

Constructing an Urban Theology of Liberation in South Africa Today

A Transdisciplinary Praxis-Approach in the Interface between (Urban) Faith, Politics and Planning

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Abstract

Urban theologising in South Africa has to solidify its intentionality, commitment, rigour, and outcomes if it is to contribute in liberating, constructive and transformative ways to the shape and content of current and future South African cities. This particular contribution articulates the importance of constructing urban theologies of liberation, reiterating the ongoing importance of liberationist praxis in considering South African cities, as millions of urban dwellers still experience profound “un-freedom.” Starting off by charting urban theologies as they evolved over the past 50 years globally, it insists that more needs to be done in the Global South, generally, and in South Africa, to expound our own urban theologies. It then provides the contours of an urban theology of liberation with reference to key elements. It indicates the validity of this approach in the intersections between faith, politics and planning. It suggests that collaborative and synergetic solidarities between different modes of doing urban theology of liberation might hold great promise for breaking cycles of urban misery and exclusion.

Keywords Urban; Liberation Theologies; Faith; Politics; Planning; Transdisciplinarity; Praxis-Approach

1. Introduction

Urban theology, as I would articulate it, is a critical-constructive theological reflection that takes the realities of urbanity, urbanism, and urbanisation seriously. It considers the totality of the urban condition and faith responses theologically.

South African cities have been shaped by an apartheid imaginary. The ongoing socio-spatial-economic fractures and segregation remain legacies of colonial and apartheid city planning. Yet, such city planning was legitimised by theological and political constructs that provided the moral and ethical rationale to defend the indefensible.

Today, for the first time in history, Africa has become the continent with the fastest rate of urbanisation (Parnell & Pieterse, 2014), presenting enormous challenges

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for the future. South African cities and towns form part of this reality, and we need to attend rather specifically to ongoing patterns of urban-rural and transnational migration, and the effects thereof on the sustainability of life, both in exploding cities and abandoned rural spaces.

One cannot speak of a singular urban theology. Instead, various locations, traditions, disciplines, contexts and experiences shape the contents and commitments of different urban theologies and their proponents.

Some might focus on urban ecclesiologies, exploring ecclesial responses to urban change, diversity and complexity from the perspective of congregational development, urban worship, or intercultural and interreligious encounters. Others focus more on urban politics, considering structural elements that affect urban neighbourhoods, people and ecologies, either positively or detrimentally. Still, others might focus on the urban diaconate, exploring various ways the church as diakonos can contribute to serving and developing the city through community development, advocacy or justice work. Some focus on the pastoral challenges that surfaced by changing urban environments, ranging from issues related to urban violence, gender and sexuality systemically to the individual, family or group therapeutic processes required to heal urban environments.

Here, I present the contours of a way of doing an urban theology of liberation, as it emerged for me, in close relationship and proximity to many others, over the past three decades. What was often organic and intuitive faith responses to urban challenges and change have become more articulated in my mind in the past few years.

This is not a proposal for constructing a new form of theology. Instead, it represents an articulation of a form of theology already constructed for many years in the City of Tshwane and elsewhere. However, unfortunately, sometimes expressions of this theology are to be found organically, without much articulation of it in a structured, theoretical manner. Here, I would like to give language to a way of doing an urban theology of liberation in South Africa (and, arguably, elsewhere) today, in the interface between faith, politics, and planning.

2. Charting urban theological endeavours

I start this reflection by locating myself in relation to urban theologies as they evolved in different parts of the world. I only start with those attempts to reflect theologically on urban processes since the 1960s. I do not consider, in this text, the work of St. Augustine, Calvin, Henry Drummond or others, who all had specific perspectives on the church in relation to the *polis*.

Two ground-breaking texts preceded much of the attempts to do urban theology in the past 60 years. Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*, written in 1965, provided a the-

ological appreciation of the secular, legitimised the social revolution, and insisted that God and faith were as present in the secular city as in religious institutions. On the other hand, contrasting Cox's clear reading of the *Spirit in the Secular City*, Jacques Ellul, in his 1970, *The Meaning of the City*, takes a much more sceptical approach to both the city and human potential to transform it. He suggests no continuity between the secular city and the new Jerusalem. In contrast, Cox insists that the transformation of the secular city will usher in the new Jerusalem. Their debate continued for decades and remains relevant as we discern various nuances and accents in urban theologies today.

Of course, both Cox and Ellul wrote from within contexts in which white men only largely shaped theological and urban discourse. Yet, Cox's appreciation of a gospel that was not foreign to widespread social revolution also aligned with theologies of liberation and revolution that sought further to centre the lived experiences of oppressed and marginalised groups. In more recent urban theologies, the insights offered by black, feminist, womanist, liberation and other contextual theologies became much more pronounced. The liberative and transformative effects of these can be traced in some contexts, even though the snares of the Empire are not eagerly succumbing.

2.1 Urban theologies from North America

During the 1980s and 1990s, a steady flow of work focused on urban ministry issues in the North American context. This often came from progressive evangelical or reformed missiologists and theologians, resisting 'white flight' and grappling with being an urban church amidst rapid urban change. The leading voices were people like Ray Bakke (1997), Roger Greenway (2000), Jude Tiersma and Charles van Engen (2009), and Robert Linthicum (1992).

At the same time, progressive responses to urban change emerged, often from African American and Latino inner-city churches, not as well documented always, as they were often not part of dominant theological institutions, under-resourced, or too absorbed in their actual contextual immersions to be able to document their work systemically. The work of the Lawndale Christian Community Church (n.d.), Bethel New Life (n.d.), Abyssinian Baptist Church (n.d.) in New York City, or the coalition of churches under the leadership of Bishop Douglas Miles in Baltimore are often anecdotally related, but seldom systematically explored for their meaning and challenge to how we understand and engage cities theologically. These are all examples of innovative and entrepreneurial responses in how it started to engage acute socio-economic and political challenges in local urban contexts.

Innovative urban theological programmes were offered in different seminaries, independently or collaboratively. Examples included the Seminary Consortium for

Urban Pastoral Education (SCUPE) in Chicago and the Centre for Urban Theological Studies (CUTS), which no longer exist in their original form. The Centre for Urban Ministerial Education (CUME) in Boston has become the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary's (2022) urban campus, now known as the Campus for Urban Ministerial Education (CUME). The Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and Calvin Theological Seminary offered urban specialisations in Grand Rapids. More recently, the Metro-Urban Institute at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (n.d.) and the Doctor of Ministry programme in Prophetic Urban Ministry offered by the New Brunswick Theological Seminary (2014-2021) are examples. Mark Gornik started the City Seminary of New York (2022) with an expressed urban theological immersion and vision, and for many decades now, the New York Theological Seminary (2022) has provided cutting-edge, contextual theological education, mostly to minority Christian leaders working in challenging urban spaces in and around New York City. Not only the theological programmes themselves, but also the content of many of the programmes creatively fused rigorous theological reflection with approaches to the city that were prophetic, entrepreneurial and transformative.

The old Urban Mission journal was recently revived by Kyoboem Lee and others, now known as the *Journal for Urban Mission* (Missio Seminary, 2022), the only one of its kind globally.

