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Reimagining Bible Study as a Tool for Community Transformation in Informal Settlements

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Abstract

Bible study groups remain the most potent platform for equipping the saints for ministry in informal settlements. However, they need to be re-evaluated and re-imagined to fulfil this role. The 2004 Pattaya Lausanne Consultation on World Evangelisation registered a concern that still requires urgent attention. Among the critical components of their deliberations for consideration was:

To articulate a potential action plan for the Church to be more effective in pursuing the mission of God in large cities. (Lausanne Movement 2004).

This article, following this concern, attempts to locate and promote Bible study groups as potential hubs for preparing the church in the slums and informal settlements to respond to the socio-political and economic challenges these settlements experience.

Using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions, data was collected in Nairobi from ten churches in Korogocho, three missional communities run by the Centre for Transforming Mission in Huruma and Kawangware, and two urban theological training teams. A modified form of the praxis cycle, developed by Holland and Henriot (1983), is used to provide a structure and framework for the article, comprising its four moments: incarnation, social analysis, theological reflection, and missional response. Moreover, Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of conscientisation

has been employed to provide a lens for conceptualising Bible study groups in informal settlements.

Introduction

A fundamental concern is that, as cities continue to grow and slum incidences increase, informal-settlement churches equally multiply but still lack the relevant missional hermeneutics and leadership to spur conversations at the grassroots level. Bible study groups in these settlements seem to narrow their focus to church doctrines, prayer, and using the groups to mobilise members to be more active in their church life. Furthermore, much of the published work intended to aid the study of the Bible does not appear to address the questions and concerns that local communities and churches grapple with. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how to breathe new life and freedom into existing Bible study groups, fostering conversations that provide a theological and conceptual framework for discipleship, ultimately leading to social action and the transformation of slums and informal settlements.

Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of conscientisation becomes a critical concept in helping to frame the desired outcome of Bible study. It invites Bible study groups to become 'a learning space of dialogue, critical thinking, knowledge exchange, and formulation of practical political action' (Mzileni 2020:15) against political, economic, environmental, and religious injustices. Christ the King Parish in Greenmeadows, the Philippines, in reference to Bible study groups, notes that

The communities are considered as a new way of 'being the Church' – the Church at the grassroots, in the neighbourhood and villages. (Christ the King Parish no date)

It goes on to say,

The earliest communities emerged in Brazil and in the Philippines in the late 1960s and later spread to Africa, Asia and in recent times in [*sic*] Australia and North America.

Rayappan (2024) considers them fertile ground for social and religious harmony.

This article hypothesises that a disconnect exists between people of faith and where they live, particularly in informal settlements. It advocates for a commitment of God's people to their neighbourhoods by studying together and developing missional responses that are true to their contexts.

Background: The Lausanne Consultation Occasional Paper 37

Global consultations convened by the Lausanne Movement have resulted in the Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOPs). The participants of these consultations have included evangelical influencers. Billy Graham founded the Movement to “Unite all evangelicals in the common task of the total evangelisation of the world” (Stanley 2013:3). Several papers have been published since its founding. Lausanne Occasional Paper 37 (Lausanne Movement 2004), specifically, is critical because it addresses the issue of ‘transformation of our cities/regions’. The evangelisation of the world, which includes our cities/regions, according to the Lausanne Movement, combines evangelism and social action.

