discussion by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2014) on *Harnessing the Possibilities of Africa's Youth for the Transformation of the Continent* noted the growing significance of the youthful population in driving economic and social change across the continent. They also underscored how innovations and new

technologies can be used by the youth and governments to unlock their potential for transforming economies and improving the social welfare of citizens. They also recommended that attention be focused on grasping opportunities for identifying practical ideas, policies, and programs, sharing experiences, and adapting them to help the continent and its cities thrive.

As Bariu (2017:310) lamented, 'It is disheartening to see that Kenya, with over 80 per cent Christians, still experience devastating ethnic violence, AIDS pandemic, bad governance, massive corruption, and increasing poverty.' This calls for an imperative that for the church to strategically engage in the affairs of the continent, there is a need to combine the approach to youth discipleship, mentorship, and leadership development with indispensable elements capable of birthing a revolutionary, transformative force to actualise the gospel message of hope, justice, freedom, and abundant life for the people of Kenya and Africa.

Discipleship of Youth and Urban Transformation: Present Scenario

Research responses showed that every church has some discipleship process. During focus group discussions, there were different understandings and approaches to making disciples among Nairobi churches. The term discipleship has been interpreted and applied differently within these congregations. Responses from mainline churches indicated that while many have organised discipleship programs, there is a significant gap in how these programmes impact different spheres of life. Observations were made that youths aged 18 to 35 tend to move into youth programs and branded discipleship classes. Often, these programs distract youth with activities that do not connect to the heart of a contextualised discipleship class. Secondly, the more significant number of discipleship classes that intend to influence young people in spiritual maturity and character development fail to grasp or address the important matters of justice or how faith relates to and impacts political, economic, cultural, and environmental change within the city.

Participants from the Pentecostal and Charismatic arms of Evangelical Christianity in Nairobi indicated a kind of discipleship that equips one to support pastors and church leaders and to be preachers and church planters.

In doing so, they remarked that these are not organised programmes and rely too heavily on the Holy Spirit's action in practical ministry. There is an over-emphasis on believers' acceptance and reliance on the Holy Spirit as necessary for successful ministry, sound Biblical interpretation, effective sermon delivery, and good leadership. This is combined with the belief that loyalty to the servant of God as a disciple and dedicated service to the church are prerequisites for receiving the anointing that leads to fruitful ministry.

Almost all the youth in MYF, a grassroots approach to the Bible within the Mathare informal settlement, attend discipleship groups in their respective churches. In the classes and groups, discussions showed that the meaning of the word 'disciple' is understood differently across the congregations. For some, it means a young person who is dedicated and obedient to their pastor and will do whatever their spiritual leader asks. Other churches use the term disciple to describe a young person who is training to become a preacher and church planter. Most participants acknowledged that this was the first time they had heard of community reading, contextualisation and community engagement.

What has emerged from the responses is that there is not much difference between the disciples in Nairobi's informal settlements and those in the affluent churches of the city as far as their vision of urban life is concerned. Other than in the resources available for ministry and discipleship, most urban youth have aspirations and dreams no different from those of their counterparts in other settings. The discipleship lessons being taught and practised tend to emphasise prosperity theology, self-improvement, and personal spiritual experiences. In this regard, the theology being imparted and the ministry being conducted seem to disconnect them from their real-life contexts. Therefore, the teachings appear distorted, foreign, and irrelevant as the emphasis on health, wealth, and prosperity is inherently individualistic, though premised on prayer, faithful tithing, generous giving, biblical knowledge, and commitment to serving God in the church.

As someone who has lived and worked in Nairobi for several years, I have noticed that specific scriptural passages about health, wealth, power over demons and illnesses, and speaking or praying in tongues are highlighted to support this perspective. These passages often keep young people hopeful

that their circumstances will improve. However, it is insufficient to teach disciples that their only actions should be to pray more and harder, to decree and declare, to bind demons and the enemies of their progress, to "lose" blessings, to prophesy health, wealth, and prosperity, and to look forward to a brighter future.