Also significant was the emergence of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) (CCDA, 2022) in the late 1990s as a powerful network and catalyst of Christian community development workers across the United States. It consolidated the work of urban veterans such as John Perkins, Mary Nelson, Wayne Gordon, and many others. It became a modelling and mentoring platform to pass the baton to many others. It showcased the work of progressive and entrepreneurial Christian leaders, and sophisticated and broad-based Christian community development corporations, primarily urban, committed to transformational urban ministry in urban centres across the United States. Also during this time, the Leadership Foundations movement, gathering people of good faith and goodwill to transform urban centres, became more intentional about their own urban charism and more international in outlook.

2.2 Urban theologies from the United Kingdom

Urban theological work coming from the United Kingdom (UK) often had a different character from their transatlantic peers. Less entrepreneurial in approach than their North American counterparts, British urban theologians either expressed themselves through more critical liberation theological lenses, asking difficult questions about cities from the perspective of those on the fringes of urban society or as

an institutional theological response to British cities, as embodied in the Church of England's *Faith in the City* (1985) and *Faithful Cities* (2000) documents. People like Christopher Baker, Andrew Davey, Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe reflected extensively on these.

The Urban Theology Union (n.d.), pioneered and led by John Vincent for many years, provides innovative spaces for doing urban theological work through liberationist and contextual lenses shaped by the grittiness of industrial England.

In their book, *What Makes a Good City? Public Theology and the Urban Church*, Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe (2009) take their cue from the same question being asked in the "faithful cities" report (2006), but here they develop a solid urban theological imaginary, unpacking this question more systematically. Theirs serve as a catalyst for "cultivating the 'good city'" (cf. Ribbens 2020).

The work of Andrew Davey, *Urban Christianity and Global Order* (2001), a priest-theologian in the Church of England, places the challenge of urban theology and mission firmly within a broader frame of urbanisation and the globalising order, identifying future trends and what a faithful Christian presence might look like in response.

Christopher Baker (2013) makes a useful distinction between what he calls arborescent and rhizomatic urban theologies in the UK today. The processes that gave birth to the *Faith in the City* and *Faithful Cities* documents represent arborescent urban theology, stemming from a singular source or root system, in this instance, the institutional church with its hierarchical ecclesiastics, and growing in a unidirectional manner. Even though there is a strong insistence on the urban poor, shaping planning and politics, and seeking urban justice, it still represents theology done "from above."

On the other hand, rhizomatic urban theologies are expressed in horizontal, non-hierarchical and organic growth, not stemming from a singular place, but emerging through wide, sometimes even surprising connections. The emphasis of faith practices emerging in this way in UK cities is often on the agency of the urban excluded, visual culture and performative ethnographies, and faith-based participation in emerging urban politics. It represents theology done "from below," locally, or through intersectional, interdependent connectedness.

2.3 Urban theologies in the Global South

Urban theologies practised in the Global South were much less often documented systematically, even though an explosion of urban centres occurred here in the latter part of the 20th century, continuing into the 21st century. Those practising urban theologies intentionally, especially from within a liberation tradition, were often limited from being published to wider audiences by their resource

base, their action orientation that required all their time, or the radicality of their theologies.

Individual contributions from different urban contexts tried to put a magnifying glass on the necessity of urban theological work, sporadically so, and – to my knowledge – still needs to be collected into more centralised archives. I do not attempt to refer to all the urban theological voices here, but I will single out a number.

In the Latin American context, one of the ‘professional’ theologians who sought to construct a more systematic theological response to urban contexts was Brazilian theologian Clovis Pinto de Castro. In many of his writings and his initial doctoral thesis, he considered faith and citizenship in relation to the challenges of Brazilian cities and the megacity of Sao Paulo, where he was based (De Castro, 2000).

Some of the most faithful responses to contextual urban challenges arose from the slums and poor urban neighbourhoods of Brazil and other Latin American contexts. In his gripping account of religion in the megacity, Philip Berryman (2006) describes some of these faith responses, both as they emerged from the base ecclesial communities in urban slums, but also through the prioritisation of the urban poor, given by prominent theological leaders such as Cardinal Evaristo Arns in Sao Paulo.

More recently, in 2021, Joel Aguilar-Ramirez, articulated a practical theological vision of urban peacebuilding with his doctoral thesis entitled *Living, Laughing and Loving in Guatemala City*. Standing in the tradition of liberation theologies, but integrating mimetic theory and the insights of Rene Girard, Aguilar-Ramirez’s voice articulates a fresh and innovative urban theology from the Global South, responding in particular to his own Central American context.

In the Asian context, the realities of urban challenge are such that those engaging these realities theologically are often stretched beyond what is humanly possible. Sadly, dominant theological institutions often fail to centre urban experience in their curricula, especially for the urban poor. Individual priest-theologians like Benigno Beltran and Daniel Pilario offer inspiring, disruptive, innovative theological thought worth considering. Their voices often remain rather marginal, yet, must disrupt dominant theological discourse, not only for the liberation of the urban poor, but for the liberation of theological institutions and theology itself.

Beltran has worked for more than 30 years with the garbage dweller community of Smokey Mountain, documented in *Faith and Struggle on Smokey Mountain* (Beltran, 2012). This journey birthed a theology that fuses liberation, innovation and entrepreneurship to address urban poverty and marginalisation, urban economic exclusion, and urban environmental degradation in strikingly transformative ways.

Daniel Pilario is stewarding his role as professor and Dean of the St. Vincent School of Theology at Adamson University in Manila whilst ministering to the urban poor in Payatas, Quezon City. He traverses the space between the academic classroom and the classroom of the urban slum, practising a liberation theology that is not about abstract philosophical constructs only, but about “life in its fullness” (Justaert, 2012:1). In an interview with Kristien Justaert (2012:1-2), Pilario says, with reference to his friends on the Payatas dumping site of Manila:

My friends there do not talk so much about liberation. They talk about the food for the next meal, a sturdier house to protect them from wind and rain, enough money to send their children to school, a much needed cure for a loved one with terminal cancer or less typhoons to be able to harvest the crops, etc. All these are basic human longings for Jesus to fulfil his promise: “I have come that you may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). Call it liberation or salvation; call it grace or the Kingdom of God. For them, it is the same – ‘a good and full life.’”

To him, it is expressed in his solidarity with family members who became victims of extrajudicial killings, the hunger of the urban and rural poor during Covid-19, and the livelihoods of rural villagers and urban scavengers alike. Pilario insists that in the “rough grounds” of marginalised people and places, we must discern God and do theology (cf. Justaert 2012:4; cf. also Pilario).

In Hong Kong, connected to the realities of urban dwellers in that congested city, urban missiologist Ray Bakke invested in an emerging generation of urban leaders over many years. Some completed their doctoral work with him, and eventually, the Ray Bakke Centre for Urban Transformation (2021) was established here in 2012, hosted in the Bethel Bible Seminary. With a focus on Hong Kong, China and Asia, the Centre offers Diploma, Masters and Doctoral Programmes in Urban Ministry and Transformational Leadership, equipping and accompanying urban leaders committed to transformational ministry in cities.

