

MISSIO DEI IN INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL CHANGE

A CASE STUDY OF INNERCHANGE

Luc Kabongo¹

Abstract

This article is written from a perspective of a black African who lives and works in an impoverished community and has observed an apathy in the way the church is involved in social change. This apathy seems to be influenced by a dualistic spirituality and an eschatology that prioritise personal piety over involvement in social matters. This article uses the case study of InnerCHANGE – an organisation that is involved in social change happening in the township of Soshanguve as a direct consequence of its understanding of one of the roles of the church in society to be a sign of hope and the good news of Jesus in the world.

Introduction

The contexts of the post-colonial Africa and the post-apartheid South Africa, like all other societies, are experiencing shifts in attitudes and behaviours.² These shifts challenge the church to be a key player in helping people engage the dizzying social change that makes them in the continent today, with the intention of improving their

quality of life.³ Nadine du Toit points out that the South African church has ‘access to the most deprived grass-roots communities and the secular society’ which presents a huge opportunity for it ‘to be an agent of change.’⁴ Yet, many local churches located in impoverished communities such as Soshanguve still see involvement in social change ‘as either a secondary task or not part of the church’s mission.’⁵ This posture is influenced by ‘a theological paradigm that proposes that while personal transformation is regarded as valuable, societal transformation is not.’⁶ This article uses the case study of InnerCHANGE, a missional team, to reflect on how the body of Christ could get involved in social change as a prophetic witness in the world. The article is guided by this question: Can the church’s involvement in social change be an opportunity for discipleship? Answering this question forces a reflection on the legacy of the church as a prophetic witness in the society.

Prophetic Witness Stories of the Church in the Society

In the area around Soshanguve, there are many faith-based organisations that focus on prophetic witnessing in times of social change. One of them is the Tshwane Leadership Foundation.⁷ It started off in 1993 when 6 Pretoria inner city churches formed a partnership in their response and engagement with the social change the city was undergoing. Its aim was to be proactive and relevant to the changing nature of the inner city and related challenges. This story, plus many others like it, are watering the ground on which InnerCHANGE is learning to walk. Such stories inspire scholars in the articulation of their theology. Kä Mana, for instance, points out that the church should be involved in social changes in Africa because its contribution is needed in the reconstruction and re-evangelisation of the continent.⁸ Mwambazambi and Banza believe that through its involvement in social change, ‘the church can motivate ordinary people to live and act in the knowledge that the reconstruction of Africa is reliant upon the creative power of Africans themselves.’⁹ Maluleke stresses that ‘if the church was to retain relevance for black Africans, it has to

be involved in social change that affect them.’¹⁰ De Beer advocates for church involvement in social change in a way that would promote the self-definition of ordinary people, an active pursuit of goals, community development by the communities themselves, communalism and solidarity.¹¹ Pityana stresses that church involvement in social matters is connected to ‘God’s mission to redeem the world. This is why it should participate in addressing issues of poverty and place human development at the centre of ‘its priorities.’¹² Burger *et al.* argue that ‘the church can also proactively contribute to social change’ by educating its members to be involved.¹³ It could ‘develop strategies to increase people’s capacities to meet their own needs through self-reliant action.’¹⁴ The church’s effective impact on social change happening in urban environments will require ‘new strategies and new skills.’¹⁵ The latter will be about organizing and executing projects and processes through which values, patterns of conduct, habits and relations can be transformed fundamentally. In doing so, the church will have an important role to play amongst a large diversity of stakeholders such as the state and other non-governmental organisations.

C. Peter Wagner moves this discussion further in stressing that the church should be involved in social matters in its discipleship mandate.¹⁶ Metcalf and Prince concur with Wagner; ‘social involvement and the discipleship mandate should be key priorities of the church.’¹⁷ They add, ‘if social involvement is the song all Christians are created to sing,’ intentional discipleship will ‘add more singers to the chorus.’¹⁸ These authors’ opinions don’t seem convincing to the church in a place like Soshanguve, hence the inaction of the churches in the area in this regard.

Why this inaction?

Nadine Du Toit points out that this inaction is influenced by two particular theological perspectives: a dualistic perspective and the impact of eschatology.¹⁹ The first is what she calls a ‘dualistic spirituality’ while the second is eschatology.

