

# Political leadership transformation through churches as civic democratic spaces in Africa: a public practical theological approach

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Churches are challenged to play a critical role in transforming leadership within the context of bad governance in Africa. This transformation occurs when churches adopt a strong, public, practical ministerial role where church spaces are utilized as democratic civic spaces that can be harnessed to practically effect leadership transformation and change. This article reflects on a possible public practical ministerial role for the Church to transform leadership. It unveils the challenges and opportunities for this practical ministerial role in African contexts.

## Introduction and background: problematizing the issue

Africa<sup>1</sup> is severely affected by bad leadership and bad governance, which Igué describes as “a troubled African leadership” (Igué 2010, 2). The bad leadership is evident through corruption, dictatorships and many other bad governance practices.<sup>2</sup> The state of bad governance and leadership has been documented in a detailed empirical study by Owoye and Bissessar (2012, 1). Efforts to correct the situation from various sectors of society tend to be ignored. Efforts taken within civil society and by churches seemingly make no difference. In the worst cases, churches and civil society organizations have been accused of being used by Western powers to destabi-

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- 1 The discussion in the literature indicates that while Africa is not homogenous, the general point of reference has been to Africa south of the Sahara. However, the entire content is worth reflecting on when it comes to leadership issues. The focus and interest of this paper is on discussing the notion and concept of Africa. I use Africa to refer to a geographical space (the African continent).
- 2 See Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index report by Ernst and Young (2014, 9) for an analysis of corruption.

lize governments, hence they are suppressed (Dombo 2014, 145–148). In some cases, churches have joined forces with other national structures in an effort to address bad governance and leadership, albeit by employing knee-jerk and often unsystematic approaches. Coertze (2005, 96) rightly observes that the churches' response to political and governance issues is an area that the Church in Africa needs to better understand. Agbiji and Swart (2015, 10) note that despite some Christians being involved in politics and governance, it is hardly evident how Christians are impacting the situation. In such a situation, it is justifiable to argue that churches as part of community structures (Magezi 2007) are required to contribute to the goal of good governance.

Notably, the Church and politics have received considerable attention, but with little focus on how to effectively leverage churches to strengthen demo-





cratic structures particularly in Africa. There has been little focus on examining how to employ church structures to strengthen and advance the democratic cause for improved leadership in many African countries. Where churches have been analyzed in Africa, the focus has repeatedly been on their advocacy role (Agbiji and Swart 2015, 9), but with little emphasis on analyzing them as strategic democratic community levers for leadership change and improvement.

It should be noted that the relationship between the Church and political leaders in Africa has generally not been very good. On the one hand, some political leaders expect churches to support them during elections. They want to use church spaces as campaigning platforms or to seek endorsement from church leaders so that the church members vote for them (Makgoba 2017; Dombo 2014; Nhlabathi 2017; Maqhina 2016; Gathogo 2007). This position was clearly indicated by the former President of South Africa when he was criticized for his actions after reshuffling the cabinet, which resulted in the country's currency losing significant value. The churches and wider South African society voiced their concern. The South African Council of Churches (SACC) attempted to hold a meeting with him to provide moral and pastoral guidance, but they were snubbed (Nhlabathi 2017). In response, he publicly accused churches of meddling in politics by stating, "it is sad to see the church leaders getting mired in matters of politics instead of praying for leaders. I urge the church to pray for us" (Maqhina 2016).

On the other hand, some church leaders use their church platforms as entry points into politics, which angers politicians because they view such church leaders as abusing their churchly positions. At the same time, churches are unclear as to whether they should officially use their platform to campaign for or against certain political leaders. There is a lack of understanding on the relationship and separation of church life and politics. Allaby (2010, 195–197) therefore warns that even though some Christians want to make a genuine political impact, there are pitfalls that sincere Christians should be aware of as they engage in political actions. These include naiveté about what being a (Christian) politician involves and the danger of being co-opted by civil organizations that will be used to legitimize some political leaders. Allaby (2010, 195–197) gives examples of good Christians who were corrupted by government, resulting in their image being tarnished,

such as that of the former president of Zambia (1990–2000), Frederick Chiluba.