In most instances, this religious teaching and practice do not save people from such situations because, despite prayer and devotion to God, people suffer in poverty and other adversities continuously. This discipline fails to consider the systems and structures responsible for the situation and how such systems and structures perpetuate oppression and injustice. These Christians are denied the power to rise against abuse and oppression because they are trained only to look at their spirit and hope for liberation only in the afterlife. Worse still, to be good disciples, they religiously follow the command of Romans 13 about unconditional obedience to authority.

This theology, therefore, finds a ready resonance in the informal settlements and the city of Nairobi mainly because of the abject poverty in which many people find themselves. It is estimated that 60–70% of Nairobi's population lives in slums or similar conditions (Wamukoya et al, 2020:11). Besides, for those who are poor and suffering, the theology of hope is imperative. As Torre (2017:4) notes, 'in a flawed, sinful, and unjust world, hope may perpetuate systems of oppression more than it may motivate sustained resistance.' Through hope, the church in Nairobi might actually damage the Christians and their communities because its understanding of hope would result in perpetuating injustice.

Of course, not all discipleship and Christian education programs are restrictive in their methodology. Indeed, some have inspired practical community activities and youth empowerment programs. Suppose theological education is going to be appropriately integrated and its potential for urban communities tapped. In that case, there needs to be a rethinking of what discipleship is and what it can mean within an urban environment. Understandably, the need for effective discipleship requires an understanding that its form must be contextual. This kind of programme should specifically deal with the problems and challenges of the city or particular community. Therefore, this programme would develop Christ's disciples to use their faith in active living in the church

and society. It requires changing one's direction to establish a more relevant learning model or finding one for the youngsters to equip them with better ways of interacting in the environments.

Relevant Christian Theological Education

A responsive discipleship programme contextualised in the urban setting also testifies to the need for relevant Christian theological education. There exist different levels of environment in which Christian education occurs. As Barbaniang (2024:78) presents, 'While Sunday school and religious education are part of Christian education, theological education is offered at seminaries and Bible schools'. Christian education cannot have one-dimensional goals at the home level, in Sunday school, or through discipleship initiatives. As a result, political forces impact its governance, content, scope, and purpose, all of which are intended to achieve particular objectives. For example, an essay by Karo-Karo (2024) demonstrates how 'Christian education in the family plays a significant role in the character development of Generation Z children.'

Machingura and Kalizi (2024:7) have pointed out an important observation. They said,

> The role that Christian Education plays in fostering effective discipleship and deep loyalty to one's Church's doctrinal orientation among members of the mainline churches and in transforming citizens' worldviews into a Euro-centric Christian life seems obvious.

This represents an important aspect which discipleship in the African church must steer clear of since contexts highly influence theology and theological education. In this article, Christian theological education examines fundamental beliefs, values, and ethical principles that are at the heart of Christianity, thereby enabling an individual to engage reflectively in complex urban challenges. Its scope goes beyond mere Christian knowledge; it seeks to give people a deep understanding of faith and its practical implications in social contexts.

Karo-Karo's (2024) approach is particularly relevant today in the face of recent calls by Generation Z for accountability and good governance in Kenya. He talks about how Christian education at home helps shape the character of young people and bequeaths them values for integrity and honesty. In this digital age, discipleship should be about teaching and embodying Christian values that also contribute to political, economic, and religious transformation in humane and empowering ways. Therefore, theological education and discipleship must begin to address how faith can influence the development and use of modern technology and the digital space. This would go a long way in bridging the gap of unemployment while at the same time upholding moral integrity in Artificial Intelligence, creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

