

Rethinking theological training as ministerial empowerment for contextual mission: A case of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa

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This research engaged a realist paradigm to triangulate existing literature with data that emerged from a PhD study on ministerial formation within the context of being a missional church in the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA). The study identified the need for theological training and ministerial formation to be relevant, contextual and responsive to the realities of the African communities. We concluded that current theological training module is dominated by Eurocentric expressions and narratives, which highlight an urgent need for a theological and ministerial formation model that will equip leaders with relevant and contextual missional strategies necessary for rapidly transforming African communities. There is a need for decolonisation and contextualisation of academic studies in order to align theological training and leadership development with the emerging challenges within the African context.

Contribution: This article contributes to systematic, contextual and postcolonial reflections on theological education and ministerial formation in Africa.

Keywords: COVID-19; theological training; missional church; leadership development; UPCSA.

Introduction and context

Theological training and skills preparation for church leaders has been tested during the period from 2020 with a difficult time for the global community dealing with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as the pandemic disrupted many activities in life. Economies ground to halt when companies, schools and universities were ordered to shut down in the face of the pandemic, leaving a trail of destruction, shattering health systems and creating confusion within the church in one of the worst experiences resulting from the pandemic. With the implementation of COVID-19 vaccine passports currently underway, we are witnessing a new era, a world where the movement of people will be redefined by the pandemic (Venter 2021):

Crises have the surprising potential of generating new knowledge amidst disruption and suffering ... We learn about the need for human touch, the susceptibility of people for post-truths, the scope of injustice and the fault-lines in societies ... [and] (t)he cognitive matrix of the Christian faith and its viability for making sense, for contributing to the public reservoir of insights should be investigated ... (p. 1)

This study contributes in 'cognitive matrix of the Christian faith and its viability for making sense' by exploring theological training and leadership formation towards adaption and development of innovative ways to respond to new challenges. In South Africa, COVID-19 struck when there were high levels of unemployment (34.4%) (Maluleke 2021), poverty, crime, violence and gender-based violence (GBV) – all of which escalated during the lockdown period. These social and economic challenges, coupled with disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, present a challenge to Christian mission and fuelled protests and looting, which took place in July after the former President Jacob Zuma was arrested (Visser, Rangongo & Esterhuizen 2021). Racism, inequalities and extremes of poverty remain high and present a serious threat to socio-economic and political stability in the country. The ongoing tensions attest to the unsustainable situation where the poor black majority still live in extreme poverty while a minority of white people and a few black people have extreme wealth. There is an urgent need to address these disparities and reduce levels of inequality between the rich and the poor through honest conversations and practical steps, which will ensure the implementation of transformational programmes. Therefore, the

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impact of these challenges on the mission of the Church in South Africa and Southern Africa in general has prompted the necessity to evaluate missional trends, strategies and new ways to empower leaders with skills for doing ministry in a new context.

This is an important theological task that requires transformation of theological education and attention to factors that influence our changing context. As Knoetze (2020) has rightly observed:

[T]ransforming theological education is not the accumulation of knowledge, but the development of consciousness ... we also need to be conscious of the factors that influence different and new understandings of theological education like decolonisation, globalisation, and diversity in culture, religion, worldviews, theology and even Christianity ... Conscious of our calling, it is realised faculties are servants in the kingdom of God and therefore they will have to attend to accessibility, decolonisation of our curriculum and globalisation to address the needs of the previously disadvantaged churches. (p. 1)

There are new contextual factors that need to be considered because during the COVID-19 lockdown, face-to-face gathering was not allowed and most Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) congregations replaced them with online church activities depending on the availability of electronic gadgets and Internet connectivity. These virtual programmes resulted in more people getting used to a worship life with less in-person church activities although the poor were completely isolated from these activities because of affordability of data, cell phones and computers. Consequently, the shifting of church activities to virtual spaces left some of the church members traumatised as they could not access spiritual pastoral counselling resources usually available to them on church premises, at a time when they were dealing with the impact of the pandemic. The virtual spaces of worship isolated communities from practical activities apart from the spirituality which families practiced in isolation through prayer. This remained the means through which faith communities could dialogue with God as part of fellowship.

This study triangulated existing qualitative literature with data which emerged from a PhD research project conducted in 2021 to explore a contextual and relevant model for theological training ministerial formation and training within the paradigm of a missional conversation in the UPCSA.