In view of the above introduction, the questions that could be posed to guide this discussion are as follows: *How could the Church engage in politics from the nexus of strengthening democratic structures by using its membership and networks without being accused of meddling in politics? To what extent could this role be designated as theological within the public sphere?*

## On being a public practical church within governance issues—a framework

To address the above questions, a practical theology for public engagement with political leadership structures is proposed. It is proposed that theology in Africa should intentionally include on its agenda a well-considered theology and praxis of public practical theological engagement wherein churches' grassroots presence and local communities' influence are harnessed as levers for life-giving and hope-inspiring interventions that transform political leadership. To that end, a theology and praxis within the interlocking space of politics and theology in Africa is proposed. Such a proposal entails a practical theology geared to engage political leadership through the utilization of churches as democratic civic spaces. Linking public theology and pastoral care as a subfield of practical theology, Koppel (2015, 151) usefully maintains that the desire to practice public theology requires that pastoral care practitioners and theologians take seriously and engage mindfully with issues that concern groups of people and whole populations. Thus, governance issues are one such issue affecting populations that theology should reflect upon and engage with.

## Democracy<sup>3</sup>—a lever for good governance

Bassiouni et al. (1998, 5) remark that democracy is one of the most commonly used terms in political vocabulary because it touches on the very fundamentals of the life of human beings in society. Their

3 Due to limited space, the discussion on democracy will be handled in a cursory manner.



(1998) monograph *Democracy: its principles and achievement* explains, among other things, that democracy is a system of government whereby citizens exercise power directly, or else elect representatives from among themselves for a governing body, such as parliament. It is sometimes called rule of the majority. The term democracy refers to liberal democracy, which is a variant of representative democracy. It includes such elements as political pluralism, equality before the law, the right to turn to elected officials for redress of grievances, due process, civil liberties, human rights and elements of civil society outside the government. Civil society is identified as one key institution within a democracy (Scruton 2007). The concept of democracy has its origins in Greek: *demos* means people and *kratos* means power. The compound word democracy means “power of the people” (Ober 2008, 3). However, the question is: *power in what sense?* Ober (2008:3) is cynical about reducing democracy to a decision-making mechanism through voting because, if the system is flawed, then the political system will be flawed as well. To gain a detailed understanding of the term, Ober (2008, 8) observes that democracy’s original meaning referred to the “collective capacity of the public to make good things happen in the public realm”. The *demos* (people) were composed of a socially diverse body of individuals, each of whom was capable of freely choosing his/her own interests. The *demos* (people) were not unified by any single ideology or desire, but by various interests (Ober 2008, 7).

According to Diamond and Plattner (2010), one of the leading scholars in the field of democracy studies, democracy consists of four key elements:

- a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections;
- the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life;
- protection of the human rights of all citizens; and
- a rule of law in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.

It may be worthwhile to discuss in detail the various aspects of democracy, which include its history, types, theories, and so forth, but this article’s interest is on the active participation of people as citizens in politics and civic life to effect public change. Accordingly, the discussion will be confined to the aspect of people’s active participation.

Democracy, as indicated above, recognizes individual people as autonomous. When the people

come together, they have the power and capacity to change things within the public sphere. The challenge, however, is to ensure that such collective power is mobilized, nurtured and leveraged to effect the necessary public changes. The structures where *demos* (people) are located and exist, such as communities, need to be awakened to the meaning of *demos* as power. The churches, as subsystems of societies (Magezi 2007, 175–177), are positioned to participate in and contribute to democratic processes. Church people are church members who are also citizens who should participate in civic life. Even though citizens may have power, as Ober (2008, 7–8) states, many of the people are unaware of their democratic power and responsibility. Hence, there is a need to awaken the democratic spaces where people are located through church systems. The responsibility of churches and their members to participate in democratic processes implies an inevitable role of churches to engage in politics and governance issues as part of its public ministerial role.

### Churches’ engagement with politics as church ministry and public theology

The discussion on separation of church and state has been going on for many decades. The debate is underpinned by the notion of a duality between church and state or politics and religion. Waldron (2014) noted that the separation of church and state was not accomplished until the medieval assumption that all of society was the body of Christ was rejected in favor of a church called out of the world. While the discussion of the relationship between church and state is worthwhile, our focus is not on discussing the nature of this relationship, but on how churches can practically leverage their religious spaces as democratic spaces within the framework of public practical theology.