The power of Christian education to empower Christians to effectively engage the social, economic, and political realities in urban areas can be limited if it focuses merely on theoretical religious teachings. This narrow focus can hamper its effectiveness in fostering holistic transformation in urban communities. By being non-contextual, it is robbed of critical analysis because it discourages questioning and critical thinking necessary for any meaningful engagement, which is essential for understanding and tackling the root causes of urban challenges. Furthermore, it can be exclusive, failing to embrace diverse perspectives, which may unintentionally alienate individuals from various faith backgrounds or worldviews, thus obstructing the collaboration and unity necessary for urban transformation. It may, therefore, lack practicality in application because sometimes it lacks concrete strategies or tools on how religious principles translate into actionable steps in trying to address urban issues. Thus, there is a disjoint between theory and practice. It may also resist adjustment to modern urban contexts, characterised by reluctance to change, which limits its responses to emerging challenges and opportunities in urban environments.

In discussing theological education and discipleship in relation to the destructive prosperity theology that is infiltrating the Nigerian church, Adedibu (2024:89) argues, 'Relevant theological education has been the missing link in the wheel of Nigerian application.' He insists on the necessity of an education that is 'Action-oriented and transformative in its content as each context and generation has the responsibility to explore the concept of having faith in God and expressing that faith within their socio-cultural environment.' He also

states that 'in this regard, the possibilities and potentialities of theological education could orchestrate the emancipation and liberation of any human society' (Adedibu 2004:89). Relevant Christian theological education for the urban context promotes critical thinking and ethical decision-making.

Moreover, it helps people to understand various social problems from the perspective of faith, leading to informed choices and ethical leadership in the urban environment. It encourages community involvement and participation in empowering ways by engaging students or participants with urban theological knowledge that will enable them to connect with their communities, challenge social injustices, and strive for inclusive urban development. It also focuses on cultural relevance and contextual understanding. Such training in theology can be helpful in closing the gap between lessons of faith and realistic challenges, thereby increasing one's cultural awareness and the needs around them in an urban centre.

In addition, it also covers social justice through promoting values that involve mercy, fairness, and equality, which encourage people to take up the cause of the oppressed, foster social bonding, and strive for a more fair and equitable urban environment. It also places emphasis on leadership development to eventually assume leading roles that serve others with empathy, care for the common good, and contribute to changing things for the better, leading toward sustainable development in urban communities.

Mathare Youth Forum: A Case Study

Mathare Youth Forum (MYF) is a collaborative initiative of Resonate Global Mission, Inspiration Centre Mathare, the Center for Urban Mission, Footprints for Change, and Msingi Trust under the Urban Deacons Network. These are church-related and faith-based organisations committed to serving the underprivileged communities in Nairobi's informal settlements. Guided by the Nairobi Transformational Network, a ministry of Resonate Global Mission, the aim is to engage young people in theological discussions outside traditional, formal schools of theology. MYF adopted the methodology of Base Ecclesial Communities (BECs) from Latin America as a framework for reading the Bible and exploring theology with those living in poverty.

Anyon and Naughton (2003:1) explain that

> Youth empowerment has become a popular way to create effective programs and policies for youth and to help them develop leadership skills, self-esteem, and positive attachments to their communities. Youth empowerment strategies have particular appeal in high-poverty, urban settings where young people feel marginalised and poorly served by society's institutions. Increasing their voices in decision-making is especially effective in such environments.

MYF's approach to similar empowerment initiatives involves designing programmes and practices with young people, not for them. This shift of emphasis is considered paramount. For those who have been marginalised and disempowered for decades, eliciting their views, voices, and knowledge is an important part of determining what might be done and how. Consequently, there is a recognised need to develop youth leadership in knowledge, skills, character, self-esteem, and attachment to the community through a biblical activist-liberationist framework that upholds human dignity, the image of God in human beings, and freedom to exercise their God-given potential.

A good example of this is the process of empowerment in which young people actively participate in developing the curriculum used under the guidance of the organisations. This contrasts with the more typical approach whereby individuals and organisations develop youth empowerment handbooks from positions of authority without the active participation of young people. In such cases, decisions about what is beneficial or detrimental for youth and their communities are made by others. MYF stresses the importance of identifying what is desirable for ourselves, our community, and our city.