Brief literature review

The General Assembly of the UPCSA some years ago agreed that preparation for the ministry should focus on the academic, practical, spiritual and evangelical components of ministerial formation. The UPCSA (2000) states that:

[T]he Assembly agrees that the aim of ministerial formation should be to integrate the academic, evangelistic, practical and spiritual aspects of training, to take account of the Reformed tradition, and to be open to transformation. (p. 271)

These four approaches are crucial for the ministers and cannot be viewed or taught independently of one another. That would provide a fragmented approach to ministerial training and would lead to a fragmented approach to ministry. For better or worse, ministry is a vocation that requires to some extent the development of a variety of skills to perform in the multifarious nature of the ministry.

The UPCSA from the onset understood that time changes and the societal needs must be met considerably. As per UPCSA (2002):

[T]he Church as an organised human community of witness can be an *ecclesia semper reformanda* which is open to change, as long as these changes help the Church to fulfil its fundamental task of witnessing to the truth of the gospel of Christ in this specific historical, cultural and social circumstances in which it exists. (p. 144)

In the life of the denomination, the time will come when it will need a new wine skin to hold the wine. The UPCSA is new, and it needs renewed ways of operating.

In light of the given discussion, it is apparent that indeed the UPCSA was geared to move forward. The proposal of the ministerial training and formation was tabled at the 2002 UPCSA General Assembly. The UPCSA (2002:146–147) records that a document titled 'Passage to Ordained Ministry' was presented. The said document suggested that the ministerial training and formation would have three phases, namely, fellowship of vocation, academic training and practical exposure.

The reports from the Ministry Committee in 2018 were much more extensive than usual. This year showed several clear markers in the committee's attempt to move forward. These include a theological workshop, the Rudder committee and the evaluation of current institutions. In all three the Ministry Committee was looking to gain a better grasp of who it was and the challenges it faced. The report, UPCSA (2018) opens with the remark that:

The Committee can report that it has been a good year. Our students have on the whole done well in their studies, probationers have integrated into congregations, and new calls have been discerned to bring new life to our congregations. (p. 249)

According to the UPCSA (2018:249), the Ministry Committee identified what it considered to be its good and regular functions and went on to highlight the state of dysfunctionality which it has been in. Yet, through the report, the good is clear to see. The committee had continued to investigate the different forms of ministry, especially around Ephesians 4:12. This had resulted in a shift away from focusing primarily on training 'pastors' to an awareness of the wider need for training. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers are highlighted as gifts that need to be recognised and supported.

Certainly, the UPCSA acknowledged that it does not think its theological training or the new way of training ministers

will eradicate the automated (*imikhovu*) ministers that the church has been training under the current set-up. Ministers will be trained with the knowledge and necessary skills required to fulfil their ministerial responsibilities in a swiftly changing world.

Without any doubt, the current theological training of the UPCSA is meant to maintain the existing congregation to allow them to die a natural death, not to start new ones. Such theological training is detrimental to the missional church and has failed to realise that the community has changed and it no longer fits the context.

Brief historical background

In his seminal work exploring early developments in theological education in South Africa, Oosthuizen (1963:279) observed that the 'first theological Institute in South Africa was held at the forest sanctuary near Stutterheim and was funded by the Theological Education Fund'. Through this initiative, different theological centres offered training to teachers and ministers preparing various denominations for ministry. According to Oosthuizen (1963:279), the institute consisted of 31 members and the majority were Lutherans, Anglicans and representatives from 'Moravian, Methodist, Basutoland Reformed, Congregational and Baptist Churches and the Xhosa and Sotho Reformed Church, and individual members from two Afrikaans Churches' (Oosthuizen 1963:279). It is for this reason that De Gruchy (1993:1) later acknowledged that 'South African theology made significant contributions during the transition to democracy in the country'. This was the period when theology started responding to contextual challenges.

Scholars have argued that theology should be relevant and connect with the cultural change in ways that reflect transition from colonialism and respond to real challenges faced by African communities. For example, Chitando (2009:n.p.) argued that Christianity must bring relevant change in the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) epidemic and socio-political challenges in Zimbabwe, while Mwesigwa (2009:1) questioned the relevance of Christianity in providing positive change within the context of ethnic biases and conflict in Eastern Africa. Gatwa (2009:22) also added his voice demanding that Christianity in Africa should translate to societal transformation and underscored the credibility of contextual theology regarding Christianity in Africa. In underscoring the relevance of contextual approach, Walls (2002:221) argued that African Christians can only relate Christ with their own culture, only if they are firmly rooted in their own cultural identity.