Forster (2012, 1) remarks that the problem of church and politics is part of a larger problem of how the Church relates to society. He adds that Christians’ task is to live out biblical principles in the context of culture, within society. However, the Bible does not offer a blueprint on how to live this life. Foster’s assertion that Christians are to live in societies and demonstrate biblical principles is an important comment. His advice however, seems to suggest that Christians should simply figure out the framework of living life within society, which can-



not simplistically be accepted. Various biblical approaches can be discerned that can function as frameworks, but *how theologically and biblically acceptable are they?*<sup>4</sup>

The Church is a mystery and has a mission (de Aquino 2013, 482). One cannot understand the relationship between the Church and society as well as politics without understanding the people of God. The Church, as constituted by the people of God, has a responsibility to offer the message of salvation to mankind and transform everyone and every system, such as unjust structures that hinder the coming kingdom of God (de Aquino 2013, 482). The relationship between the Church and the world suggests bias towards the poor and oppressed from a social justice standpoint (Luke 4).

However, de Aquino (2013, 482–484) has made the following two important observations when discussing church and politics. First, the Church is not a political organization, although it cannot be indifferent. The Church has a purpose and mission that cannot be reduced to the political organization of society. The Church has a mission that relates to the historic achievement of the reign of God in this world. This is notwithstanding the fact that the Church is a social force. The Church employs resources available to it in interfering with political life. These resources include popular mobilization, social pressure and speaking for the oppressed. Second, churches should participate and intervene in society. However, a distinction should be made between the Church as an institution, individual Christians and the actions taken by a group of Christians. Christians act in politics not only through the ecclesial community, but also through other social forces available to citizens. To engage in politics and determine what actions to take or who to support, churches should be guided by their mission of realizing God's reign and whether the political forces advance or suppress the rights of the poor and oppressed. Institutional churches can campaign against structures opposed to this mission. Churches should also encourage their members (citizens) to align with political structures that support their overall mission.

These approaches indicate the level of public engagement of churches, which should be examined

4 The discussion on church and state as well as religion and politics is extensive. However, the position of de Aquino (2013) usefully connects with the argument of this paper.

from a public theological perspective. Bezuidenhout and Naude (2002, 8) describe public theology as an attempt to understand the relationship between Christian convictions and the broader social and cultural context within the Christian community. It deals with how the public can be described and how to theologically engage with the public. Juma (2015, 3) states that public theology is about interpreting and living theological beliefs and values in the public realm. Public theology is about ensuring that theology engages with issues within public spaces and not only within the Church. Van Aarde (2008, 1229) offers a basic definition of public theology that is operationally fitting. He states that public theology is about the role of Christians in public as well as the public's theology. While Van Aarde's definition resonates with that of others, it has two important implications for the discussion concerning church and politics. First, public theology entails Christians' engagement with the public either at the institutional level, group level or individual level. Second, it relates to how ordinary people practice theology within their public spaces. This second aspect implies that Christians, as individual people, act on their own convictions within public spaces to participate in and influence what is happening. The manner, dimensions, convictions and expressions that theology directs at the public depends on what an individual appropriates from it. Dreyer (2011, 3) and Dreyer and Pieterse (2010, 6) contend that because theology in the public space manifests itself in multifarious ways, it is important to assist it with language. De Gruchy (2007, 39) advises that public theology needs to use a common language that is understandable by people outside the Christian tradition. De Villiers (2005, 530) calls this "translation of the Christian vision to a wider society". Important to this discussion is the fact that public theology is beyond just theological reflection, as it relates to living out theological beliefs and values. It is about life. It entails a Christianity that emerges from the closet to be visibly engaged with the public, which Van Aarde called *agora* (2008).

