

MISSION AS ACTION IN HOPE IN THE CONTEXT OF WHITE POVERTY IN PRETORIA: A CASE FOR BETLEHEM MISSION CENTRE

ABSTRACT

The gap between the rich and the poor is widening daily and the proportion of people living in poverty in South Africa is steadily on the rise. The phenomenon of white poverty has existed since the 1890s and is becoming a more common trend across South Africa. White poverty left a number of whites in South Africa homeless. Consequently, they are forced to live in the streets, in shelters and informal settlements such as Bethlehem Mission Centre in Pretoria. A descriptive study was undertaken within the qualitative paradigm to describe the living conditions at the Bethlehem Mission Centre in Pretoria. The mission operandi, faith-based focus and funding of the Centre is described. In describing the experience of people involved in Bethlehem Mission Centre a story unfolds of how hope may be restored to a seemingly hopeless situation. The church living out “mission as action in hope” can address the issue of poverty in the context it serves.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges of urbanisation in the world is urban poverty (Greenway & Mashau 2007:11). Urban poverty is a worldwide phenomenon that has worsened significantly in recent years. Van der Walt (2003:40) asserts that poverty, including many manifestations and consequences such as suffering, hunger, disease, low income, dehumanisation, and injustice, is indeed a serious problem in Africa. South Africa is witness to this on a daily basis. It is asserted that the single most important issue facing South Africa ten years after the transition to democracy is breaking the grip of poverty on a substantial portion of its citizens (Landman 2003:1).

Prof D Mashau, Northwest University, South Africa. E-mail: Derrick.mashau@nwu.ac.za.



Unemployment and wide social and economic gaps are clearly visible in this country. The pace of change for the nation's poor is slow, as is job-creation. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening daily and the proportion of people living in poverty in South Africa is steadily on the rise.

Approximately 57% of individuals in South Africa were living below the poverty income line in 2001, unchanged from 1996. Limpopo and the Eastern Cape had the highest proportion of poor with 77% and 72% of their populations living below the poverty income line, respectively. The Western Cape had the lowest proportion in poverty (32%), followed by Gauteng (42%) (HSRC 2004).

According to this report, "the Gauteng's poverty gap has grown faster between 1996 and 2001 than all other provinces", and the rise of its "population growth" that exceeds "economic growth" is cited as the reason for such eventuality.

South Africa's economic straits are a troubling reality (Mashau 2006:2). The poverty problem in South Africa exists partly because of the inheritance of past economic policies from the colonial period to the apartheid era, which were characterised by severe socio-economic inequalities (Chikulo 2003:1; cf. Aliber 2001:6). During these periods in the history of South Africa, poverty was defined in terms of race with blacks being its face. It is asserted that

Over the last hundred years, political influences on the South African labour market have been characterized by a plethora of legislation that was instrumental in maintaining, until the early 1970s, a workforce strictly divided on the basis of race (Bhorat 2001:3).

Between 1902 and 1971 the high rate of unemployment, cheap labour, exploitation, job reservation, and other South African labour laws ensured that many blacks remained poorer, while many whites generally enjoyed a very privileged position economically. This is clearly documented in the Carnegie Commission on Black poverty in 1984 (Pick, Rispel & Naidoo 2008). In 1913 the *Nations Land Act* was passed, driven by two demands, namely the need for cheap labour for the mines and protection of white farmers against black competition. The 1913 Act set aside 93% of South Africa's land for white purchase only (see Chazan *et al.* 1999:469). The *Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923*, as amended in 1930, attempted to control the influx of Africans to urban areas. The local authorities were required to provide segregated areas for African residents and to create Native advisory boards and Native revenue accounts. Those who were not

employed were considered a surplus, and were removed from those areas (Horrell 1963:3). Accordingly,

The government aggressively promoted the employment of whites in state-controlled enterprises and in the burgeoning bureaucracy, revitalised public relief programmes to ensure short-term employment for whites, gave assistance to Afrikaner business, and supported commercial (white) agriculture through a variety of measures (Bhorat 2001:4).