According to information available on the website (Fourie n.d.), the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria is the largest of its kind in South Africa and it is also one of the oldest faculties – there are seminaries that are older, but not faculties. The Faculty dates back to 1917 when the Presbyterian Church and the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NGK) began training their ministers at the

University of Pretoria. Later around 1920, the Presbyterian Church withdrew itself from the partnership and in 1937 they were replaced by the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK), which however formed a separate section within the faculty. The arrangement of two independent sections was maintained until 1999 when the sections merged on the 01 January 2000 and the faculty became a 'multi-ecclesial faculty' comprising the two traditional partners. During the following year, the UPCSA joined the faculty in 2002, and the most recent partner to come on board was the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Arica (URCSA), which joined the partnership in 2012.

According to minutes of the UPCSA General Assembly (1999), the leadership of the denomination agreed on the need to develop a clear theory surrounding theological training and ministerial formation. As the record of the meetings shows, the former Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa – PCSA (UPCSA 1999:217–218) articulated the need for 'means of providing a theological education and practical training for our ministers...[through a] radical revision.. [of the previous model]'. At the same General Assembly, the former PCSA (UPCSA 1999:222–223) objected to the integration of academic teaching and practical exposure proposing that the two should run one after the other, and not concurrently, an approach which advanced the idea that teaching and practical exposure should run concurrently. Formulating a theoretical model for ministerial and theological training was one aspect of the disagreements within the newly established UPCSA, which entered into a collaboration with the University of Pretoria.

The literature presented here was not comprehensive but nonetheless provides a brief background of missional developments. Missiology has always been considered to be a sub-discipline of practical theology and is dynamic and forever evolving with changing circumstances in different contexts. This underscores the significance of relevant and contextual theology at the interface of theological training and ministerial formation. Therefore, as Soltau (1984:152) observed, there is a challenge in the development of academic studies on missiology as a sub-discipline of practical theology as it does not receive priority attention. According to Soltau (1984):

Missiology entered the curriculum as a theological orphan to be treated generally as an addendum and looked to as a means of providing instruction in technique rather than a theology of mission. (pp. 152, 153)

As Mashau (2012) has also observed:

... As a result, theological institutions all over the world continue to produce pastors without the vision, heart and passion for mission and church planting. Central to this problem is that both mission and missiology have been driven to the periphery in the life of both the church and theological institutions. (p. 1)

This context-based dynamism can be observed through missional trends and trajectories that intersect with biblical

and theological hermeneutics that are reflected in the intersecting trajectories in biblical, theological and contextual hermeneutics that have recently emerged on the global and local theoretical landscapes on mission. Given these rapid developments and changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Church should keep transforming in line with the emerging issues in different contexts. There have been previous attempts to understand the church from different perspectives. For example, Smit (2007) highlighted what he calls 'six manifestations of understanding the church' and observed the following:

[T]he church as ecumenical church (whether global, national, regional or local), (2) the church as denomination(s), (3) the church as (mostly local) congregations, (4) the church as worshipping communities, (5) the church as individual believers (in the fullness of their personal, private and public lives) and (6) the church as believers (individuals or groups) participating in initiatives and actions, together with others. (p. 265)

Trends in missiology and implications for ministerial formation

The Faculty of Theology and Region, together with participating partners, has been informed by developments in missiology in the world. The faculty aims to 'facilitate life-affirming theologies that are constructive, critical, relevant, contextual and engaging' (Fourie n.d.). This vision resonates with what Chitando (2009), Gatwa (2010) and Walls (2002) identified as central to African theological discourse. The above vision also resonates with the World Council of Churches' (WCC) theme of 'the fullness of life for all of God's creation' achieved through the mission of God – *missio Dei*. Following a number of important conferences, the concept of *missio Dei* has become fundamental to the training of leaders and development of congregations, which are mission driven.