The implication of the two dimensions of public theology, namely theological reflection and taking practical action on public issues, suggest the need for a proper translation of Christian tasks to the public. Koopman (2012, 1), drawing lessons from Etienne de Villiers' theology, maintains that prophetic public theology should include a vision of a redeemed and new society (*habitat*) of people, with new habits (*habitus*), who engage in challenging the



public issues of their time. However, due to the plurality and contradictions surrounding public space, theology should strengthen its technical discourse (Koopman 2012, 16). Technical discourse is about translating the Christian task at the level of the public square. Technical discourse relates to the notion of a translation language that Dreyer (2011) draws from Ricoeur's principles. This implies that Christians should engage in public issues with a clear understanding that the public includes complex and multiple dimensions.

In view of the church–politics discussion in this article, churches are expected to engage in politics and governance discussions from a clear theological position. Unfortunately, as Swart and De Beer (2014, 4) observe, public theology has been lacking in a distinguishable scholarly manner in South Africa. This indicates an underdeveloped technical discourse to meaningfully guide church and political engagement. This immaturity weakens the Church's ability to translate its task to the public. Le Bruyns (2012, 3–4) argues that *Kairos* theology contributed to the common good during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, but that it has fallen conspicuously short in providing the theological resources for meeting the public tasks of reconstructing and transforming societal struggles in post-apartheid South Africa. Le Bruyns's (2012, 3–4) concern with the inadequacy and lack of a public theology to address current African challenges has been pointed out by many other scholars. Bowers (2009, 96–100), who has almost 40 years of theological education and church engagement in Africa and who was among the people who established the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA), notes that there is a critical deficiency in African theological reflection on contemporary challenges, which is increasingly being acknowledged by African theological scholars. Gifford (2008, 31–33) observes that African theological reflection has been too immersed and entangled in contextualization, national liberation and nationalism issues, as evident in *Kairos* theology. However, African theological engagement has failed to reconfigure itself to be relevant in post-colonial Africa. This has caused a deficiency in African theological engagement with respect to such pressing critical issues as politics.

Berinyuu (2005, 153–154) states that the current theologies in Africa are inadequate for addressing African challenges, such as dictators, political and ethnic conflicts or violence. The limitations of Afri-

can public theology in engaging contemporary challenges resulted in the birth of African reconstruction theology. African reconstruction theology refers to the theological exercise of holistically engaging with such life issues as politics, tribalism, oppression, HIV, gender and global warming (Gathogo 2007, 119). Bowers (2009, 94–100) adds that theology's intellectual preoccupations in Africa diverge significantly from what is practically occurring in the lives of people on the ground. African intellectual projects do not reflect the people's needs and the practicalities of church and society. Therefore, Swart and De Beer (2014, 11), referring to the South African context, are right that public theology requires a new, dedicated and robust theological focus that intentionally engages with the contextual challenges and issues faced by the country.

The above discussion highlights the reality of the Church as a public social structure. In view of the governance challenges in some African countries, churches are expected to intervene using the resources available to them. The churches' participation in political issues is a public theological task wherein they should be publicly engaged in the social issues affecting people's lives. However, the challenge is that churches lack a clear language and approach to engaging with political issues. This challenge relates to developing a language that is accessible to people outside the Christian tradition (De Gruchy 2007, 39; Dreyer 2011, 3). The importance of having a language is a technical responsibility for public theology (Koopman 2012, 1). Within this matrix, practical theology plays a critical role. Miller McLemore (2012, 20) advises that practical theology points to different locations, i. e. from daily life to the library, from fieldwork to the classroom, from congregation to community and from academic guild to global context. Miller McLemore (2005, 20) states that practical theology, among other things, is, "an activity of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday life".

Juma (2015, 2) usefully links practical and public theologies by saying practical theology finds expression, not replacement, in public theology. Osmer and Schweitzer (2003, 215) clarify that the tasks of practical theology include public dimensions. Dreyer (2004, 919) adds that not all practical theology is public theology. Dreyer's argument is that not all practical theology is aimed at a non-ecclesial general audience, i. e. the general public. Practical theology is a theology for church and non-church people alike. Therefore, the call for a public practical theol-



ogy has to do with strengthening the practical theological focus on non-church, public issues. Within the discussion of church and politics engagement, practical theology provides a method and a way for how Christians may sustain a reflective life amidst an everyday life of political despair and indifference. Practical theology advocates using the resources available to it, such as popular mobilization, social pressure, speaking for the oppressed and sensitizing people to participate in governance structures as citizens (de Aquino 2013).