One such recent example is the engagement of youth in responding to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their communities in 2020 and 2021. The Mathare youth, through collaboration with one of the organisations in their network, Footprints for Change, launched the '5 for Mathare' campaign. It aimed at encouraging members to commit five minutes each day to praying for the neighbourhood. The Urban Deacons Network took steps by mobilising resources that offered food and toiletries to the most vulnerable people in

their communities. Although these are young people from the disadvantaged side of life, they came out to make some concrete contributions after only a few months of coming together.

Empowerment of youth involves deep involvement with the community, understanding the struggles, aspirations, and emotions of the people and continuous reflection upon their acts to solve community problems. It all started with one common promise. The concept was introduced by Holland and Henriot who, their influential work *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (1984)*,* explored the pastoral cycle that includes moments of insertion, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral response. This model has been adapted by different groups, including the MYF, which has redefined the stages as immersion, discernment, reflection, and response. Thus, the curriculum focuses on community immersion, contextual analysis, theological reflection on the issues at hand, and proactive measures to effect change.

Latin American BECs have read the Bible directly and collectively and found a just God who sides with the marginalised. This is similarly replicated in MYF, which has become a model for urban communities seeking to empower youth and offer theological training that will enable the flourishing of African cities. The young people who attended realised how unemployment, substance abuse, and poverty were all linked to the political elite's disempowering of them. While formal theological training is confined within the walls of the university, informal patterns open to the masses must be given complete recognition. The small, informal groups of Christians in the local settings provide the best avenue for questioning colonial ideas, approaches, and ways of knowing that have been perpetuated through the universities.

The BECs have continually expressed and communicated their reflections based on the Bible. Linked with this approach to interpretation, some theologians have called liberation theology a byproduct of this interpretative approach. Nevertheless, it remains dynamic at work, pointing out and denouncing unjust policies, processes, institutions, and structures. Imperfectly, these theologies resist complicity. They challenge us in a questioning deepening of our discipleship that is not controlled or manipulated by the urban ambient. Torre (2017) argues that only those who

have nothing to lose can be depended upon to imagine ethical practices that are genuinely liberating.

Therefore, the youth in MYF are also very engaged in activism and social justice initiatives in their community. They clamour for peace, livelihood security, environmentally safe neighbourhoods, and a spirit of creative care and service to the most vulnerable as they push for political change that benefits the community. Rather than merely focusing on congregational worship, small groups create opportunities to drive change in cities and neighbourhoods. Recently, they held an accountability forum when members scrutinised the audited accounts of the County Government of Nairobi to account for whether resources allocated to their constituency and wards are being utilised as they ought to be. They exposed the embezzlement of funds meant to construct roads, bridges, and open public spaces. Out of this, they had to take necessary actions to complete these roads. They tried to develop and grow this African city suffering from poverty due to corruption and mismanagement by promoting good governance and holding leaders accountable. The MYF represents an important example of how engaging young people through theological education can lead to urban transformation. Based in the Mathare slum of Nairobi, this forum empowers youth by providing theological teachings, encouraging community involvement, and developing leadership skills.

The MYF enables young individuals to tackle social challenges, advocate for peace, and initiate positive changes in their community. It offers various opportunities for skill enhancement, mentorship, and training, equipping youth with the necessary tools to spearhead transformative projects. Participants are motivated to champion social justice, human rights, and better living conditions in Mathare, playing a vital role in urban transformation. A sense of belonging, unity, and collaboration among the youth is developed through this forum, leading to a feeling of solidarity and collective action. MYF, through theological education and awareness, instils hope, resilience, and a sense of purpose in youths to work toward a secured future for themselves and the community with kingdom values such as justice, equity, peace, humility, and integrity. This shows how theological education can be a catalyst for urban transformation by engaging young people, nurturing leadership, and encouraging positive change in marginalised urban areas.