Recent trends and trajectories in missiology and ecclesiology emerged from conferences, which developed documents based on various theological-missiological proceedings, which captured contextual hermeneutics in relation to the church on the global scene. These conferences culminated in groundbreaking projects such as the WCC's *Together Towards Life* (TTL) document (Keum 2013), written by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC; *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), the pastoral exhortation of Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church and the *Cape Town Commitment* (2010) of the Lausanne Movement. These developments were informed by conversations that took place at the centenary celebration of the Edinburgh 1910 Conference in 2010, a conference that arguably set the stage for conversations that inspired the TTL document, alongside the *Evangelii Gaudium* and the *Cape Town Commitment* in 2010. These new forms of missional ecclesiology have developed since the term 'missional church' (Guder 1998) emerged. Scholars such as Niemandt (2019:n.p.) had observed that this approach has 'particular focus on the impact of and renewed interest in missional ecclesiology that can be identified in important

ecumenical events ever since 2010', including Edinburgh in 2010, WCRC in 2010, Lausanne III in 2011, WCC in 2013 and WCC conference in 2018.

What is significant about the Cape Town Commitment of the Lausanne Movement in 2010 is that it took place on African soil and stood out as a confession of faith and a call to action for the global church not only to strengthen its determination for evangelism but also to address critical issues such as the global changing landscapes of the creation as the context for mission, reclaim the centrality of Scripture and God as the source and the initiator of mission and the agency of the Holy Spirit as our source of strength and comfort. In the articulations of the proceedings and documents from these conferences on global mission, there is a general consensus that God's mission aims at ensuring redemption of the whole of Creation – not just salvation for humanity. Such an approach requires the global Church to reclaim contextual and authentic articulations of participating in the *Missio Dei* through complex diversities and convergences, which characterise the modern world. African churches have a key role to play in this critical enterprise.

In order for the Church to be missional, contextually relevant, theological training will require leadership development and intentionality on being missional through re-reading the Bible from a missional lens, re-discovering and developing contextual hermeneutics towards transformative application of scripture in mission as explicitly articulated in the three missionary documents cited above. As Gibbs (2009) has rightly observed:

[T]he church must be understood as referring to a people rather than to a place, and a congregation represents not just a weekly gathering that people are a part of, but a community in which each person actively belongs, receive[s] support, and is encouraged to make their own distinctive contribution. It consists not of passive consumers, but of creative participants ... The church is not primarily a place of refuge, but a community of people on pilgrimage. (pp. 54, 55)

Like the rest of the world, current missiological discourses in Africa have tended to focus on areas such as evangelisation in context, developing intercultural communication skills, promoting interreligious dialogue, understanding patterns of mission theology, developing missional church practices, studying the history of missions, promoting and empowering women and youth, developing sustainable communities and developing faith-based strategies for sustainable care of creation and earth healing. These issues remain relevant and critical in these changing landscapes. However, there is a need to also focus on ministerial formation and leadership development as appropriate ways to attend to these focus areas vary from the African context. Leadership failures can be observed in trends and trajectories relating to missiological, biblical and contextual hermeneutics in South Africa and Africa in general.

In his research on theological education in Africa, Wahl (2011:240) explored discipleship through mediated learning

experience (MLE) to demonstrate how MLE can effectively contribute to the construction of an appropriate 'framework for theological education in an African context'. As he analysed the 'discourse on theological education over the past five decades', Wahl (2011:241) identified six models for theological education and four central themes emerged, namely 'leadership stature, practical effectiveness, relational capacity and spiritual accuracy'. The study concluded that theological education in an African context faced contextual challenges such as access, the lack of resources, socio-political and socio-economical illness and (a lack of) an Africanised scholarship and curricula (Wahl 2011:241).

As a contribution to contextual conversations on developing 'missional congregations', this thesis critically engaged a realist paradigm as a commitment to the belief that there are multiple realities that should be critically engaged within a rapidly changing context, such as South Africa. The researchers employed qualitative and quantitative approaches through 'liquid modernity' to explore different articulations, symbols and practices on mission towards developing a model for training and developing missional leaders within the UPCSA. By analysing the various formulations and articulations of missional church, this research interrogated ministerial formation structures, programmes and theological articulations to uncover the new ways in which congregations responded to COVID-19.

Research methodology

The authors approached the study from a critical realist paradigm and were committed to the belief that there are multiple realities that should be critically engaged, especially given the rapidly changing context in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although not exhaustive, data were collected through interviews, focus group discussion and questions designed to explore the meaning of 'being a missional church' and identifying the theological resources necessary for leadership development within the context of missiology in Southern Africa. The authors analysed a few of the responses from the participants through the lens of 'missional church' as an attempt to determine how theological training and ministerial formation can be reimaged to address the contextual challenges faced by African communities.