In the paper, Christianity is rightly identified as initially being an urban movement. The paper focuses on the fourth component:

To articulate a potential action plan for the Church to be more effective in pursuing the mission of God in large cities. (Lausanne Movement 2004)

The first three components are: first, ‘To consider the hermeneutical and theological underpinnings of the mission of God in large cities across the world’, second,

To identify the critical questions [...] involved in the mission of God in large cities (keeping in mind that the major concern

at this consultation is how to respond to blockages to evangelism and discipleship)

and, third,

To collect and publish some case studies to help the Church in cities to respond to the theological and critical issues. (Lausanne Movement 2004)

The participants singled out, among others, a specific action plan: ‘to propose tools and resources that will help to equip practitioners to pursue contextual practices in their city-regions’ (Lausanne Movement 2004). Fundamental to this paper is their acknowledgement that the

first source of information that informs urban ministry comes from our Christian traditions: our study of the Scriptures, Church history and Christian theology. (Lausanne Movement 2004)

Although their recommendations targeted churches and schools of theology, this paper primarily looks at Bible study within the local church. The level of Bible study groups is where, more closely, the biblical text and context are brought together in conversation to reflect and discern the good news for an urban context. Unfortunately, the LOP failed to capture the small Bible study groups for city transformation. The question remains whether they are functional in informal settlement communities across the globe and whether they are alive and intentional towards transforming the slum neighbourhoods and cities.

Bible Study in Informal Settlements

Many urban churches across the globe hold weekly Bible study sessions for their members. Several of them happen through small groups, while some prefer large gatherings. Attendance at such meetings is never regular, but the groups continue to meet. The primary purpose of the small groups is to provide an opportunity for each believer to participate and be grounded in God’s word. In Nairobi, like elsewhere, some congregations have a structured Bible study

system while most do not. In these Bible studies, the deductive Bible study method is practised by the majority of churches, with a few using the inductive method. One respondent noted that, in her church, it is the pastor who determines the Bible study topic, which often depends on what he believes the church should be studying. However, regardless of the method used, Scheffler argues:

For it is not the Bible as such that will eradicate poverty, nor our 'objective' study of it, but the way we *interpret* it and are *inspired* by it to become practically involved in the struggle against poverty. (2013:12)

In these Bible study group meetings, little attention has been given to relevant books, articles, and journals to aid the Bible study process. Over 95% of the responses indicated that they do not use any material other than the Bible. The Bible is the primary book churches use, and the term 'bible study' is intended to reinforce the need to study the Bible alone. The Second Vatican Council's document *Gaudium et Spes* (quoted in Kelly 2013:5), on the other hand, takes a different view when it says,

In pastoral care, sufficient use must be made not only of theological principles but also of the findings of the social sciences, especially of psychology and sociology, so that the faithful may be brought to a more adequate and mature life of faith.

It acknowledged the significance of drawing on other literature to provide Christians with the knowledge and tools they need. Unfortunately, the churches are still naïve about the idea of using resources from other disciplines, even though the social sciences would help uncover the layer of oppression and injustice in communities.

Most churches' 'pastoral orientations' (Kelly 2013:1) are prayer, teaching, preaching, and care of God's people, with the aim of forming believers to 'transform reality towards the Kingdom of God'. One interview respondent noted that the discipleship programme aims to make them 'walking Bibles and prayer warriors'. However, the challenge remains whether that particular

pastoral orientation, although well-intentioned, can indeed empower people to become change agents in their communities more effectively than through small groups. According to Freire (1970:47), the people of God within a system of oppression need to engage in a process that

critically recognise[s] its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.

In this regard, it is prudent and advisable for informal settlements to adopt small groups as platforms for members' theological, ministerial, and spiritual formation rather than large groups.

For informal settlements, the fundamental orientation for adequate impact of small groups in communities lies in forming and practising a spirituality that opens space to enable activism and active participation in urban transformation. For this to happen, a conversion needs to take place in churches and among church leaders. There has to be a radical shift from an inward-looking to an outward-looking spirituality and ecclesiology, from 'all the traditional means and motives for pastoral engagement' (Kelly 2013:2) to prophetic and activist engagements. The prophet Isaiah invites God's people to such a stance (Isaiah 58). A corresponding pastoral, theological development and strategy for effective disciple-making are necessary to make such a shift possible. The Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) of Latin America offer a suitable model of what that shift entails. Through them, the God of the Bible was more readily understood as a God of liberation from oppression, with the interpretation of the book of Exodus informing this belief. Such a discovery and revelation were possible because the Bible was in conversation with their context of oppression and the Roman Catholic faith tradition. For the shift that happened, the beginning point was immersion.