A Dualistic Spirituality

Du Toit stresses that the observed apathy of the church located in South African communities of poverty in participating in social change 'is a dualistic spiritualisation of the gospel which directs hope to the life hereafter and has the same effects as Valium which tends to buttress rather than challenge status quo.'²⁰ Additionally, this dualistic spirituality tends to articulate 'a spiritualised concept of salvation, which neglects social concerns.'²¹ This type of spirituality seems to be a typical characteristic of Christendom. It 'separates the sacred from the profane, the holy from the unholy and the in from the out. This dualism has over many years created Christians that cannot relate their interior faith to their exterior practice, and this affects their ethics, their lifestyles, and their capacity to share their faith meaningfully with others.'²² Some of the ripple effects of this dualism are palpable in Africa in drastic ways. Katongole once wondered, 'Christianity continues to grow and thrive in Africa, but so too grow the realities of poverty, tribalism, corruption, violence, and civil wars.'²³ He connected this paradox to the colonial way of evangelism which overemphasized personal salvation and neglected social justice in a way that would 'bring the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven' (Mat 6:10).

Impact of Eschatology

The church's inaction is also influenced by a certain eschatology. This eschatology has a pessimistic view of history and life. He teaches believers to long for the new earth and new heaven promised in the Book of Revelation.²⁴ This eschatological view is called pre-millennialism. Du Toit points out that 'pre-millennialism is perhaps the most commonly identified form of eschatology with regard to the prevention of involvement of the church in social action.'²⁵ This theology believes that 'Jesus Christ will return to earth in glory, ushering in a thousand year reign of peace, after which a new heaven and earth will replace the old ones, as foretold in the book of Revelation.'²⁶ It is,

therefore, worthless for the church to be involved in any social action. In many local churches of Soshanguve, there seems to be an emphasis on personal salvation communicated in a manner that dissuades Christians from asking questions about how they can be involved in social change around them. In contrast to this, Moltmann stresses that ‘the materiality of this world and the liberation of the oppressed’ are ‘an eschatological condition that actualises the kingdom of God in the future.’²⁷ Along the same line, Venter argues that ‘Christian eschatology is no privatised, bourgeoisie and moralistic-therapeutic reality: it addresses fundamental matters of evil, suffering, and desperation.’²⁸ It ‘is dominated by the critical relationship between the eschaton and the present, and by its potential to inspire people amidst oppression.’²⁹ These two influences have challenged InnerCHANGE to articulate a theological perspective that is in line with the church’s legacy in social matters.

InnerCHANGE

InnerCHANGE is located in the township of Soshanguve, 35 kilometres to the north of the City of Pretoria. Soshanguve itself was declared as a formal township in 1974. It is one of the few locations that started off as multicultural settlements for black migrant workers and their families. The name ‘Soshanguve’ is an acronym of ethnic groups that resided in the area from the very beginning; SO for Sosho, SHA for Shangaani, NGU for Nguni, and VE for Venda. InnerCHANGE moved into this township in 2008 after exploring it for 4 years. Its focus has been to disciple people and raise local leaders as agents of hope through various ministry initiatives it runs. This approach is guided by its purpose. As InnerCHANGE, we ‘are a community of people from all walks of life working together. We make disciples of Jesus and work for community transformation.’³⁰

In contrast to the dualistic spirituality and futuristic eschatology discussed above, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch suggest a ‘messianic spirituality’ that is inclusive and holistic. Messianic spirituality is a ‘spirituality of engagement with culture and the world in the same

mode as the Messiah himself.’³¹ Christians are called to be connected to the world as a way of imitating Jesus. This messianic spirituality is taken from the Bible. In Nehemiah 2:17-18, for instance, Nehemiah deepened his relationship with God by mobilising his fellow Israelites to build the ruined walls of Jerusalem. In Jeremiah 29:1-12, the Israelites in exile deepened their relationship with God by incarnating in their host society and actively seeking its peace and prosperity. In Isaiah 58, social justice actions are seen as a spiritual discipline to be regularly practiced by God’s children. John Hayes adds that ‘in this era of information and mass messages, the world needs more people to live the good news incarnationally, in a way that can be seen, heard and handled.’³² This is why we, at InnerCHANGE, resolved to be engaged in social change around the township of Soshanguve. The remaining part of this essay explores InnerCHANGE’s involvement in social change related to the issues of entitlement, xenophobia/homophobia, competition, land and youth development.