Data presentation and discussion

From the interviews conducted, some respondents expressed concern that the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria offers a Western and colonial model of theological training, which does not accommodate African values. As a result, such disregard for the African context and values is perceived by some students and ministers who were trained at the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Theology and Religion as racial discrimination. This was reflected in the sentiments echoed by a respondent:

'After my ... [studies] in the University of Pretoria, things changed drastically because there are those who think they are clever. And the reality is, you know, black people ... needed to

be taught in a certain way. That's what white people believed, and this is where the problem is, racism in ministry, and the UPCSA to a detriment towards a black child ... at the University of Pretoria. So how do you expect to get proper formation ... When you are black in an institution, which is very racial, then you get a white, you know, Ministry Committee ... Secretary, who comes and impose things to students ... [and] doesn't even understand their culture, let alone their language, let alone their background, how do you think this could be a proper formation ...' (Interview, participant 4, male)

Although we should guard against racial overtones, these sentiments reflect a need for decolonisation of theological training to adapt to the indigenous context as a critical factor for consideration in theological training and ministerial formation. According to UPCSA (2018:493), the UPCSA's adopted recommendations, which emphasised the African or Black worldview as contextualisation of theology and one of the key focus points. Prior to 2018, these issues had not been adequately addressed despite some superficial attempts in some sections of the church, such as the appointments of both black and white staff members. Accordingly, there is a need for the UPCSA to address challenges of racial discrimination and privileging of Western epistemologies in both theological academic training and ministerial formation processes. The study under discussion identified this challenge as one of the themes that emerge as some of the key shortcomings for the UPCSA's Ministry Committee formation programme. Instead of preparing students for missional leadership, some of the respondents felt that the training is designed to 'distort' and manipulate the way that students think, as reflected here:

'... So there is a distortion somewhere, it's actually a recipe you are brewing and you are cooking, students who, you want them to have a certain way of thinking, which will be towards, thinking that you know they are inferior and the white church is very superior. That's what you get at the end of the day. So you cannot be talking about formation. That's why I'm very worried when we use formation within the scope of the UPCSA I don't think there is any ...' (Interview, participant 3, male)

Instead of programming students to think in a particular way, the UPCSA should take advantage of the post-COVID-19 shifts and redesign programmes towards a decolonised approach. The church in the past embarked on shifts that were necessitated by changes in context, from Christendom to post-Christendom, from maintenance to mission, from mission to being missional. Post-Christendom church models included fundamental, evangelical, emerging and liberal. In all these shifts, the social stance and context informed the praxis of the church and, therefore, our changing context should be taken seriously in the emerging missional approaches. Sweet (2012:43) has rightly warned that the world we live in is a 'dangerously fluid world', whereby religion is not merely 'becoming liquid' but also the political, economic and social are rapidly changing. This has also been observed by De Groot (2018:2-3) who posited that neither is church only 'moving from the "solid" phase of a modern institution to the liquid phase of late modern

de-institutionalised forms'. Therefore, new missional approaches should 'de-institutionalise' mission and locate it within the religious communities whose circumstances and socio-economic conditions and realities should be at the centre of any theological reflection and inform ministerial training and practice.

Sweet (2012: n.p.) explained that the goal in the contemporary church must be to go beyond surviving to thriving in this new culture. In order for the church to address relevant and contextual challenges such as racism, inequality, poverty, GBV and all forms of discrimination, leaders need to be properly equipped. The church should not be blind to the changes that are unfolding but should be part of developing new strategies into the future. The church is losing relevance in the world and Bauman (2012) gave a timely warning that:

[T]he prolonged time of 'interregnum' – when the old ways of doing things no longer work, the old learned or inherited modes of life are no longer suitable for the current *conditio humana*, but when the new ways of tackling challenges and new modes of life better suited to the new conditions have not as yet been invented, put in place and set in operation ... (p. 1)

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, it became apparent that old ways of doing ministry were not effective. For example, Mpofu (2020:4) pointed out that the post-COVID-19 church should emerge as a church whose mission is God's mission (*missio Dei*), not merely the activities of the church where the poor are marginalised and exploited by the rich and powerful. It should be acknowledged that COVID-19 disruptions exposed the weaknesses of traditional missional practices. In some cases, the church has lost relevance and has ignored the circumstances of the poor. This renders the mission of the church irrelevant and not contextual.