Instead of urban theologies vesting in a few strong individual Asian scholars, a new generation of transformational urban leaders arises from here, able to think theologically about urban ministry praxis.

2.4 Urban theologies in (South) African contexts

African theologians have seldom articulated systematic urban theologies, similar to other contexts in the Global South. However, being the continent with the fastest rate of urbanisation today, it would be scandalous, theologically, if a concerted effort is not made to reflect and respond systematically and robustly to the vast challenges of African cities.

Many on the African continent have also done urban theology without having the time to document it. People like Jember Teferra, called by some the Mother Theresa of Addis Ababa, have for many years engaged in incarnational community development ministries in the poorest slums of that great city (Barrett, 2021). She sometimes wrote small booklets that she distributed widely, reflecting her own urban spirituality, shaped profoundly by her Ethiopian Orthodox roots and radical evangelicalism. She also wrote up her urban ministry approach in a Doctor of Ministry thesis through the Bakke Graduate University in Seattle. Many others are working in the trenches of their cities, seeking to relate their faith to daily urban struggles without their life works, actions, and thoughts ever being documented in theological books or classrooms.

What Pilario says of the Philippines is true also of other contexts around the world, particularly in the Global South and African cities. For example, in the interview with Justaert (2012:2), Pilario states:

If we think of 'liberation theologies' done among the poor in the grassroots – of people trying to reflect on their lives as they struggle for a better life – it is widespread. I have witnessed communities trying to read the bible and getting inspiration from it in the midst of pain, violence and disease. I know of pastoral workers and lay ministers who traverse mountains and walk for hours just to reach far flung mountain communities to officiate in Sunday celebrations without a priest. I have seen catechists who are hardly given their transportation allowances but do not stop in helping young people make sense of their faith in new contexts. I have seen informal settlers trying to organize to get potable water or acquire land for their simple house – all inspired by their faith life. If what they do is theology, then liberation theology is a widespread phenomenon. But if you think of professional theologizing, liberationist theology remains marginal in the Philippines.

Dominic Tomuseni (2018), a Zimbabwean Jesuit priest-theologian, considered theology and the African city for his PhD thesis at Loyola University in Chicago. Sheth Otieno (2020) wrote about theological education with informal settlement leaders in Nairobi, advocating a pedagogy from below. Colin Smith (2011) worked for 14 years as director of the Centre for Urban Mission in Kibera, Nairobi, and wrote about the divided city, here and elsewhere, in different publications. Much earlier, in 1979, urban missiologist, Timothy Monsma, published *An Urban Strategy for Africa*. The Centre for Urban Mission in Nairobi, the Institute for Urban Ministry in Pretoria, and the Centre for Faith and Community at the University of Pretoria are among the only theological institutions with a deliberate urban theological emphasis (cf. De Beer 2020). The University of South Africa provided legitimation for activist urban theologies in the 1990s, hosting a certificate and Masters programme in urban ministry in partnership with the Institute for Urban Ministry. However, in-

stitutional dynamics halted the benefits that emerged from this relationship, but in recent years, missiologists like Mangayi, Mashau and Banda are trying to re-insert African cities as a central missiological concern at UNISA.

In addition, many organisations, local churches, faith-inspired communities, or individuals do urban theologies in cities across Africa, responding contextually to local urban challenges without these being documented in ways that help disrupt or shape dominant theologies.

In 2018, a collaborative research project brought together 15 researchers from 15 African cities and 15 theological institutions. *Urban Africa 2050: Imagining Theological Education/Formation for Flourishing Cities* explored a two-fold question: “Where would African cities be by 2030/2050?” and “How could theological curricula contribute to fostering a generation of transformational urban leaders that will work for flourishing African cities?” This project gave birth to a small African Urban Theology Network, committed to emphasising African cities in theological discourse and institutions (De Beer, 2020).

Although little systematic attention was given to what has become known as urban ministry or urban theology until the 1990s, in the South African context, black theologians and other progressive faith-based leaders often worked in urban townships and informal settlements, urban neighbourhoods like Sophiatown and District Six that were affected by forced removals and displacement, or city centre cathedrals that provided spiritual sanctuary to diverse peoples. These leaders often had to respond to critical urban challenges of exclusion, marginalisation and oppression, systematically dealt with by the apartheid regime. Their faith responses, and the black and contextual theologies that emerged from these spaces, could be regarded as forms of urban theology, even though not framed in such a manner. Trevor Huddleston’s *Naught for my Comfort* (1956), Jan du Randt’s *Swartman, Stad en Toekoms* (1970), and Desmond Tutu’s *Hope and Suffering* (1984) all stemmed from theological engagement with apartheid South Africa, in general, but South Africa’s harsh urban realities, in particular. Tutu juxtaposed the city of God with the city of man (*sic*), offering a political, theological vision that still has bearing.

3. Constructing an urban theology of liberation in South Africa today

3.1 Deliberately praxis-based

The outright bias of most liberation theologies is toward a praxis-based approach to theology: immersed in solidarity with struggling or poor communities centring the interlocution of the poor and marginal; engaging in ongoing critical socio-ecclesial analysis, or deconstruction of dominant societal patterns, norms and narratives; reflecting theologically in ways that are able to make sense of reality; whilst crafting

radically new imaginations of possibly different urban futures; and, finally, engaging in strategic discernment of the kinds of actions required to usher in such preferred imaginaries.

The lack of deep immersions of solidarity; a hermeneutic of suspicion that is reserved mostly for how we engage biblical texts without practising similar suspicion towards ecclesial and societal power discourses; our entrenched ways of doing theology that serves to legitimate the status quo; intellectual, theological reflection void of spirituality, experiential correction, or imaginative potency; and minimal exposure to liberative actions or practices that transform local situations fundamentally – these all contribute to impotent theological enterprises, that leave cities as they are.

New Testament scholar, Dieter Georgi (2005:xix), lamented the ways in which Plato, for example, has been misread by medieval theology and philosophy in ways that endured to this day in Western theologising.

Plato understands *theoria* not as mere contemplation or speculation or as systematically organised knowledge. Rather, he considered “theory” to be vision, which he related closely to “praxis.”

Georgi (2005:xix) continues to state:

Theoria, that is, vision, lost its imaginative, visionary qualities, and praxis, originally something very creative, turned into practice, a mere application of more or less abstract theory, most often stifled and sterile indeed.

Georgi (2005:xix) describes it as “a fatal reversal of the sequence praxis-theory to that of theory-practice.”

A praxis-based approach to doing theology prioritises the “rough grounds” (cf. Pilario 2005) of immersed action as the locale for doing theology. In doing so, theological responses would hopefully be responsive, imaginative, and liberative in contextually appropriate ways. This is a far cry from dominant models of theological education that seek to do theology as *theoria*, detached from local contexts, and placing theory in a position of superiority to the deeply embedded, sacrificial, and often imaginative-innovative praxes of urban practitioners, activists and change-makers.