Immersion as the Starting Point of Engagement

As Freire (1970:77) stated,

The starting point for organising the programme content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of people.

In this respect, Bible studies remain irrelevant and impotent as long as they limit themselves to spiritual nourishment and not social action. Spiritual nourishment, as critical as it is, must have a direct relationship with changing society. This position calls for a spirituality that refuses to begin with abstract ideas and instead locates itself within a concrete situation. Kelly (2013:9) draws from Grande's principle that the beginning point aims at the process being

personalising, dialogical, creative and critical. It is based on the pattern of action-reflection-action, that theologises their reality, starting from the solidarity of love, faith and hope in this person, here and now.

Furthermore, as Freire (2000:34) observed,

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Therefore, education, and hence, Bible study, becomes a political endeavour. It is a political endeavour because, as the anonymous saying goes, 'the personal is political'. As much as the issues of shelter, food, and clothing, among others, are personal, they are also political, because politics is about the welfare of the people. Therefore, although they are spiritual exercises, Bible and book discussions in the church also become political endeavours. It follows that the Bible must not be divorced from life on the streets, as its teachings have social, political, cultural, and economic implications. In this way, Bible study groups can operate as Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) to breed and incubate change for the marginalised and impoverished

communities. They provide a good illustration of what it means to be immersed in a context.

Basic Ecclesial Communities: An Example of the Volta Redonda Process

Christ the King Parish (no date: para 2) defines BECs thus:

BECs are formally defined as small communities of Christians, usually of families who gather together around the Word of God and the Eucharist. These communities are untied to their pastors or parish priests but are ministered to regularly by lay leaders. The members know each other by name and share not only the Word of God and the Eucharist but also their concerns, both material and spiritual. They have a strong sense of belongingness and of responsibility for one another.

The BECs offer a perspective on ecclesiology and disciple-making that highlights the potential of small groups to theologise and serve as interlocutors of mission for their communities. Depending on the pressing issue, for instance, the housing challenge in Volta Redonda, Brazil, the communities stepped up to defend their rights and advocate for a more just society in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Faria (2015:2266), BECs oversaw ‘religious faith turned into a tool of emancipation of the working classes’. While explaining the role of BECs in the political organisation around housing in Volta Redonda, Faria observes that a movement within the Catholic Church had

made the choice for the poor, rescuing primitive values of Christianity, geared to solidarity, social justice and critical to [*sic*] competitive market values classes. (2015:2266)

BECs became the breeding ground for liberation theology.

The conditions she describes that workers of the National Steel Company (CSN) experienced are similar to those of informal settlements. They include ‘growth made in a disorderly way, without planning frameworks, such as housing,

piped water, sanitation, public transportation, paving' (Faria 2015:2266). She recognises that BECs became the 'social space of a new consciousness'. She concluded:

The research confirmed the role of liberation theology as the foundation and political- religious claim praxis of urban infrastructure and training tool of social movements in that context. (Faria 2015:2267)

Churches within informal settlements could borrow a cue from the Latin American Catholic Church of that time and adopt a political-religious stance to address the city's neglect of the poor as part of their vocation.

The Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) model has been successfully implemented in several contexts around the world, demonstrating its effectiveness in transforming traditional congregation structures into dynamic, community-focused groups. For instance, in the Philippines, BECs have played a crucial role in fostering grassroots movements against poverty and social inequality. They act as platforms for dialogue where members learn to address local issues such as housing, healthcare, and environmental degradation, effectively mobilising resources and support from both the church and local government.