Entitlement

Boyd III, Henry and Helms’ understanding of entitlement is helpful here. According to them, it is when someone expects ‘special treatment’ for one reason or another.³³ A large number of people living in poor urban areas think that they have the right to be granted benefits because they were victims of apartheid. The heart behind this plight is their aspiration, like all other human beings, ‘to security, prosperity and equity.’³⁴ Our current unequal society puts the majority of township residents in conditions where security, prosperity and equity are only an ideal. Entitlement has led to an unhealthy dependency on government and poor interpersonal relationships. As a missional team, we see one of our roles as that of stimulating agency in people to contrast the dependency mentality.³⁵

Entitlement is expressed in different ways. One of them is ‘victim mentality’. Township residents were victims of apartheid and even nowadays, they are among those most affected by bad government decisions which lead to growing inequalities and poverty. We see our

role as that of helping to build a *shalom* community with our neighbours. Linthicum calls 'a *shalom* community an environment where socio-economic justice becomes a concern for all'.³⁶ And problems and their resolve are a concern for all, through the empowerment of ordinary people. We also think that a collective building of a shalom community is a sign of inviting the 'kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven' (Mat. 6:10).

Xenophobia/Homophobia

Another issue our team is involved in is related to inter-personal relationships that sometimes lead to xenophobia and homophobia. Generally speaking, the South African society is known to be xenophobic and homophobic. Landau, Loren Brett, Kaajal Ramjathan-Keogh, and Gayatri Singh stress that there seems to be a lot of hatred for foreign nationals and non-heterosexual beings, which often leads to the violation of their 'human right'.³⁷ They add that these negative attitudes 'vary across South Africa's socio-economic and ethnic spectrum'.³⁸ Communities of poverty have the worst human right violation records when it comes to the treatment of foreign nationals from Africa and non-heterosexual persons.

In his study on xenophobia in South Africa, Matsinhe stresses:

Since the collapse of apartheid, the figure of *Makwerekwere* [derogatory way of calling foreign nationals from Africa] has been constructed and deployed in South Africa to render Africans from outside the borders orderable as the nation's bogeyman. Waves of violence against *Makwerekwere* have characterised South Africa since then, the largest of which broke out in May 2008 in the Johannesburg shantytown of Alexandria.³⁹

Many findings have pointed out reasons behind xenophobia. Some of the major reasons include 'poor service delivery and competition for resources.'⁴⁰ The type of leadership within communities might have

an impact on whether or not xenophobic attacks occur in certain communities—this is an issue of governance. Xenophobia tends to be high when unemployment rates rise in the country.⁴¹ One narrative suggests that foreign nationals are the cause of the high rate of unemployment, crime, and violence the country is experiencing. As a response, InnerCHANGE formed a reconciliation group between foreign nationals and locals. We have had signs of hope in these interactions. We now have locals who are mentored in running a business by foreign nationals. We have also seen foreign nationals come out to testify that since they started being involved in the day-to-day life of the community, their businesses are no longer under threat of being vandalised. The community protects them and even asks that their shops remain open on volatile days. Both locals and foreign nationals are learning ‘to seek the peace and prosperity’ of their context like Jeremiah 29:7 says.

Homophobia, defined as an intense hatred or fear of homosexuals or homosexuality, seems to be a consequence of our own success as a democratic South Africa. Since same-sex relationships and marriage became legalized in 2016, we have seen some of our neighbours come out as gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender. Ben Viljoen once said that South Africa as a country is full of homophobic people. Williams stresses that ‘the lived reality of queers is one that remains of great concern.’⁴² Many of them are victims of intolerant fellow citizens. Having seen so many queer people being victimised because of their sexual orientation, InnerCHANGE made the decision to be a voice of justice in our community. One of our volunteers is a law student at a local university. We have been using his knowledge of human rights to educate our community during parents’ meetings which we hold monthly and quarterly. These are the parents or guardians of the children and teenagers we serve. This volunteer also teaches human rights principles to teenagers and other adults we serve.

Competition

Another issue we are involved in is connected to the issue of competition. In the community of poverty wherein InnerCHANGE serves, tension occasionally rises when many people need to utilise ‘common resources and opportunities which are in short supply.’⁴³ The tension alluded to is a competition that sometimes leads to violence and hatred. Hickel stresses that competition is sometimes analogous to ‘jealousy, hatred and violence’ in South African communities of poverty.⁴⁴

The understanding we get from our conversations with different people in our community is that competition, in the South African culture, is understood as a destruction of the other. Sport is a tool we use to alter this experienced understanding of competition. We run football, netball, volleyball and basketball teams. Sport builds character. Currently, the majority of InnerCHANGE staff and volunteers come from the sport activities it has been running. They are not only Christians, but also community builders. They understand their ‘role in society as servant[s] with the mission to help lives flourish’ around them.⁴⁵