### Churches' engagement in democratic structures as a public practical theology of transforming leadership

Practical theology, among other things, entails imagination (Cahalan and Mikoski 2014, 3). Louw (2014, 11) adds that practical theology and Christian spirituality both include anticipatory *imagination* (*fides quaerens imaginem*: faith-seeking imaginative deciphering). Therefore, it is the task of practical theology to imagine new ways of transforming political leadership via the resources it has available to it (de Aquino 2013, 484). Agbiji and Swart (2015, 9) observe that advocacy is the most prominent form of social engagement of Christian religious leadership. However, in situations where church leaders are suppressed and ignored, there is a need to develop new strategies to transform the situation and change the existing leadership. For instance, in South Africa vibrant church leaders challenged the apartheid system, which contributed to the advent of democracy in 1994. Thus, practical theology should provide innovative strategic tasks to assist churches in imagining and exploring new approaches to transforming political leadership.

**Message and motivation:** The Church requires a clear message and motivation for engaging in politics. Spencer (2008, 41) advises that doing public theology is doing what Jesus intended—Christians demonstrating his kingdom. De Aquino (2013, 484) explains that the fundamental criterion of the church's political activity is a realization of God's reign in the structures of society. Since the reign of God is about justice for the poor and oppressed in a country, this should constitute a criterion and measure of political activities. Church leaders must ask searching questions of themselves regarding their motives as church leaders and also analyze the motives of politicians. The ethical proof and eschato-

logical measure of the effectiveness of individual leaders and politicians is their commitment to the poor. Whatever the actions of churches and church leaders, those actions should be motivated by the obligation to uphold the rights and interests of the poor and all other people. The way in which this defining principle is communicated and employed to shape political discourse and practical actions then requires technical competence by churches. Thus, the Church as an institution, church leaders and individual Christians should be motivated and persuaded by this principle to intervene when bad governance is evident.

**Leveraging the civic power of citizens:** Leaders and members of churches may denounce politicians and confront them, but in many instances leaders do not change their actions. In such cases, churches need to employ alternatives for the good of citizens. There is a need to move beyond ineffective ideas and mere verbal denouncement as a way of putting pressure on government. One such alternative is for churches to utilize their positions to unleash democratic power. Churches can awaken the civil capacities of their members to participate in civic activities that intensify pressure as well as mobilize members to vote against an oppressive government. Church members should be encouraged both as citizens and as responsible Christians to act against oppressive structures. In so doing, church members would then be acting on behalf of their private faith, which would be communicated to the public through the use of power and the spaces available to them.

The action may be taken at four levels. First, church leaders, through theological persuasion based on God's mission for humanity, may encourage members to consider voting against an oppressive government or actively participate in activities to put pressure on such governments (sensitization of *demos* power—individual power). Second, churches may facilitate the formation of civil society pressure groups via their members to pressure oppressive governments to correct their actions (local membership networks). Third, the use of church spaces as venues for anti-oppressive government social mobilization and meeting spaces (church infrastructure as spaces for civic activities meetings—churches as civic action pressure groups) is an option. Fourth, churches could form congregational networks and bodies to campaign against oppressive actions and initiate mass mobilization to vote against a government (churches networks and coalition mobilization).



Churches in many African countries have large membership figures, numbers that can change political power. For instance, about 80 % of South Africans, 85 % of Zimbabweans, 90 % of Namibians, 80 % Malawians, 75 % Zambians and 70 % of Botswanans identify themselves as Christian. The point being made is not that churches and church members should be manipulated to choose certain political parties, but rather that church members should be made aware of their Christian responsibility based on God's mission of justice in order to look after the poor and oppressed in a nation. This entails creating awareness and strengthening Christian awareness of church members' duties and responsibilities (technical discourse). This church effort will result in a collision with bad government and in churches being labelled as meddling in politics. However, what certainly cannot be denied is that government leaders and politicians would take churches seriously.

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