Drawing deeply from Holland and Henriot’s (1980) work, the praxis-approach articulated in their book, *Social Analysis*, has become the theological method many of us now use in South African urban contexts. Born from the theological work being done in base ecclesial communities in Latin America and small Christian

communities in Africa, the praxis-approach refuses to place action, reflection or spirituality in a hierarchical relationship to each other, but rather conceive of a theological method that is profoundly contextual and circular in how it arrives at new utterances about God in relation to society, or faith practices as the embodied Word of God, becoming human.

It was popularised in the South African context among some urban workers through the workbooks of the Institute for Urban Ministry (n.d.) since the 1990s, valorised by the support of the then-Missiology Department at the University of South Africa, and more recently, the course work of the Leadership in Urban Transformation programme offered by the Centre for Faith and Community at the University of Pretoria. In addition, it is practised consistently in places like the Tshwane Leadership Foundation in Pretoria, the Warehouse in Cape Town, or the Ujamaa Centre at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal.

The particular logic of the praxis-cycle – the intentionality/discipline of each distinct moment; the rigour of being immersed in a specific theological method that is committed to liberatory change; and the integration of immersion, action, analysis, reflection, and spirituality, into one methodical process – is what distinguishes this method.

3.2 Incarnational solidarities

Doing urban theologies that are praxis-based and committed to integral liberation will start with questions like: “Where do we do theology from?” “Who do we do theology with?” and “What do we do theology for?”

Most of the dominant expressions of theological education and their pedagogical approaches in South Africa today are not practised from a position of incarnational solidarity with the urban poor or done in conversation with them, or with the view to transform urban situations of exclusion and marginalisation irreversibly. There is a theological vacuum when it comes to urban literacy and solidarity. Even though many theological institutions would pride themselves in being weaned from unhealthy fundamentalisms, the same theological institutions are often weaned too, contextually, from the ability to immerse themselves, and immerse theologies in the realities of urban pain and suffering.

Veteran black theologian of liberation, Itumeleng Mosala, lamented the status of black theologies of liberation in 1996. He was quoted as saying:

Black theology has abandoned its origins located within the movement of resistance present in the grassroots black community. It has become alienated from this community, to be housed in seminaries and religious studies departments. It has become the subject of dissertations and academic papers rather than a weapon of

struggle. It has lost the creativity that it once had in generating cultural metaphors and religious symbols capable of arousing the masses. Today, black activists are driven by a different ideology. Black theologians have failed to keep in touch with the grassroots people and have not succeeded in adapting the message of black theology to address the changing needs of the community. Black theology no longer takes the demands and needs of the community as its point of departure. Quite frankly I do not know whether we will be able to re-establish the link (Mosala, in an interview with Villa-Vicencio, 1996:214-215).

What he raises might not resonate well with all exponents of black theologies of liberation, although it indeed articulates the same questions: “Where do we do theology from?” “Who do we do theology with?” and “What do we do theology for?” He concerns incarnate solidarities as the “rough ground” from which our liberating theologies spring.

Ironically, there might be faith practices emanating from rather conservative evangelical traditions, not at all articulating their theologies in terms of liberationist language, but their concrete solidarities with those on the margins, and the impact of their engagements might be radically liberating.

I believe learning to be in incarnational solidarity is the greatest gift we can offer students of ministry and theology. Such learning is characterised by a life-long commitment to unlearning, undo, unfollow and unmask, whilst at the same time embedded in a commitment to learn afresh, do differently, follow ‘the other,’ and find new identities, without masks, as liberators and healers in oppressive and broken urban spaces. It is a praxis-theory sequence which grounds theological/theoretical/imaginary formation in the “rough grounds” of praxis.

Theologies of liberation always insisted that theology itself needs to be liberated. Unless our theologies, theological curricula, and pedagogies are liberated, our theologies will fail to mediate liberation, both of the poor and the rich, of the church and of society at large, of those with power and those without. Such liberation of theology happens where it finds itself in incarnational solidarities with interlocutors that are too often ‘outside the gate’ of the city.

3.3 The interlocution of the poor

This remains what distinguishes liberation theologies from many other theologies: the perpetual disruption, by the urban poor, of theoretical, ecclesial and socio-spatial constructs that render us safe and comfortable, which in fact, might separate us from the radicality of the gospel’s claims. The garbage dwellers of Manila shaped the theologies of Beltran and Pilario; the slum dwellers of Addis Ababa and Kibera deconstruct the preconceived theologies of Teferra, Otieno Oguok or Smith; and the

waste pickers, refugees and homeless communities of Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town, expose the urban illiteracies, incapacities, and spatial-ecclesial exclusions of our local urban churches. However, such socio-theological disruptions can only occur if we choose to be present in the spaces occupied by the urban poor. Unfortunately, such presence is not obvious.

West (2020) asks critical questions about interlocution after liberation in South Africa. He refers to the historical moment of political liberation in 1994, which did not necessarily culminate in integral liberation for most of South Africa's population. Vellem (2012:3), in particular, laments the shift in interlocutor "from non-persons to middle-class persons" (West, 2020), which he discerns in the State's Affirmative Action practices, their shift from critical solidarity with the poor to critical solidarity with the state, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's prioritising of reconciliation over justice (Vellem, 2012:3; 2013:8).

Urban theologies of liberation today should be expressed in their deep connectedness to urban "non-persons" or those deemed not valid or able to access a right to the city or its resources or disallowed from participating in city-making processes. At the same time, urban theologies of liberation should not only dwell on debilitating constructs, but should also discern the unexpected agencies, innovation and resilience with which the urban poor and disenfranchised navigate urban spaces and, without permission, participate in making urban spaces, from below, in ways that force their "right to the city." Urban social movements, organised and non-violent spatial occupations, waste picker associations, community-based organisations and local faith communities often find ways to mobilise will, resources and capacities against all odds.

One of the liberation theological voices that most informed my own journey was that of Margaret Eletta Guider (1995), as she described the journey of the Catholic Bishops of Brazil with commercial sex workers in her *Daughters of Rahab*. She traced a process of eight national encounters hosted over a period of 16 years (1974-1990) in which bishops and marginalised women listened to each other. This resulted from the church's resolve to engage women in prostitution, not as sinners, but as victims. Through the interlocution of marginalised women, not only was the church challenged at a profound level with its complicity in the marginalisation and stigmatisation of vulnerable women. It also revealed, though, according to Guider, how the church's own liberation had limitations – it was more likely for the church to abandon class privileges and embrace "the poor" in a generic sense than to abandon historically held doctrinal positions, which firmly entrenched patriarchy and its oppressions.

Urban theologies of liberation in South Africa (and Africa) today are uniquely challenged to centre the narratives and experiences of the urban poor as expressed

in the lives of women, girl children, and persons not confirming to heteronormativity; landless and homeless people; and disenfranchised families and neighbourhoods, everywhere. The insights of womanist, feminist and queer theologies in this regard must be given space in our liberative considerations, conversations and commitments. The shortfalls of various theologies and whether they mediate qualitative liberation also must be interrogated. Liberation theologies must find solidarity not only with those groups we have an affinity with, but with all who are treated with disdain as if they were less human or as “non-persons.”