Therefore, when the church emerges after the COVID-19-related lockdown, it must challenge the missiological 'glass ceiling'. This concept refers to a belief that the church has reached the height of mission calling. The COVID-19 pandemic must be taken as one of the life-denying situations – not 'the' but one of 'the'. This would help the church not to lose focus on other life-denying situations, such as economic injustices, climate change and GBV. The church must not take its eyes off the ball but should use the pandemic as one of the hermeneutical keys to unlock and interpret life-denying situations as an opportunity to see the crisis in the context of the marginalised. This will require transformation of theological education to include African values and embrace African theology as articulated by one of the respondents:

'... The theology taught at that University of Pretoria is teaching Western theology however we are in Africa. Africa is very rich in theology but the faculty don't teach the African theology ...' (Interview, participant 4, male)

There has been a growing call for decolonisation of theological education and contextualisation or Africanisation of academic studies, not just in theology but in other academic disciplines

as well. These developments indicate the lack of transformation within educational models since 1994 and there is a need to develop an educational system relevant to the needs of the local context. The appeal for theological education to equip the local context is an established one. For example, in his seminal work, *Theological impotence and the universality of the church*, Mbiti (1976) underscored the irrelevance of models of theological education in Africa and appealed for change. At a later stage, Maluleke (2006:61–62) interpreted this anecdote as an appeal for relevant theological education within the South African context. Their major concern has been that theological education in Africa is static. Wahl (2013:267) argued that 'despite a global shift in Christianity, from the northern to the southern hemisphere, educational forms and thought processes have not matched this shift'. As one participant observed, the effects of this have been enormous:

'... UP still an apartheid institution, we cannot run away from this fact. Some of the decolonization programs have not taken place at all. The theology we were taught is still a theology that struggles to address the issues of race in SA, the challenge of injustice of the past, the struggle of poverty and those things ...' (Interview, participant 14, female)

This view concurs with that presented by Mogashoa and Makofane (2017), who pointed out that:

'... African theology is not taught as one of the mainstream modules at UP but is rather treated as a sub-discipline in traditional disciplines such as Systematic Theology ... prescribed books and lecturers largely focus on theological ideas and methods generated from Europe and North America. As a result, the faculty does not expose students sufficiently to the realities and theological riches of the African continent ... (p. 6)

Paradigm shifts in theological training

As we have seen, Christianity has not lost its enticement, but church, as its official custodian, has lost much of its influence. The major challenge facing vibrant expressions of church in a rapidly changing society like ours is not theological liberalism but religious consumerism:

'Classical theology has produced ministers who are not skilled in responding to the local realities and it must be discarded ... students are active in the affairs of the church while still at school; and there is a balance between academic presentation and congregation exposure.' (Interview, participant 14, female)

Western imperialism that has had a lasting impact on theological education and the Eurocentric impact of classical theology is visible in the Southern African context. The decolonisation debate has accumulated credible collection of literature with the likes of Amanze (2009), Hadebe (2017), Hendriks (2012), Le Grange (2016), Monhla (2014) and Maluleke (2006) being instrumental in enriching the subject matter. It is important to observe that theological teaching and education are in a fragile state because of slow transformation. While faith may be booming, the maturity and nature of transformative Christian leadership is a cause for concern. Gatwa (2010:322) acknowledged that

'Christianity in the South is a giant standing on clay legs'. This observation highlights the fact that while there has been numerical growth in Christianity, ministerial formation has not developed in unison with this. As such, the legs of the giant need to be strengthened and theological knowledge deepened. Balcomb (2011:33) saw this as an opportunity for the 'translation' of the gospel into African society to take a contextual grounding.