Theological Reflection as Conscientisation of Young People for Flourishing Cities

The theological reflection that MYF has been engaging in with young people is an important process of urban transformation. This becomes important because unless citizens, especially the youth, understand how their city or community works—who is in charge, and what citizens' roles are—they will not be meaningfully engaged in the city. It empowers them to critically address issues in society, challenge injustices, and work toward positive change in urban settings. Theological reflection equips young people with a deeper consciousness of social realities, inequalities, and ethical challenges, thus encouraging them to question the status quo and to dream of alternative ways toward a more just and equitable urban landscape. By cultivating a sense of social responsibility, moral agency, and compassion among young people, theological education becomes a catalyst for conscientisation—a process of critical reflection and action that fosters urban transformation through informed, ethical, and purposeful engagement with the complexities of urban life.

While theological reflection is the third moment in the pastoral cycle, MYF believes that it should be integrated into all stages of the cycle. Hence, experience, social analysis, and missional action as other moments of the cycle are approached theologically.

Montero (2011) provides one of the most poignant definitions of awareness raising: 'Conscientisation is the liberating process of consciousness-mobilization that enables critical thinking about how we live and how the world we live in is ordered.' By nature, it is a political process that seeks to turn individuals into 'ethically conscious citizens.' Montero goes further to say that it attempts to 'uncover the effects of oppression and exclusion and increases awareness of unjust circumstances, events, and relations that have been ignored and normalised or considered part of daily life.' The result is a community that is more aware and concerned.

Freire (1970) states that theological education has to pursue two objectives in the conscientisation process: finding the roots of oppression and promoting change both in the persons and the community. The different forms of

oppression that reduce the youth to a non-person condition have to be critically studied because such oppression is essentially dehumanising. He says one will be truly human when one is fully an agent in doing, thinking, and hoping. It is basically a matter of self-determination. Otherwise, the person could risk becoming alienated from all the activities. At all costs, the minds, their creativities, and all modes of productivity must be set free, or else people disjoin from life. His second imperative is to modify reality with critical thinking praxis. This is a learning process grounded in inquiry (problem-posing), in which the questions are about the problems they experience in their social context.

The theory of conscientisation holds that people of faith are uniquely positioned to be core change agents for society. In his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1963:42) emphasises conscientisation when he writes, 'the church in the colonies is the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but the ways of the white man, of the master, or the oppressor.'

It is possible to view current discipleship programmes as being a threat—a form of colonised discipleship. Notably, most, if not all, churches established in the city today bear a resemblance to colonies. Apart from this colonial element, Smith (2007), in his missionary analysis of Pentecostal churches in informal settlements in Nairobi, Kenya, noted that these Pentecostal and charismatic churches mainly operate as private businesses in the informal economy. The bottom line is that they are managed and controlled by individuals and organisations that may or may not have a legitimate interest in God's mission.

While Uwan's work (2018:2) reflects an American evangelical perspective, he asks significant questions on disciple-making, which resonate with the African context:

> What kinds of disciples are being made? Do the minds and the lives of these urban disciples reflect a baptism of faith in the marginalised brown-skinned Palestinian God-man, Jesus Christ, who was bludgeoned and hung naked on that rugged cross at Calvary? Or does their baptism reflect faith in a

capitalist white Jesus clothed in a Polo blazer, khakis, and loafers?

Uwan (2018:5) further observes: 'Urban disciples are trained implicitly and explicitly to disdain their culture, traditions, and appearance. Implicitly, they are taught that only white men have "solid theology" because those are the only theologians read and quoted by the urban disciple-maker' and underscores the need for the process of conscientisation in urban congregations.