3.4 Socio-ecclesial analysis

A key element in doing urban theologies of liberation is ongoing and rigorous socio-ecclesial analysis. This has been a source of discomfort for many critics of liberation theology due to its use of Marxist analysis in reflecting on class and power. Whilst the limitations of such analysis tools must be considered, their contribution to deconstructing dominant societal structures that deal oppression in large sectors of society could not be underestimated. In urban theologies of liberation, the socio-ecclesial analysis will use various tools and disciplines to analyse urban realities socio-economically, politically, culturally, and spatially. Such analysis would not only name and unpack oppressive and exclusivist societal and ecclesial systems and structures, but will also surface and celebrate innovation, liberative practices, and clear alternatives to the oppressive narratives.

On the one hand, the socio-ecclesial analysis serves to name and lament that which causes urban death and dying. However, on the other hand, it names and celebrates faithfulness to imaginaries and practices that advance the possibility of the “good city” for all. Increasingly, transdisciplinary is appreciated for its ability to help articulate and deconstruct intersectional forms of oppression and dominant narratives that keep the status quo in place. Various disciplines and the insights and interlocation of urban practitioners, urban dwellers and those outside the city gate, must be welcomed and heard in our collective discernment of the city. Social analysis in isolation from such diversity of experiences and insights will, at best, be superficial, biased and blurred by the narrow interests of an individual theologian, group, or institution if not deliberately expanded.

Understanding how religious institutions, particularly the Christian church, and various faith-based expressions respond to urban realities, describing such responses, the theologies undergirding such responses, or the failure to respond is critical if we were to foster fresh imaginations for ever-changing and ever-challenging urban contexts. We must engage in daily practices and socio-ecclesial analysis spaces to foster alternative imaginaries and practices for a liberated/transformed city.

3.5 Reflexivity and imagination: Between utter despair and radical hope

Another critical element of an urban theology of liberation, but also any life-affirming theology, is the ability to reflect theologically. Unfortunately, many theology students go through their formational years and end up in ministry, *unable* to reflect independently, critically and constructively, either in social or ecclesial contexts. Theoretically trained, but mostly disembedded from struggling urban contexts or not grounded in a consistent praxis-approach, theirs is a theory-practice sequence that rarely settles in the “rough grounds.”

Urban theologies of liberation seek to function in the difficult spaces between utter despair and radical hope – deeply connected to the cross-bearers of urban slums and streets, yet simultaneously grounded in the resurrection narrative of Christ, with a vision of a new and transformed city in the end. Reflecting on both the pain and hope of current urban realities, the reflexivity of urban theologies of liberation enables them to articulate that which deals death in the city and to help evoke and animate imaginations of prophetic and radical hope. Such imaginaries should be both utopian in how fantastical and bold they dare to be, but also concrete in the sense of being implementable by local people and communities. There is a creative tension here that should not be suspended.

3.6 Prophetic discernment

An important part of the reflective and imaginative function is to discern, with others, the moment we are in. Some contexts and moments, at specific moments in time, require resistance, whilst other contexts and moments, at specific moments in time, require reconstruction. In many urban contexts, we are required to live and work on the edge, always resisting and reconstructing simultaneously. What is important is to cultivate among urban leaders and communities of faith the ability to discern deeply, sensitively, and well with many others. Such discerning capabilities come from the formation that holds theological reflection, spiritual meditation and prophetic imagination, grounded in local contexts, as equally important.

In the 1980s in South Africa, a Kairos-moment was discerned by the theologians who constructed the Kairos document. Yet, every new era and every changing context requires us to discern the moment we are in right now and the most appropriate word/embodiment of the good news in such a particular moment.

3.7 Co-constructing urban alternatives: Between liberation and reconstruction

Vellem (2007:128-237) recognises the contribution of theologies of reconstruction in critiquing the failure of black or liberation theologies to offer vivid and concrete imaginaries of alternatives beyond that which they deconstruct. He proposes engagement in acts of reconstruction, but always pre-empted by liberation.

The reconstruction project will fail if prior liberation has not occurred effectively or thoroughly.

In the South African context, the reconciliation project remains fragile and tentative because restitution and reparations have not adequately occurred. Both liberation (in the sense of justice, restitution, the dismantling of oppressive structures, and recognition of unfair privileges) and reconstruction (in the sense of rebuilding urban infrastructure, creating life-affirming institutions and structures, sharing privilege and resources equitably, and fostering reconciled relationships across many boundaries) are important if we are committed to the “good city” or “good society.” Both must be considered equally critical commitments, not juxtaposed, but seen as intimately intertwined and dependent upon each other.

3.8 Theologies with intent: The shalom of the city, integral liberation or flourishing cities

Urban theologies of liberation must allow themselves to be liberated, if required, from deconstructive paralysis. These should be theologies with clear intent: mediating *measurable* integral liberation/freedom for all people, particularly perpetually un-free people. Taking our cue from Gutierrez, but expanding on him, we should consider integral liberation as spiritual, social, economic, environmental, spatial, cultural and political freedom from all conditions that obstruct or prevent the fullness of life.

Liberation-transformation needs to be measured in terms of whether the city is flourishing for all its people, whether it is a “good city” or whether God’s shalom (wholeness as peace and justice) is experienced by urban people and places alike. Instead of using concepts such as “flourishing,” “good city,” or “urban shalom” as buzzwords only, urban theologians of liberations should work with local communities, their leaders, municipal officials, and other urban researchers to formulate concrete indicators for measuring the extent to which liberation, transformation, and flourishing – indeed, the “good city” of “shalom” – have become possible.

Such indicators could include a significant increase in the number of families gaining access to running water and toilets; the percentage of people living in informal settlements accessing title deeds; a significant decrease in incidents of street-based or gender-based violence in communities; an increase in local churches offering their land and property for shelter and housing; sustained unqualified municipal audits over multiple years; effective, efficient, affordable and city-wide public transport, accessible to all the city’s inhabitants; or legal recourse for urban dwellers whose rights are infringed upon by law enforcement agencies, or who are excluded from access to the city’s resources.

3.9 Grounded in liberative (urban) spiritualities

Sustaining long journeys of liberation – resisting and reconstructing that which is broken and that which causes brokenness, often if not mostly against almost insurmountable odds – requires urban theologies of liberation to be grounded in liberative spiritualities (cf. De Beer 2020b on Vellem’s spirituality of liberation).

Without such spiritualities – enabling us to sing, pray, lament, dance, and break bread in the face of urban hardships and frail urban dreams – the temptation to get up and leave to seemingly greener pastures might be too great. That is why the work of Dorothee Soelle in *The Silent Cry* remains so crucial, reminding us that mysticism and resistance belong to each other, that spirituality and justice/liberation need each other, that prayer and politics are two sides of the same coin, allowing for the way of God to infiltrate the cities of the earth.

3.10 Deliberately transdisciplinary

Whereas liberation theologies have always borrowed from the insights of other disciplines, an even more deliberate transdisciplinary should be fostered today, not only in terms of broadening or sharpening our tools of analysis, but also in terms of fostering radical alternative imaginaries, which we can then start to construct, embryonically or organically, as prophetic irruptions that change the urban landscape.