In relation to the first point is the fact that even those receiving theological education feel it does not equip them for ministry. Houston (2013) affirmed:

[T]hat most theological colleges in Africa are faithfully teaching the knowledge that was generated in the West because we are dependent on Western textbooks for so many of the courses we teach. (p. 109)

This dependence perpetuates execution of an education that has no relevance in the African context. This leads to work being performed to perpetuate the Western system even though it may have no bearing or relevance today. In the words of Maluleke (2006):

The African graduate has learnt well to ignore the questions that are being asked 'on the ground', to explain them away and to occupy himself with his own fabricated ones. (p. 67)

This is consistent with what one participant observed:

'Training for ministry in universities that are not linked to the church may not provide sound doctrinal underpinnings as lecturers may emphasize academic as opposed to theological or church principles and fundamental doctrines of the church.' (Interview, participant 14, female)

The above statement from a focus group participant implies that the University of Pretoria uses church partnerships to underpin doctrinal teachings, but this is not the case and such a misconception reflects a misunderstanding of the Faculty and partner churches. While the current model at the University of Pretoria is flexible for partner denominations to run in-house placements, the academic model does not provide compulsory ministerial exposure for candidates to engage with the local context. However, students who take part in some programmes such as the centre for Faith and Communities have an opportunity for contextual learning experiences. As Balcomb (2011:8-9) observed, the 'colonial model of education is entrenched in the secular, enlightenment world view, which promotes the importance of rationality at the expense of spirituality'. Yet this is not the reality of the African world view. Further issues of relevance are found with the curriculum design. Naidoo (2016:2) added that 'the dominant curriculum continues to be a source of alienation'. To affirm the notion, Maluleke (2006) wrote:

It is still possible to attain a diploma or a basic degree in theology within (South) Africa and to do so without ever having read any work by an African. (p. 66)

Amanze (2013:229) asserted that because of this lack of relevance, much of the education is carried out in isolation

and lack contextual missional strategies necessary for rapidly transforming African communities. Theological education is critiqued for not meeting the contextual reality of those studying. Lessons can be drawn from other institutions. For example, one participant observed:

'The system of ministerial empowerment applied by the Justo Mwale University is the model I cherish. Each student is assigned a different congregation and a supervisor (minister) for each academic year; students are active in the affairs of the church while still at school; and there is a balance between academic presentation and congregation exposure.'

The University of Pretoria is undergoing curriculum transformation to include more African scholarship as a way of decolonising education. This will help the Faculty of Theology to address the historical limitations of offering the classic fourfold division of modern-day theological education (biblical studies [Old Testament and New Testament], church history, practical theology and systematic theology). When the UPCSA as one of the current official partner institutions did an investigation in 2018, they proposed that the faculty should explore ways to offer more African perspectives from the black world view as one of the criteria for theological education. This follows a realisation that some scholars have been critical of the University of Pretoria. These scholars include, among others, Duncan (2016) and De Beer and Van Niekerk (2017), cf. Van Wyk (2017). According to UPCSA (2018:503), UPCSA was encouraged to learn that 're-curricularisation was taking place with increased transformative awareness of Africanisation and identifying black writers and scholars'. One participant also lamented the need for theological teaching praxis, which embraces diversity:

'... I think we need a wide range of theological approaches. The problem is not the theologies, but the lack of a praxis perspective in teaching them ...' (Interview, participant 6, male)

Therefore, there is a need for UPCSA to engage with the university in order to promote African epistemologies towards life-flourishing and life-affirming curriculums in theological education. It is not enough to undertake a process of diversification of prescribed reading lists and staff bodies as this too often tends to be superficial and employed as a justification to give an impression for transformation. As COVID-19 disruptions forced many institutions to engage in hybrid teaching and learning, curriculum transformation should be intentional and aim at diversifying prescribed reading lists to include more scholarly work from black African scholars and women. This is one way through which we can address the systemic injustices of the past.

Conclusion

This study identified the need for theological training and ministerial formation to be relevant, contextual and responsive to the realities of the African communities. We concluded that current theological training module is dominated by Eurocentric expressions and narratives, which highlight an urgent need for a theological and ministerial

formation model that will equip leaders with relevant and contextual missional strategies necessary for rapidly transforming African communities. There is a need for decolonisation and contextualisation of academic studies in order to align theological training and leadership development with the emerging challenges within the African context. It is our view that theological training and ministerial formation should embrace African epistemologies as part of equipping transformative leadership. Churches in partnership with theological faculties also need to play their role by transforming structures, polity and the way we do mission in the African context. Theological institutions also have a task to develop curriculum theological disciplines in ways that embrace and value African indigenous knowledge and place them at the centre of theological teaching.

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Authors' contributions

S.Z. contributed data that were analysed in this work and most sections of the article were refined and edited by B.M.

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Data availability

Data discussed in this article were collected for a PhD thesis and have been stored in accordance with the University of Pretoria regulations.

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