The distinctive characteristics of South African labour economics, as recorded by Lemon (1976:29), were division of labour into two classes: a large body of African labour earning low wages (cheap and exploitable), and a much smaller group of white workers earning high wages, and division of labour into two classes of skilled and unskilled labour, with blacks being the most unskilled due to the lack of training. This duality is currently still visible.

In his speech at the opening of the third democratic parliament in May 2004, President Mbeki noted that there are two economies in South Africa: a first-world, developed economy and a third-world, informal economy (Seepe & Mkhabela 2004:17). As many white South Africans still own the bigger share in terms of economic gains, the post-apartheid era has witnessed the emergence of two phenomena which are changing the nature of social discourse in respect of poverty and inequality in this country, namely the widening gap between the new black haves and have-nots (Duke 2004:19; cf. Mashau 2006:2), and the growing number of poor whites who are living in similar conditions as the poor blacks. The racial face of poverty is fading away. It is asserted that

In the past inequality in South Africa was largely defined along race lines. It has become increasingly defined by inequality within population groups as the gap between rich and poor within each group has increased substantially (HSRC 2004).

The foregoing suggests that whites are also becoming the face of poverty in many parts of South Africa, a hidden phenomenon during the apartheid regime. Poverty among the whites is on the rise in Pretoria as witnessed by the increasing number of homeless and unemployed whites. They have joined a large proportion of urban poor people living in the streets or in informal settlements with limited access to housing, water, electricity and sanitation (Nleya 2008:269). The researcher is more

interested in the white poverty phenomenon in Pretoria with a view to unmasking the role that the church and faith-based organisations can play in providing hope to these people. The present research aims to answer the inevitable question: How can the church in mission restore hope to a seemingly hopeless situation?

Before a discussion of the church's calling in response to such a phenomenon, this article briefly describes and analyses white poverty in Pretoria by examining mission as action in hope. A question of definition from a historical perspective and its biblical foundation is explored in this instance. The article then examines the concept "mission as action in hope" from the context of the white informal settlement in Bethlehem, "Bethlehem Mission Centre". I have chosen Bethlehem because it is one of the many stories that reflect what it means to define mission as action in hope. I became aware of this informal settlement in January 2008 during the annual internship programme of the fifth-year students of the Theological School Potchefstroom (TSP). The conclusion provides broader principles that can be applied by the church in both rural and urban contexts when addressing the issue of poverty in the context it serves.

2. WHITE POVERTY IN PRETORIA

According to a study conducted by Haroon Borhat (2005), "Poverty and well-being in Post-Apartheid South Africa: An overview of Data, Outcomes and Policy", the level of inequality, poverty and unemployment in South Africa is on the increase. In his research, Borhat (2005:13) concluded that five clear trends have emerged in the analysis of welfare shifts in the post-apartheid period, namely an increase in both absolute and relative income poverty, when using the standard measures of poverty; an increase in income inequality, which is notably being catalysed by a rise in the share of within-group inequality; an increase in unemployment rates despite some employment growth; a large and swift fiscal resource shift that has engendered widened access to assets and basic services to poor households (these aggregate trends are fairly consistent across race and gender), and an environment of tepid economic growth rates. The most interesting finding is that this state of poverty and inequality is no longer defined in terms of race as in the colonial and apartheid periods. Fourie (2006) echoed the same sentiments in his research findings when he concluded that as black poverty is currently of a much greater magnitude and severity than white poverty, the latter is on the rise; hence my interest in the subject of white poverty in Pretoria.