I ascribe to a definition by Klein (2001) of transdisciplinarity as different disciplines collaborating with practitioners and communities to find solutions for real-life problems. It broadens the definition from academic disciplines and knowledge to a deliberate inclusion of the voices and experiences of urban practitioners and communities.

Working with widely diverse disciplines like architecture, urban planning, geography, health sciences, political sciences, environmental studies and social work, in playful, critical and synergetic collaboration have the potential to generate new knowledge and practices, liberative not only for urban places, people and politics, but also for these disciplines themselves. It is about transcending own narrow disciplinary boundaries to construct new kinds of knowledge together. It is indeed about ongoing self-liberation and transformation as we meet the other.

As I understand it, the radicality of urban theologies of liberation practising transdisciplinarity lies in the knowledge, wisdom and transformative experiences that reside with urban dwellers, precarious urban populations, and urban practitioners. Centring their experiences and knowledge is to practise epistemic justice in a way that goes beyond decolonial rhetoric, allowing for the construction of real-life solutions from below and within communities.

Solution-driven approaches do not always sit well with those focused on deconstructive intellectual work. Yet, whilst we engage in post-modern or liberationist rhetoric of dismantling larger systems of greed, capital and exploitation, the urban

poor must look after their children for another day, find access to public transport that works, or find housing in proximity to income and education for their children.

Urban liberation theologies that fail to work with the urban poor to find actual solutions are not liberating.

3.11 Deliberately liminal: Between urban faith, politics and planning

M.J. Boswell (2019) describes the liminality of his liberation theological options, finding himself between worlds, classes, races, and theological persuasions, seeking to walk the tightrope of mediating God's freedoms. The kind of urban liberation theologies contemplated here will, almost by definition and design, be liminal, in spaces between the city, the church and the academy, between public policy and the urban poor. It requires theologians working in this way to develop multilingual vocabularies to hold their own in various, and often contested, publics.

Jude Nnorom (2020) seeks to broker a relationship between theological seminaries and urban planners in the city of Enugu, Nigeria, appreciating the potential role religion and faith can play in contributing to a healthy city. The work of policy formation around street homelessness in the City of Tshwane requires constant wandering between researchers, homeless persons, public officials and politicians, NGO leaders, and grassroots practitioners in order to foster collective vision and weave possible threads between sectors that – collectively – could ensure greater freedom for greater numbers of people currently being homeless. This article argues for assuming a liminal position between urban faith, politics, and planning as a permanent posture.

4. Between faith, politics and planning

4.1 The intersections of faith, politics and planning

Politics, in the literal sense, refers to managing the resources of the *polis*. If we assert that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, then politics refers to managing what is essentially God's urban resources. There is no way that faith communities could abdicate their responsibility, outsourcing God's resources to some who might not have the interests of all the city's people, particularly the urban poor, at heart.

Urban theologies of liberation will find ways to engage politically as stewards of God's urban resources, as urban prophets-priests, and as co-constructors of a "good city" with God and all people of good faith and goodwill. It is a theology that places the *polis* at the core of its theological engagement, but then, in particular, showing solidarity with the poor of the *polis*; considering those who are outside the gates of the *polis*; or those struggling to exercise their right to participate fully in the *polis*, its resources and its making (cf. Görgens & Van Donck 2012). Far

from partisan political interests, it seeks to further the shalom of the city from the perspective of those people and neighbourhoods most bruised through urban domination and exclusion processes. It does so through being present in urban processes, in order to ensure the fair and equitable management and distribution of the city's resources.

An example is the work some of us do in the City of Tshwane with homeless communities, insisting on a politics of compassion, generosity, and justice (cf. De Beer & Vally 2017:392-394). From a position of solidarity with homeless communities over many years, we have insisted on their experiences being broadcasted, participating in drafting and shaping the city's policy on homelessness, advocating for the implementation of this policy, and accompanying the city and civil society in how it seeks to embrace and include those who live on the streets, through implementing its policy.

It is precisely in the *polis*, as a public space, where faith and *planning* come together. Cities cannot be left to their own devices. Urban planning is supposed to ensure the most equitable and sustainable ways of managing, sharing and multiplying the city's resources. Yet, the relationship between planning (planners) and politics (politicians) can be contested.

On the one hand, urban planners are supposed to implement a city's policies and political agendas in concrete spatial, social and economic terms. On the other hand, although they are expected to give effect to the political vision of their political superiors, this could easily turn into a bureaucratized planning regime, void of a clear and bold vision inclusive of all the city's inhabitants, and often void of an ethos seeking justice and equity.

Participatory urban planning, on the other hand, seeks to go beyond the unilateral implementation of master plans by political heads. Instead of merely consulting communities, participatory planning creates spaces for the deliberate co-construction of urban visions, processes and practices that could mediate a better city for all. In many contexts, including South Africa, legislation even provides for this, but in practice, deep participation is often replaced with superficial consultation/co-option.

Activists or equity planners, also centring participation by the city's populace, particularly the city's most vulnerable populations, refuse to act instrumentally only in the interest of narrow party political aspirations or only to implement policies "from above." Instead, they fuse their technical expertise with a sense of political consciousness, insisting on influencing, shaping and developing policies in the interest of the greater good on behalf of those who are kept from participating in the city and its resources and in the direction of a more just city. In the process of seeking the city's shalom, urban theologians of liberation should foster close collaborations with such planners.

Yet, to foster such collaborations, urban theologies of liberation first need to understand and embrace the importance of deliberate, thoughtful, systematic and strategic engagement in processes of *urban planning: contemplating, designing and constructing urban neighbourhoods and urban futures that reflect the shalom of God in the fullest sense of the word.*

It could be in the processes of urban planning that faith might shape the *polis* most concretely if it can liberate itself from its captivity to ecclesial spaces and introvert spiritualities. It is also in the processes of urban planning that liberative faith might shape the *polis* most decisively if theologians of liberation allow themselves to be set free from a preoccupation with intellectual deconstruction and, instead, participate imaginatively, critically and constructively in fostering visions, practices and realities that might embody their radical alternatives.

Urban theologies of liberation and communities practising such theologies would insist on radically participative planning processes, opening up spaces for planning to be done from below, with interlocution by those most affected by exclusionary urban practices.

Such engagement might take different forms on a scale between resistance and reconstruction. One form of engagement is the consistent, continuous and robust *resistance* to death-dealing practices and processes that hinder the well-being or freedom of urban people and neighbourhoods. The treatment of waste pickers, homeless communities or informal traders, already desperately vulnerable, at the hands of law enforcement agencies or the general public needs to be monitored, and violations of their basic human rights be exposed and fought. The gentrification that displaces the urban poor needs to be resisted, and viable alternatives presented. Initiatives that have disastrous environmental effects on urban people must be halted. Exclusions of key populations from the municipal budget must be named and argued against. In addition, unutilised church and public land and property must be called out in terms of poor stewardship, juxtaposed with the reality of unhoused or precariously housed populations.