Castillo, Fides, and Habaradas have reflected on the success of BECs in the Philippines. Reviewing their book on the subject, Asuncion observed:

BECs, are able to gather not only individuals but also families, which is a strength of Philippine dioceses that must be continued, nurtured and supported. Furthermore, BECs are regarded as 'homes of synodality' because these promote the participation of the people through dialogue and collaboration. Synodality basically entails the People of God gathering and journeying together. This also applies to how religious education is carried out in classrooms. If a class is reimagined as an ecclesial community, then religious education becomes more than just a subject; it is now a

gathering in the name of God and an opportunity to build Church. (Asuncion 2024:88–89)

By implementing the BEC model and focusing on these critical issues within Bible study groups, informal-settlement churches can cultivate a transformative space for dialogue and action. This approach not only deepens theological understanding but also empowers community members to engage meaningfully with the challenges they face, ultimately leading to holistic social change. And, in order for these small groups to be effective in the African context, since they bring together individuals and families, they definitely require fidelity to the oral tradition of the African people.

Africa's Oral versus Written Traditions and Consciousness

Bible study groups, taking the shape of BECs, require incorporating both the African literary forms and oral tradition. Literary works should play a fundamental role in the conscientisation process and evoke a missional response that fosters community transformation. Written literature is robust. Buhbe (2020), in her blog post 'Activism and How Writing Empowers Us', underscores the weight that good words can carry. She says that, within intense contexts, a skilful use of good words is employed to 'publish essays, create novels, and give speeches that resonate across nations'. Engagement within contexts takes different forms, and writing is one of them. As a form of lending one's voice, literary activism enables one to champion a cause that is not directly related to one's personal experience. Agatucci (2005: Para 3) notes that

Ancient writing traditions do exist on the African continent, but most Africans today, as in the past, are primarily oral peoples, and their art forms and stories are oral rather than in written form.

Amy King (2015:Para 7) argues that

one needs to hear about the lived realities and ideas of 'the Other' so that we might begin to empathise, approach understanding and be willing to relinquish certain privileges,

including risking our own safety, in order to demand the safety and platforms for others.

What she says can take the shape of both oral and written media. She has also observed an existing challenge: the literary platform is not innocent. She says it has been colonised by the rich and powerful, who have capitalised on 'its very existence via white supremacist tendencies in the academy and mainstream publishing world especially' (King 2015:Para 7). However, this does not mean that all literary materials have been captured. On the other hand, her argument provides reasons for developing and using more relevant, decolonised African literature in local churches.

In appreciation of the place of all members at the table, Bible study groups in informal settlements ought to incorporate both oral and written media into their discussions. The key within this arrangement is to allow for detours and cyclical storytelling by African Christians without losing focus. It should honour and accommodate every voice as an epistemological model. Books that could accompany the Bible may be drawn from the oral tradition, such as those by Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. In addition, more African scholarship articulating African urban issues should be utilised to make the Bible more relevant and practical for African Christians.

Tuwe (2016:1) adds that the 'African oral traditional paradigm of storytelling is an effective and suitable social research methodology'. Therefore, he argues that consideration must be made because of

the uniqueness of African storytelling, African storytelling as a communal participatory experience, style and structure of African storytelling, the power of African stories, moral lessons behind African stories, the pedagogical significance of African storytelling, the utilisation of cultural proverbs and parables in African storytelling, African traditional knowledge, cosmologies and epistemologies in African storytelling and lastly the indigenous paradigms and the decolonisation of African social research methods and methodologies. (Tuwe 2016:1)

Bible study groups, incorporating both the oral and written traditions of the African people, would also enhance African conscientisation.

African Conscientisation

Conscientious Bible study in the African urban-informal-settlement church would naturally contribute to African conscientisation. Attributed to the first prime minister and president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, the African conscientisation,

often referred to as critical consciousness, refers to the process of learning to perceive social, economic, and political contradictions, and ensure that there is opposition to harsh elements that may hinder the progress in the three fronts.
(bartleby research no date)

The call is loud because even after many African countries attained independence, most, if not all, remained tied to the hips of their ‘former’ colonial masters and controlled by treaties and economic practices that left them constrained and restrained.