Land

InnerCHANGE is also involved in the issue of land. Land distribution is a very sensitive issue in South Africa. We are involved in this matter because land is a common good. A challenge South Africa faces is to distribute land fairly. Currently, land distribution seems to benefit a few people at the expense of the many—the poorest of the poor who need land the most. As a missional team, we have been part of discussions happening at the local level with ward councillors. We have also been engaging ourselves in what it means to have a kingdom-like attitude towards material possessions such as land. Through this engagement, we have contended for neighbours who were at risk of losing their land due to finances. We have also seen two of our volunteers give land for free to needy neighbours. These friends acquired land

they did not really need, they just wanted it because everyone else in the community does that and after they understood some of our teachings based on Isaiah 58:12 about our personal roles in building and restoring our communities, they reckoned that a tangible way they could repair the broken walls of injustice in their community was to relinquish the ownership of the land they did not need and give it to someone who really needed it. This is the kind of discipleship we would like to inculcate in the minds and hearts of the fellows within our sphere of influence—a discipleship that stresses that people around us need to see that we are disciples of Jesus by the way we love (John 13:35).

Development of Agency in the Youth

A final issue we are involved in is connected to the development of agency in our youth. InnerCHANGE believes that we can only become a *shalom* community if everyone becomes an agent of the kind of society we desire. With that end in mind, we raise capacity from within our context. Since 2016, we run an apprenticeship where we invite emerging leaders of our community to learn alongside of us, ways we could be change agents using biblical principles.⁴⁶ We encourage these neighbours to ‘engage in a variety of sectors of society’ and do remarkable things to stimulate culture-altering change.⁴⁷ Our aim is to involve everyone in the building of our society, especially the youth. Like Lesslie Newbigin, we believe that ‘the church in each place is to be the sign, instrument and foretaste of the reign of God present in Christ.’⁴⁸ We also believe in ‘the *declericalisation* of the church’ so that every gift and skill within the community could be used and valued enough ‘to bring the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.’⁴⁹

Reflection from These Different Involvements

InnerCHANGE participating in social changes has been an experiential way of implementing the messianic approach proposed by Frost

and Hirsch.⁵⁰ In this process, we try to keep the two priorities of our vision in mind – making disciples and raising local leaders. We believe, like Barth said, ‘that the church is there to live in solidarity with and responsibility for the world.’⁵¹ We have learned to be incarnational in participating in some of the issues that are meaningful to our community. We are seeing an increased number of neighbours as disciples and others signing up to be fellow agents of change. In this process of implementing the messianic approach, we are learning to shift our paradigm from being team-centric to primarily becoming context-centric. We are learning to move away from being centripetal (drawing people towards us as the centre) to being centrifugal (moving towards the community and being involved in what matters most to our neighbours).⁵²

Our involvement in social change has improved our visibility and relevance such that we have been able to raise capacity from within. This capacity has made it possible to multiply our participation in social changes happening in several other neighbourhoods of poverty in South Africa. In some issues, such as homophobia, we have struggled to hold a healthy tension between biblical principles and human rights. We certainly still need some growing to do in our articulation of this matter. In some other issues of entitlement, competition, xenophobia and land, we were unable to shift the room temperature from being overly emotive, to striking a balance between reason and emotion. This was especially true when we had groups of 20 or more people. We felt like we had fruitful conversations when we had small groups. We are learning to engage people in small groups, which is time consuming, albeit with small wins.

Conclusion

This article shared a case study of a missional team, Inner-CHANGE, which is learning to be a good student of the existing legacy of the church in participating in social changes happening in a certain context. Stories of few bold and adventurous followers of Jesus who made their mark in history through participating in the social

changes of their time and context paved the way for this case study. The latter took place in a context that seems to be apathic in social involvement because of the dominant influence of the dualistic spirituality and a certain interpretation of eschatology. These dominant forces have been engaged by using a messianic approach which views personal salvation and social development in a symbiotic way. InnerCHANGE's involvement is still a work-in-progress that needs to be shaped by more praxis and scholarship. Nonetheless, this involvement has seen an increased number of disciples and change agents who have increased InnerCHANGE's capacity to be involved in more social changes in communities of poverty.

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1. Luc Kabongo grew up in the Democratic Republic of Congo in a Roman Catholic family. He moved to South Africa as a refugee in 2002. He is married to Petunia. Together, they parent three children (two girls and one boy). He did his undergraduate studies in Philosophy and Administration. He, then, pursued his post graduate studies in Applied Theology and Missiology. He obtained his Ph.D. in Missiology with specialisation in community development at the University of Pretoria. He is the current InnerCHANGE, a missional order among the poor, Africa regional director. He is also a part-time missiology lecturer at the University of Pretoria.
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