Yet, instead of merely *resisting* exploitative and exclusionary urban practices and developments, which should be one posture of the urban theologian of liberation in relation to urban planning processes, another posture would be to participate in *reconstructive* ways, as a voice of, in solidarity with, and collaboratively with, the urban poor, making recommendations on reimagined and radically inclusive urban spaces and futures, and creating prototypes that signal the possibility of such alternatives.

In addition to resistance and reconstruction, urban theologians of liberation should not wait only on planning bureaucrats, politicians, or private sector capital, to lead city-making processes. Instead, it could take the initiative to create *urban*

think tanks around specific topics or challenges faced in an urban locality – drawing community leaders, urban practitioners and people representing a range of disciplines to work collaboratively in finding solutions for concrete problems. Doing so can help set new agendas and mobilise the kind of resources and expertise committed to shalom cities. Instead of isolationist theologies, urban liberation theologies should mobilise bold and creative alliances, outwitting the unholy trinity of political patronage, capitalist exploitation, and media sanctification that ordinarily shape urban futures.

In history, also in the creation of the apartheid city, there are many examples of toxicity in how faith, politics and planning collaborate to build oppressive and exclusivist cities. It is the work of liberationist theologies, politics and planners to unshackle themselves from such historical tentacles through daring collaboratives that model liberation-transformation in ways that are equitable and just, resisting political co-option, administrative technocratisation, religious fundamentalism, or the triumph of narrow economic self-interest over the common good of all God's urban people.

4.2 Faith, and faithful capital, as resources for urban liberation/transformation

Faith and the faithful capital (cf. Ribbens 2020:156) of God's people – galvanised and mobilised – are potentially powerful resources for imagining and constructing cities that are flourishing for all. We must embrace *faith* in the city, but also faith in *the city*.

An urban theology of liberation will find itself between faith, politics and planning, bringing the resources of faith to bear on the polis in life-affirming, liberating and transformative ways, whilst asking how, for, and with whom it is planned.

A more recent awakening of theologies that engage the built environment, or consider the spatiality of justice, contributes to new-found understandings of faith's potential role in (re-)shaping urban futures.

Not only can and should communities, people and resources of faith be brought to bear on daily urban issues and ongoing urban planning and policy processes. Jamie Kralovec (2021), an urban planning teacher at Georgetown University in Washington D.C., holds that planning itself is an “inherently Catholic practice” committed to “the integral ecology of daily life,” using the words of Pope Francis. For Kralovec, urban planning is a vocation, a spiritual practice, and a discipline committed to integrating life, acknowledging the interconnectedness of everything. Integrating Ignatian spirituality into his planning practice, Kralovec (2021) writes:

Everyone should pay attention to urban planning, in part because urban planning is inherently about inviting people to participate in the process of forming the

future of their environment, the future of their places... with a special focus on those least likely to participate or most likely to be excluded from the process. It invites a call to active participation.

The Encyclical of Pope Francis (2015), known as *Laudato Si'*, offers clear reflections on urban spaces, their challenges and our civic and religious duties. In paragraph 44, he bemoans "the disproportionate and unruly growth of many cities, which have become unhealthy to live in... congested, chaotic, and lacking in sufficient green space" (Francis, 2015). In section 3 of the Encyclical (paragraphs 147-155), entitled "Ecology of daily life" (esp.153), Pope Francis (2015) commends what he calls "admirable creativity and generosity" practised by people surrounded by poverty and hardship. Francis submits that "any place can turn from being a hell on earth into the setting for a dignified life" if in local urban neighbourhoods "close and warm relationships develop," "communities are created" and people feel "held within a network of solidarity and belonging."

Drawing from an Apostolic Exhortation, Francis (2015) then says in par.152:

How beautiful those cities which overcome paralyzing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development! How attractive are those cities which, even in their architectural design, are full of spaces which connect, relate and favour the recognition of others!²

This is a hopeful, prophetic imaginary, drawing from wells of spirituality and faith, able to inspire forms of urban action that can indeed connect, heal and overcome what currently divides, wounds, and paralyzes, in cities across the globe.

People of faith, mobilised to practice the good news as the integral liberation of Christ, will then participate as local citizens to protect and further the rights of all people, whilst tending to both the built environment, as well as open and natural spaces, as resources for sustainable and flourishing livelihoods. Their participation as faithful urban citizens will be expressed in the generous sharing of resources; the creation and multiplication of caring and empowering communities; informing urban plans, policies and budgets; offering a prophetic critique of an urban status quo that denies some access to the resources of God; fostering alternative imaginaries to such a status quo; and animating prototypes that embody such alternatives rather concretely. A liberationist church will refuse to stand on the sidelines, but will incarnate itself in the trenches of urban struggle.

² Extract from: Francis. 2015. *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, 24 November 2013. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

For faith and faithful capital to be potent resources of urban liberation/transformation, we must consider faith practices in relation to urban challenges, urban politics and sustainable urban futures, in a critical manner, challenging faith constructs that fail the city and its poor; whilst animating faith practices that practice deep solidarity with the city's most vulnerable populations and neighbourhoods.

At the same time, we must articulate and foster faith in *the city*, and its potential to be a good place for all who reside in it, even those currently failed by the city in relation to their ability to access the city's resources, and contribute to the city's construction. This is vividly modelled by Olamide Udoma-Ejorh (Busy Minds Foundation, 2020) in Lagos, Nigeria. She not only lobbies for slum upgrading and housing rights, lamenting the exclusionary practices of city-making, but she also hosts a monthly Open House Lagos event, inviting people to journey with her to celebrate the architectural heritage of her city. We must celebrate our city where it offers joy and home, and lament what it sometimes does to its people, making them ashamed and homeless.

As people and communities of faith engage in urban politics and planning, we might help to exorcise faithless politics and faithless planning – faithless both in terms of a void of ethics and spirituality, a cynicism about the possibilities the city and its people hold, and a failure to honour the trust put in the custodians of these disciplines. Instead, we must call for, participate in, and foster faithful politics and planning – faithful to the city's resources, people, spaces, and potentials; faithful to the public trust; and faithful to the One who called us into being.

4.3 Different modes of doing (urban) liberation theology

Not all urban theologians of liberation will work in the same spaces. In one of the earlier works on liberation theology, the Boff brothers spoke of three realms in which liberation theology is practised – the professional or academic, pastoral and popular; and I want to add a fourth, which is that of “undercover” liberation theologian, acknowledging the work of Ivan Petrella.

- *Professional or academic theologians of liberation* document and systematise the experiences, lessons, faith responses and organic theologies of people of faith in grassroots communities or urban slums – their resistance, resilience and innovations – in the face of many odds against them. It is done in ways that could unmask dominant practices and processes of exclusion, whilst naming and validating subversions of faith and the gospel that mediate life despite the daunting and death-dealing tentacles of Empire.