In the wake of the adverse effects of the International Monetary Fund’s and World Bank’s Structural Adjustment Programmes in the 1980s and 1990s (Oringer and Welch 1998; Pettinger 2019), the African conscientisation process deepened. Steeped in abject poverty, incessant civil wars, a gross violation of human rights, and unending political instability, African Christians would need to read the Bible differently, the majority being in sub-Saharan Africa. The continent’s current social, economic, and cultural challenges invite the latest creative and problem-solving strategies, which the church would need to embrace. Therefore, Bible and book study programmes can provide a more conducive environment for such a robust conversation and promote adult education, which has suffered immensely on the continent. Freire’s model not only works in the education system, but its principles also gain broader usage and are applicable in social movements. For example, this model aided the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa (Mzileni 2020). Therefore, the conscientious Bible study groups would partly address the call by the Lausanne

Occasional Paper 37. The following section highlights their strategic significance.

The Strategic Significance of Bible Study Groups

Small-group Bible studies play a significant role in the theological and spiritual formation of believers. Following the example found in Acts 2:42–47, some of today's churches have structured themselves into cell groups or home Bible churches where believers regularly gather to study scripture and fellowship. The socioeconomic dynamics of the house churches in Acts led to social action, where the Christians sold their properties and gave them to people who had need. They read their context and understood that their faith required them to respond to the poor or needy among them. As a result, their breaking of bread and fellowship had a tangible effect on the underprivileged. However, whether their action was the best response of the day is not under scrutiny in this article. Instead, the impact of their action has implications for how small-group Bible studies can be instrumental in making informal-settlement churches more responsive.

As Silva (1974:1) has defined,

the term 'group' designates any number of persons who are in dynamic relationship with one another, have some significant commonality, and assume some responsibility for one another.

The formation of these groups has a purposive element and serves to provide a safe atmosphere for instruction, comfort, and encouragement (1 Corinthians 14:3, Hebrews 10:24). Silva (1974:2) further observes that

The group that patterns itself after the biblical *koinonia* is powerful. Such groups move beyond fellowship to enable persons to work newly aroused social concerns through to positive and constructive action.

The Acts 2 groups demonstrated Silva's point. They went beyond study and fellowship and, by paying attention to social concerns, engaged in positive and constructive action.

Although it is assumed that the groups purely studied the Bible at the time of Acts 2, the Bible as we know it today was not in existence. The text says, 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching' (Acts 2:42 NIV). They relied on what they heard and spent time discussing and teaching to strengthen their faith and shape their theology. However, it is not clear whether all that the apostles taught found its way into the canon. The point is that Christians throughout history have reflected on and written about the Bible, the church, mission, and faith, which believers can take time to study alongside the Bible. The biggest hurdle to surmount is whether church folk, in the strictest form of Bible study groups, can be willing to agree to study books other than the Bible. Some of the respondents found the idea strange. Although book study groups exist, they are often initiated by individual Christians rather than as the church's policy. Some respondents noted that reading other books together with the Bible would open up the scripture and help Christians contextualise their faith. So often the Bible is read out of context, leading to a faith that lacks rootedness in the concrete situations within which believers find themselves. The newly acquired knowledge, skills, and values can help shape one into a more effective urban practitioner and a more skilled, conscious, sensitive, and well-rounded person.

From the text in Acts 2, another outcome of the small group fellowship was church growth. It records that the growth of the early church occurred as a result of these fellowships. They became the small evangelistic outposts and the fundamental expression of the Christian faith in communities. As a 'means of Christian nurture' (Silva 1974:1), these groups became the space for group life and study and were 'important in establishing Christians in the faith'. An establishment in the faith led to meaningful witness in their neighbourhoods, hence their resultant numerical increase. It can be argued that this numerical growth happened because of their proclamation and response to social concerns. Therefore, those who received the gospel message transformed into community benefactors. They moved from being mere recipients to active participants in transforming the lives of others. The beauty of this is that it was

coordinated by the institutional church, as exemplified in Acts 6, from which the urban church can learn. In addition, the small group fellowships have the potential to curb the spread of the prosperity gospel that is prevalent in urban areas today.