The phenomenon of white poverty has existed since the 1890s and is becoming a more common trend across South Africa. It became more apparent and a major political problem during the great depression in the 1930s. The Carnegie Commission report on white poverty recorded a total of 300 000 poor whites (17% of the white community) in 1932 (<http://newhistory.co.za/part-3-chapter-11-the-white-communities-the-crisis-of-poor-w...>). During this period the eradication of white poverty became a social, economic and political objective. Until the 1970s the nationalist government dealt with the problem of white poverty and allowed it to subside from the social, economic and political domains (cf. Fourie 2006; cf. Pick, Rispel & Naidoo 2008).

White poverty in Pretoria came under the spotlight when the president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, visited the informal settlement of Bethlehem in Pretoria West in 2008. For the first time, millions of South Africans were exposed to white poverty in this specific area as this visit was broadcast on public television and radio stations and reported widely in various local newspapers.

Speaking during this visit, Mr Zuma acknowledged that he was not aware that there is a section of the South African population referred to as “poor whites”. His sentiments remind us that blacks have been the face of poverty for a long time in South Africa. Poverty is undoubtedly the biggest challenge for black South Africans, but it is also becoming a reality facing many whites in Pretoria. The Bethlehem informal settlement is an example of this. Since this revelation caught the attention of many South Africans, poor white South Africans without shelter are increasingly begging for food in the streets of Pretoria. Some are even forced into prostitution and drugs for survival. The picture is bleak.

Various factors account for the growing phenomenon of poor whites in Pretoria and other areas in South Africa. According to a report compiled in 2008 by Solidarity Helping Hand, which was directed to president Zuma, affirmative action, unemployment and the poor socio-economic situation that have developed in post-apartheid South Africa can be cited as some of the reasons why white poverty has been on the increase. Many white South Africans in Pretoria became poor as a result of extensive loss of job opportunities in the Western industrial area of Pretoria. According to the report, large-scale lay-offs at companies such as Iscor over the past decade have resulted in thousands of jobs being lost. Some of these people received severance packages, but they used these packages injudiciously and were gradually left with less or nothing. We can therefore conclude with Grigg (1992:159-160) that, broadly speaking, there are three kinds of poor: the unfortunate poor who are subjected to this condition because of

job losses, the oppressed poor or the marginalised poor in our context as a result of affirmative action, and those who are poor due to their own bad choices. White poverty in South Africa is a combination of all three.

White poverty left a number of whites in South Africa homeless. Consequently, they are forced to live in the streets, in shelters and informal settlements such as Bethlehem. There are 39 such shelters in Pretoria alone. The report by Solidarity highlights the fact that these shelters often provide insufficient water, no electricity, sanitary and washing facilities. Some of these facilities have created a number of social problems in the process, namely child molestation; alcohol and drug abuse; unwanted pregnancies, and illiteracy as shelters are far from schools and children thus do not attend schools. The situation is dire and the question is: What can the church do in response to the problem of white poverty in Pretoria? It is my proposal in this article that the church in mission should live out its calling by identifying with those in need and by taking the necessary steps in becoming the hands and feet of Jesus Christ by attending to those needs by means of words and deeds.

3. MISSION AS ACTION IN HOPE

3.1 The concept of mission as action in hope

I have in this article chosen to borrow the concept “*mission as action in hope*” from David Bosch who, in turn, borrowed it from Margull (1962) who used the concept “*hope in action*” to refer to the evangelism dimension of the church’s missionary calling. In “Transforming mission: paradigm shifts in theology of mission”, David Bosch (1991:368-507) mentions “mission as action in hope” in his discussions of the many elements of the emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm, namely

mission as the church with others; *mission as Missio Dei*; mission as mediating salvation; mission as the quest for justice; mission as evangelism; mission as contextualization; mission as liberation; mission as inculturation; mission as common witness; mission as ministry by the whole people of God; mission as witness to people of other living faiths; mission as theology.