> The colonised mind is a telltale sign that the urban disciple has been indoctrinated with a false theology that derives from the Empire instead of the Kingdom of God. Empire theology is focused on time without regard for unseen and eternal things. It only serves the interest of the powerful, maintains the status quo, and perpetuates the demonic narrative of white superiority against those in the margins. It requires nothing of its propagators and everything of those on the margins to whom the theology is given. It ensures that the first remains the first and the last remains the least. (Uwan 2018:6)

There is a desperate longing for decolonised and liberated theological training among the youth population in African cities, let alone in informal settlements. As Wink states in *Naming the Powers* (1984), African urban centres also need a theology and/or a way of reading the Bible that would challenge existing powers to return to their founding intent and simultaneously liberate those continually enslaved by such systems. This calls for people of faith to question and hold accountable leaders and structures that dehumanise, combat corruption, and resist the socio-economic and political injustices that contribute to instability in their communities. It underlines that the struggle should not be left solely in the hands of activists and politicians; instead, it calls people of faith to practice an active faith by rejecting exploitative capitalism and by standing in solidarity with the poor and marginalised. They need to challenge dangerous ideologies to advance equity, justice, and dignity as enshrined in the Bible.

Based on what goes on in discipleship practices within the church today and what many youths face, this conscientisation needs to be embraced without reservation to ignite critical awareness among repressed populations within church communities to rise to action. Many young people have shown enthusiasm for this kind of dialogue during class discussions. There is, therefore, a need for new wine in new wineskins. This educational approach, designed for and with young people, will highlight the political, economic, and cultural factors contributing to urban precarity in Africa. According to Freire (1970), the process of conscientisation moves the oppressed from a magical awareness to a critical awareness. The training model will create a new breed of leaders, missionaries, theological educators, advocates, and activists who can bring about change. The church does not have much to gain from maintaining the status quo in African cities' socio-political, economic, and cultural aspects while expecting different results.

The Intersection of Theological Education with Youth Aspirations

It is important for churches and theological institutions to see the connection between theological education and the aspirations of young people in Nairobi. As earlier acknowledged, the vast population of youth presents excellent opportunities for the growth of African cities, and theological reflection provides an opportunity for young people to interrogate and engage their faith, identity, and purpose within the urban context. That is why a pedagogy from below resonates particularly with youth in informal settlements and other marginalised communities, making them pay attention to their experiences and utilising the Bible and other relevant literature to empower them to solve the social, economic, and spiritual challenges within their contexts.

The dreams of young people can be seen in the effort they put into education, entrepreneurship, and innovation, with the hope of contributing meaningfully to their families and communities. It is crucial to link these aspirations to the vision of their cities. As God in Jeremiah 29:7 encourages the nation of Israel to seek the welfare of the city, so the prosperity of young people is linked to the prosperity of the places where they live. If it prospers, they, too, will prosper. Theological education, therefore, can inspire youth to connect their

aspirations to a missional purpose, seeing their contributions as part of God's redemptive work in the urban landscape.

Such a relevant theological education process carries the potential to open the eyes of young people and provide them with important tools to identify and challenge death-dealing systems in their cities and to foster their capacity for change. The scriptures would come alive to the youth because it envisions liberation and well-being. As a result, these young individuals can be the agents of change, turning around systemic urban poverty, inequality, and environmental concerns. Flourishing cities would result from collaboration among those who merge spiritual insight with innovative ideas and civic participation. Consequently, theologically educated youth would take on important roles in urban planning, social entrepreneurship, community leadership, and peace-building processes, demonstrating stewardship, justice, and hospitality—values relevant to sustainable urban development.

The Call to Shift

The future of African youth and cities requires a shift in focus, both in the church and in theological institutions. The current challenges inter alia of marginalisation, inequality, poverty, and unemployment in urban areas must become a priority. The message of the kingdom of God, therefore, invites theologians and theological educators to offer theological education in light of such challenges, reflecting the biblical teachings of *imago dei* (image of God), social justice, community and solidarity, stewardship and care for creation, and prophetic witness.