The Panacea of Prosperity Gospel

Within informal settlements is the widespread and fast-growing, disempowering ‘prosperity gospel’, which is due to poverty and other factors. Prosperity theology’s interpretation of the gospel and ministry context is, in itself, an act of contextualisation. In the informal settlements, as elsewhere, it promises financial and economic liberation for the poor. Whether it is the correct model for economic liberation is a different matter altogether. As Niemandt (2017:203) notably opined, its

underlying epistemology is more oriented towards buttressing the worldview of global capitalism than deconstructing the political, social, and cultural domination established by Europeans and their Euro-North American descendants.

In other words, its presence in the informal settlements either entrenches colonial, capitalist mindsets and disempowers the communities, or it can be reinterpreted and applied as a liberating theology. This article aims to address the issue of contextuality as it pertains to the gospel in urban slums.

Kwateng-Yeboah, in his article, ‘Analysing The Social Effect of the Prosperity Gospel on Poverty Alleviation in Neo-Pentecostal Accra, Ghana’ (2016), has rightly observed that

On the one hand, the prosperity gospel appears to demonstrate elements of optimism, entrepreneurship, self-reliance and self-supporting attitudes among believers. On the other hand, religious rites espoused by preachers of the doctrine seem to be embedded with the exploitation of believers, individualism, and a pervasive emphasis on a ‘miraculous economy’, which impedes the socio-economic

transformation believers themselves seek. (Kwateng-Yeboah 2016:v)

The prosperity gospel ought to be understood in its close connection to Pentecostalism. As Pentecostalism spreads across informal settlements, keen attention needs to be paid to its impact on the congregations therein and its influence on small-group Bible studies. Using relevant literary materials in Bible study groups, a deliberate effort must be made to question and challenge the excesses of prosperity theology in order to free believers from its deceitful allure. The focus, therefore, must shift to the facilitators of these groups. Do they possess the required theological training and preparation to lead such difficult conversations with boldness?

Another concern is whether the founders and lead pastors of these congregations will permit such conversations to take place. Such a shift may require a re-evaluation of theological education for pastors and church leaders in informal settlements to ascertain its relevance in decolonising the Christian faith, liberating the church in these settings, and making the church more relevant. It aims to equip local churches to view the gospel holistically and apply it appropriately in their contexts for the benefit of their communities. For the shift to occur, there is a need to reimagine the role of the informal-settlement church.

Reimagining the Informal-Settlement Church

According to Lausanne Occasional Paper 37 (2004), instead of people looking at the spiritual and social plight of the city and asking where the church is, the question to ask is, 'What will the church look like?'. Verster also wrestles with 'how the Gospel can inspire people living in dire circumstances to strive for the fullness of life' (2015:1). It envisions a kind of church that can meaningfully serve the city, since not every church form is suited for the city. In this regard, the city's church ought to be reimagined and structured to function in a manner that makes it relevant and fit to serve its purpose in the city, which is to facilitate the city's social and spiritual transformation. In other words, today's church must be reimagined to become responsive and relevant to its context.

Instead of the church serving only a few leaders and disempowering the masses, slums and cities will be served better when the slum church devolves power to the congregations through Bible study groups. So often, pastors and church leaders concentrate power amongst themselves and leave the congregants dependent on them. Therefore, the church is run by a few individuals while the rest remain spectators or consumers of information and church ministry. Bible study groups have the potential to turn more congregants into active ministers if adequately facilitated. It can happen when the church begins to see itself as a body with all its parts functioning.