In addition, academic theologians of liberation must expose students of theology, and peers, to contexts of struggle and exclusion, bridging the gap

between institutional church and academy, on the one hand, and the realities of those “outside the gate.” To stay faithful to their commitments to liberation, academic theologians of liberation would therefore opt to be in liminal spaces, having one foot in the academy and another foot in the local context of struggles, maintaining the poor as primary interlocutors through which Christ is mediated. They seek to subvert the Empire from within whilst dragging students, churches and the institutions they work for into places of greater solidarity – and resistance – with those on whose necks the Empire rests.

The tenacious hope of the professional theologian of liberation in the academy remains – even against common sense that local congregations, theological institutions, and students of theology would experience and work for the integral liberation – personally, interpersonally and politically – that liberation theology professes. This is modelled by Daniel Pilario and others. *Pastoral or church-based theologians of liberation* would mostly serve as pastors or priests of congregations or parishes, or as pastoral care workers concerned with the well-being of parishioners, vulnerable groups, or those in need of healing and comfort generally.

Church-based theologians of liberation must help parishioners – through prayer, preaching, pastoral care and worship – to understand the claims of faith, the necessity of continuous prophetic discernment, the Christ-like commitment to work incarnationally for justice and freedom, and the eschatological vision of a city without a church, where God’s presence will permeate every space. In doing so, the people of God must be equipped for works of solidarity, mercy and justice, where they live their lives in neighbourhoods or live their vocations in workplaces as domestic workers, law enforcers, medical doctors, lawyers, or politicians. The pastoral liberation theologian would help parishioners to read and interpret the Bible contextually, in ways that bring it to life, with profound meaning for the immense challenges local urban contexts present. The Bible, to them, becomes a source of conscientisation, helping people understand their own experiences of being oppressed, oppressors, or complicit through silence or apathy.

What distinguishes these liberation theologians is their deep commitment to God’s people through practising pastoral care and ministries of healing, acknowledging the individual, family, and community needs they attend to, but simultaneously acknowledging, naming and challenging the deep systemic causes of some of the fractures they must attend to. Not only would they attend to the hurts of victims of gender-based violence or child sexual abuse,

but they would also preach against patriarchy and violence in both church and society, and condemn ecclesial and theological constructs that have helped perpetuate violence against vulnerable people for many centuries. Donna Schaper in New York City, Tsakani Sibanda in Khayelitsha, and Paul Verryn in Johannesburg, in very different ways from each other, are examples of doing such theologies; hosting asylum-seekers in refugees in their churches; ensuring access to safe spaces during Covid-19; embracing those who do not ascribe to heterosexual normativity; and centring the experiences of women and children violated in the course of daily urban life.

- *Popular theologians of liberation* work closely with social or so-called popular movements (or civil society more generally), either inside such movements, as co-workers or alongside, providing religious support or connection between social movements and the institutional bureaucracies of the church, where possible. These theologians might often find themselves rather deliberately between the church as an institution and the popular movement, seeking to translate the cries and struggles of the poor theologically, through liturgy or sermons, or through facilitating resource-sharing; whilst at the same time encouraging and comforting grassroots movements as they seek to remain faithful to their cause, interpreting their work of justice or shalom, also theologically, in the vernacular that is accessible to them. Many in such movements grew up in faith communities and had their commitments and value sets shaped by visions of faith. Yet, the institutions supposedly serving as custodians of their faith often failed to embrace, nurture, accept or encourage their literal understanding of faith as worked out in radical forms of liberation, getting them to be labelled as too politically minded, perhaps not spiritual enough, and then, sadly, often estranging them from their faith communities.
- *Popular theologians of liberation* play the dual role of encouraging such movements, interpreting their work for them and others as part of the bigger prophetic narrative of seeking the city's shalom, whilst simultaneously pointing the church to such movements as possibly being true carriers of hope and prophetic movements for justice in cities that have become numb. People like Nkosi Gola and Mandisa Dyantyi in Cape Town work in the trenches with grassroots social movements, informed by a fusion of black and womanist liberation theologies and depths of political consciousness. Across the world, people of faith are embedding themselves in radical urban social movements, tired of waiting for justice to roll down.
- *Undercover theologians of liberation*, coined by Ivan Petrella (2008; 2017), unlike the postures above, might be active in local urban institu-

tions or politics, not primarily as theologians, but as workers or officials in such institutions. They might be healthcare workers, housing practitioners, gender activists, policymakers, human rights lawyers, or environmentalists, but they practice their vocation in these spaces whilst remaining faithful to their liberation theological commitments, opting for the poor, working for the integral liberation of all creation, and dismantling structures that are unjust or exploitative.

Petrella took political office in Argentina, but maintains his primary solidarity with the poor and seeks to practice the tenets of liberation theology in how he lives his vocation. Paul Farmer (2013; cf. also Newman 2016) is a health anthropologist and medical doctor teaching global health and social medicine at the Harvard University School of Medicine. For decades he has worked to improve the health and living conditions of the world's poorest populations, deeply grounded in and shaped by the liberation theology of his friend Gustavo Gutierrez. Annalet van Schalkwyk (2014) is an ecofeminist missiologist committed to ecological and gender justice and the liberation of women, the earth, and vulnerable people everywhere. After being a professor of missiology at the University of South Africa, she now invests herself fully in eco-movements, creating gardens of peace with vulnerable communities in the inner city and advocating against environmentally destructive mining practices wherever these are to be found. Petrella, Farmer and Van Schalkwyk live their commitment to a gospel of liberation and fullness of life in how they work out their vocations in the *polis*.

Cross-sectoral collaboration between these different postures of doing urban theologies of liberation – professional-academic; pastoral; popular; or undercover – can assist in infiltrating ecclesial, academic, political and bureaucratic spaces, working for radical forms of liberation-transformation, dismantling oppressive structures, and replacing them with spaces and processes that are more life-affirming and just. Bringing research, institutional and civic resources to bear on urban issues in synergistic ways has great potential to break cycles of perpetual urban misery.

5. Conclusion

This article does not necessarily offer something brand new, but reiterates the ongoing importance of theologies of liberation in urban South African contexts. It starts off by charting urban theologies as they evolved over the past 50 years, insisting that more needs to be done in the Global South to systematically expound our understanding of urban theology. I then offered key elements of an urban theology of liberation, returning to the basic tenets of this tradition. Next, I attempt to indi-

cate its validity in the intersections between faith, politics and planning. Finally, I suggest different modes of urban liberation theology that – synergetically – might hold great potential to bring research, church, civil society and the poor into collaborative solidarities in order to break urban misery cycles.

It is critical to do the hard work of creating robust, committed and long-term spaces for urban analysis, reflection, imagination and action. Without such spaces, urban theologies of liberation will wither, and their adherents will grow weary. However, through sustained collaboration, synergy and cross-sectoral reflection and action, we might see new forms of irruption, insurrection, intervention and innovation that will not leave our cities the same.

As praxis-theologians, it becomes possible to speak “praxis” yet practice singular elements of the praxis-approach only, and to do so detached from communities of praxis and the interlocution of the urban poor. This should be guarded against vehemently, lest our liberation theologies become neo-orthodoxies, abstract, and lifeless. That is what Pilario warns against. The urban poor, everywhere, cannot eat, live or find solace in our theological abstractions.

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