Historically David Bosch’s use of the concept “mission as action in hope” is tied to the resurgence of the doctrine on eschatology, but one that seeks to bring something of the future in the present, bringing about a

creative tension between the “now” and the “future”. This is well captured in the following:

The fullness of the reign of God is still coming, but precisely the vision of that coming kingdom translates into a radical concern for the ‘penultimate’ rather than a preoccupation with the ‘ultimate’, into a concern for ‘what is at hand’ rather than for ‘what will be’ (Bosch 1991:509).

According to Smith (1997), the theology of hope emerged as a new approach to theology in the 1960s. Its leading proponent was a German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, who believed that God’s promise to act in the future is more important than the fact that he has acted in the past. He called upon the Christian community not to withdraw from the public life, but to actively participate in the world in order to aid in the coming of the better world. The Christian is to be regarded as a “hoper” who is impatient with evil and death in this present age. This theology has had much influence and impact in the third-world churches. African theologians have called for the theology of hope in the face of poverty, HIV and Aids and other human afflictions.

Theologians such as O. Cullmann, W. Freytag and K. Hartenstein developed the theological foundation of missiology from an eschatological perspective. The coming of Christ and his coming for the second time are regarded, in terms of the history of salvation, as qualifying the coming of the kingdom of God as a present reality and yet to come. The gospel should first be proclaimed to all of humanity in the entire world, cities included; thereafter, the second coming and the dawn of the new Jerusalem will take place (cf. Matthew 24:14 and Mark 13:10). Through the mission of the church something of the future coming of the kingdom of God is realised.

Oscar Cullmann (1961:42) contributed a great deal in the twentieth-century debate regarding the relationship between mission and eschatology. In his “Eschatology and Missions in the New Testament”, Cullmann succeeded in outlining that the missionary work of the Church is an eschatological foretaste of the kingdom of God, and the Biblical hope of the “end”. In the light of the final consummation of the kingdom of God, the church should proclaim the good news to the world.

Theology of hope is therefore understood in this article as a theology that seeks to affirm life of God’s people in the midst of suffering and death based on the resurrection power of Jesus, who not only identified with God’s people in their shame and rejection but also accompanied them in their journey of life in pain and suffering until he hanged shamefully for

them on the cross, was buried and resurrected, thereby affirming life for those who identify themselves with him.

3.2 The Biblical basis of the theology of hope

This research will refer to selected passages, which are relevant with regard to the issue of hope. First, theology of hope is based on the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. He became our Immanuel (God with us) when he humbled and identified himself with the fallen humanity in their shame and rejection. His ministry was characterised by mercy and compassion, such that he also accompanied them in their journey of pain and suffering until he paid for their debts by hanging shamefully on the cross (Philippians 2:5-11).

Secondly, theology of hope is grounded in the resurrection power of Jesus Christ. The Christian faith acknowledges that God approved the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross by resurrecting him from the dead, thereby making him the first born of those who will rise from the dead. Christians now live in anticipation of a better future.

Thirdly, theology of hope has implications for the present. It gives the church strength to adhere to faith in the midst of trouble. The militant church continues to strive in the midst of all tribulation hoping for the better future, a future where it will become victorious when the earth and heavens and all of the redeemed humanity are restored (Revelation 21). An exegetical reading of Revelation 21 holds the following pointers with regard to the inauguration of the new Jerusalem, the holy city of God: it will be a marvel; it will be a future home for God's people from among nations; it will be a perfect home with perfect beauty; it will last forever; it will be filled with God's presence and glory, and it will be the inheritance of God's people. It can be concluded that the militant church (*ecclesiae militates*) will become a triumphant church tomorrow.

Fourthly, theology of hope does not encourage the spirit of withdrawal from the world and its problems. On the contrary, it encourages Christians to participate in a meaningful way in the fight against evil and suffering in this world. This encourages the church, out of compassion and mercy, to identify and accompany those in pain in their journey in life. In his model of healing, James outlines the theology of hope as a kind of theology needed most in this world with severe pain and suffering (James 4:13-18). This calls us to reflect on the story of an informal settlement in Pretoria called Bethlehem and realise how the church in mission lives out her hope as she attends to the poverty of white South Africans.