Religious institutions in our cities, by concentrating power, more often develop oppressive structures and discourses. On the contrary, opening itself up could help create conversations and spaces where freedom can be mediated. The church in the informal settlement ought to be deliberate in using its power to empower others. Such a church becomes a space for restoring power in the people, releasing hope for a better life and raising new visions for individuals and communities. It begins by listening to the people and their contexts.

Listening to the Community

Bible study groups ought to be faithful to where they are – their contexts. There is a need to listen to the community of which they are a part. Listening to the community embodies a posture of the heart, in response to God's word, that honestly and humbly seeks the welfare of the people, honours their humanity, and recognises their dignity. Using another phrase, it is 'putting ears to the ground'. Kelly (2013:1) argues that there is a need

to always look for the greatest participation possible by the base or least empowered part of a community and never to proceed autonomously or without hearing the community.

Therefore, the church and Bible study groups ought to pay close attention to what is happening in their neighbourhood. The pastoral and faith formation processes should yield a commitment to include all believers, incredibly, the least empowered, in the discussions. The goal is to give life to Christian teaching and

translate [it] into a life of action with the dynamism to transform a person integrally (economically, sociologically, politically, spiritually) as well as the community in which they live. (Kelly 2013:4)

It is necessary because it is also possible to engage in ‘communal prayer, religious acts, and scripture discussion’ (Kelly 2013:4) without producing real change.

As religious programmes and activities crowd the church’s calendar, many congregants continue to internalise pain, rejection, poverty, oppression, and injustice. Merely reciting religious dogma and participating in church activities is no guarantee of freedom. Having a comprehensive understanding of their situation is necessary for an appropriate response. When Bible discussions are conducted effectively, stories of pain and struggle emerge, and the community’s issues are identified, named, and confronted. It immerses the church in the Christian’s life, work, and home. Freire observed:

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (Freire 1970:72)

For freedom to be fully realised, the people themselves should have the ability to determine it.

Taking Back Power

Freire argued that

understanding a situation does little to liberate anyone from it – it is only when people act upon that situation that they become conscientized. (Kelly 2013:6)

Thus, as small groups learn, they transition from ‘magical consciousness’ to ‘critical consciousness’ (Freire 1970), and the community goes through a process that empowers them to be the agents of change. The argument is that

those from outside can only ‘accompany and serve oppressed people’ (Kelly 2013:6), but they also have to be conscious. Therefore, making the necessary tools available and creating forums for the process becomes crucial for local communities. In this way, they can relate their experiences to other social factors in order to respond relevantly.

The conscientisation model of education, proposed in this article through Bible and book studies, changes the relationship between laypeople and the clergy. Mostly, the power gap between the pastoral minister and ordinary worshippers can be huge. Roundtable discussions alter the power dynamics and provide space for new interlocutors to participate in theology. It decongests and devolves power, making theologising from below possible and leading to mission from the margins. Moreover, it radically alters the relationship, allowing for greater communicative solidarity to be achieved. Freire (1970:77) acknowledges that ‘Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication’.

Since the majority of Christians in informal settlements and slums feel disempowered, the Bible study sessions would provide a space for them to speak up, vent, and release the frustrations imposed by silence and non-involvement. In this way, they gradually gain confidence and win back their voices. When they eventually become the voice of their pain and oppression, they shall have taken back the power that was theirs originally. Thus, the power domiciled in the pulpit is devolved into the pews, empowering the church more readily to address its contextual challenges.

From Victims to Agents

Mission in, from, to, and with informal settlements requires the informal settlement church to play a fundamental role. It is at the heart of the settlement and interacts directly with the challenges of slums each day. The active participation of the local church is significant for its relevance, sustainability, and self-propagation within the community. Therefore, the role of Bible study groups in locating and transforming the church into an agent of change cannot be overstated. Otherwise, the church remains like any other

entity in the community, relegating it to the status of mere recipient and beneficiary of mission enterprises from outside.