The dignity, well-being, and complete expression of young people is an imperative. The image of God (Gen. 1:27) speaks to the intrinsic dignity and value of all individuals. The image of God highlights the potential within young people to fully participate in city-making and, at the same time, reinforces the need to empower them to take an active role in shaping their city's future. Micah 6:8 places seeking justice from exploitation and oppression alongside loving mercy and walking humbly with God. It informs an engagement with youth in challenging social injustices, inequalities, and systemic issues that impede urban transformation.

A reading of Matthew 25:40 uncovers the salient features central to the kingdom of God, especially in building healthy communities. The people of God are challenged to care for the needy in society. This is a rebuke of the rich and powerful on the one hand, and, on the other, an encouragement to embrace a collectivist culture, one of solidarity and care so that the community advances together. Theological education at the grassroots and family levels is best suited to mobilise and inspire such action.

Coupled with the above texts are Genesis 2:15 and Isaiah 1:17. Since urban environments are threatened by environmental degradation and irresponsible stewardship of creation, theological education has a lot to say about climate change and care of creation. Such a way of reading and applying God's word resonates with the future of African cities and their flourishing. The second text invites young people to seriously consider the issues of oppression and disadvantages that characterise African cities today. Thus, theological education provides the ethical, moral, spiritual and theoretical foundation for actively working for more just, equitable and flourishing urban communities.

Pathways Forward

The church and theological institutions are not left without innovative approaches to theological education, such as:

i.   Incarnational discipleship: Jesus' becoming flesh and blood (John 1:14) is an example of theological education and Christian discipleship that is rooted in community, addressing the needs of the people, and proclaiming the kingdom of God. Theological education cannot continue to focus on the academy but rather it must focus on where the people of God are and on making them change agents.

ii. Faith-Driven Impact Labs: To link faith with innovation, entrepreneurship, and digital technology the church must take deliberate steps to develop curricula, avail resources, and create partnerships that would link the aspirations of young people with the vision of their cities.

iii. Theology of the Common Good: Religion has been responsible for some of the conflicts in Africa and its cities. A theology of common good means respecting others, promoting reconciliation and unity among different groups, seeking justice, and promoting policies and systems that work for all in the city. Robust conversations happen in school discipleship groups such as the one at the MYF.

We can make theological education relevant to the goals of Nairobi's youth by empowering a generation that would not only dream about an African city that prospers but also works toward its actualisation, living out the kingdom of God in tangible ways.

Thus, the churches, para-church organisations, and theological institutions have a role in initiating, nurturing, and sustaining theological education among young people in Nairobi and other African cities through diverse approaches, such as the youth-centred programmes that must be designed to meet the needs, interests, and learning styles of young people in Nairobi, ensuring relevance and engagement. These centres can host robust transformational conversations that spur active participation and appropriate responses to the challenges facing young people and other urban dwellers.

Another powerful model is engaging young people in Nairobi through the internet, social media, and digital platforms to access theological education material, discussions, and resources. In addition, mentorship programs and leadership development initiatives can empower young people in Nairobi and other African cities to become change agents with theological knowledge and competencies for urban transformation. It would be one way of integrating arts, music, and cultural expressions into theological training, thus making the learning more interesting and relevant to the diversified youth in Nairobi and across Africa.

Conclusion

The Mathare Youth Forum provides a good case study of theological education that is relevant to young people and inspires them to be actively involved in shaping the future of their city. The young demographic and its attendant challenges and opportunities, depending on how they are responded to,

demand a responsive theology. Young people must be prepared through reflective learning, active service in a community, and leadership experience to become committed change agents for urban settings that uphold equity, solidarity, and well-being for all citizens. As we begin to look more deeply at the intersections between faith, education, and social progress, it becomes ever so clear that theological education provides a critical resource for the nurturing of a new generation of leaders who seek to build urban spaces shaped by the values of love, justice, and hope for the future.

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