The call bolsters Verster's emphasis that

The church's involvement in the situation of the poor should lead to a better life for all. When the churches are involved in these situations, they must strive to better the situation of the people and to give them some kind of new future. (Verster 2012:49)

Moreover, the task of resolving what the World Council of Churches (2021) has aptly articulated below can best be carried out within small groups. Small groups can become spaces for deep listening and communal discernment, enabling the generation of appropriate missional responses. The council says,

In order to commit ourselves to God's life-giving mission, we have to listen to the voices from the margins to hear what is life-affirming and what is life-destroying. Therefore, we must turn our direction of mission to the actions that the marginalised are taking. Justice, solidarity, and inclusivity are vital expressions of mission from the margins. (World Council of Churches 2021)

Therefore, a mission from the margins facilitates shared theological reflection and analysis, advocacy, action, and communication at, on, from, and beyond the margins, with the hope of encouraging and transforming churches and societies to be more just, responsive, and inclusive.

Within these small groups, Christians can learn to 'resist the forces of globalisation and empire, and to respond anew to the gospel message for today' (Small 2004:3). The two forces of globalisation and religious and cultural pluralism continue to demand that the local church understand itself within local and global contexts. This process of reflection and theologising is better done in small groups instead of primarily teaching and preaching to large congregations. These concepts and ideas require careful study, discussion, and thought to be fully understood and applied effectively. Focusing on large

groups makes this important goal elusive and unattainable; therefore, it is necessary to demand that the church reconsider its approach to Bible study groups and redefine them. Even though small groups are the way to go, they invite the church to exercise patience, as it takes time to build and maintain momentum to yield fruit. On the other hand, the newly acquired knowledge, skills, and values would help shape members into becoming more effective urban practitioners and more skilled, conscious, sensitive, and well-rounded individuals.

Re-educating Informal Settlement Leaders

The kind of church leaders who can spearhead a movement of Bible study groups would require adequate education and training. Such education and training should lead to policies or ministry philosophy that redirect the entire church or denomination and its structures towards embracing the proposed Bible study method to raise critical consciousness among members. Furthermore, as noted earlier, it is no easy task. It requires reorienting institutions and educators, at both the theology schools and grassroots training programmes, to unlearn and relearn. Moreover, such a shift entails redeveloping their curricula and reassessing their faculty, which may necessitate additional resources.

Since such an endeavour may not be cost-effective for most formal theological institutions, which are complicated by the COVID-19 impact, parachurch organisations, local churches, grassroots organisations, and grassroots leaders are better suited to champion this cause. Moreover, with existing networks and relationships with church leaders within the settlements, parachurch organisations can influence the church by leveraging their trust. However, although they are best suited for this task, Resane (2020:1) has observed that there are 'ongoing tensions between the church and the parachurch', especially in the areas of 'theology, finances, accountability, governance, and human resources'. Therefore, he rightly calls for dialogue between them to resolve the issues and work together to extend the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Lausanne Occasional Paper 37 expressed the desire to articulate a potential action plan for the church to be more effective in pursuing God's mission in large cities. This article sought to ground the conversation within informal settlements as local spaces for the theological and spiritual formation of their members, which are integral for God's mission in the city. It proposes using other relevant literary materials alongside the Bible in Bible study groups as a strategic means of realising this dream. Therefore, there is a need for the church in informal settlements to rethink its mission and devolve theological and spiritual formation through Bible study groups. In this way, it stands to raise critical consciousness among its members, thereby spurring social engagement. Such a shift requires the church to immerse itself in the local community, reclaim its power, and reimagine itself in order to become an agent of change. It will rid the church of the negative side effects of the widespread prosperity theology within these settlements and provide a holistic perspective of the gospel for the communities involved. The article finally argues that re-educating church leaders is necessary to influence policy and develop a philosophy of ministry that places Bible and book studies at its centre, and works towards transforming whole urban communities.

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