4. MISSION AS ACTION IN HOPE: A CASE STUDY

4.1 Research methodology

A descriptive study was undertaken within the qualitative paradigm to describe the living conditions at the Bethlehem Mission Centre in Pretoria (cf. Kothari 1985). Non-participant direct observation, and personal interviews held between January 2008 and August 2011 were used. Unstructured interviews and open-ended questions were used for the interviews conducted with the owner of the Centre, Mr Arnold Crause, and members of the community. The unstructured interview was preferred for this research because it allows the researcher space to interact with the respondents without trying to impose his/her viewpoints on the participant. "Its main advantage is that it provides in-depth data on the topic being investigated" and it allows "for the participant to be interviewed on a number of separate occasions" (Struwig & Stead 2001:99).

To avoid unethical behaviour on my part as a researcher (cf. Struwig & Stead 2001:67), the informants were made aware of the nature of this research and that it will be published in a journal. Permission was sought to use the names where necessary. Mr Arnold Crause gave me the permission to mention his name and the physical address of his centre in this article. He was very generous in allowing me space to conduct interviews with individuals and families in their Wendy houses. This process allowed me to gain inside information with regard to the reality of white poverty in the context of Pretoria. This calls for some reflection as discussed below.

It should be noted that a study of this nature has limitations because of the unavailability of recent data, especially as far as statistics is concerned. This is well-captured in the following words:

Thus far, we have been hamstrung, within this debate, by the lack of recent data. In particular, the debates around shifts in household poverty and inequality in South Africa, have relied on the income and expenditure surveys of 1995 and 2000 – together with a range of unofficial or less than satisfactory datasets (Bhorat & Van der Westhuizen: 1).

4.2 Research participants

4.2.1 Location

Bethlehem Mission Centre is an informal settlement located on plot 46, Andeon farming plots, opposite Zandfontein graveyard in Pretoria West.

The Centre has more than eight Wendy houses with the capacity to host over 60 residents at a time.

4.2.2 Historical background

Bethlehem Mission Centre is the ministry of Arnold Crause and his wife. They started this ministry in 2000 when Arnold saw an old pensioner, Tannie Kotie, who was living and begging for money with her son in the streets of Pretoria. They were begging for money because they had to raise R60 to pay the owner of the house where they were lodging. According to Arnold, he could not find peace in his heart until he decided to house her. He then decided to buy a caravan at the cost of R3 500 to house Tannie Kotie and her family. Then Arnold exclaimed that the Lord provided them with the land and material resources to buy the plot and erect Wendy houses to house destitute white people in Pretoria.

According to Arnold, Bethlehem Mission Centre is merely a step out of faith and in faith. He decided to quit his job in April 2008 in order to serve full-time in this ministry. He relied on God to provide for his needs and those of his family when he committed himself to participate in building the Kingdom of God in this way. With this ministry, Arnold and his wife have become a symbol of hope among the poor whites in Pretoria. All the informants expressed their gratitude to the Lord that he had given them such a man and his family to take care of their needs.

4.2.3 Mission statement

The mission statement of Bethlehem Mission Centre is as follows:

Bethlehem Mission Centre provides accommodation, food and clothing for the destitute in a Christ-centred environment where individuals participate in agricultural projects which cultivate food for the mission Centre, soup kitchens and other destitute individuals.

4.2.4 Vision statement

Bethlehem Mission Centre seeks to:

- Provide accommodation for the destitute;
- Empower the destitute through work programmes;
- Be self-sustaining through agricultural projects;
- Provide food parcels for those in need through projects;

- Provide strictly overnight shelter for chronic indigents, particularly with addictive tendencies;
- Establish local churches in the key distribution areas;
- Provide medical service via an on-site weekly clinic visit.

4.3 Research findings

A description of the operation and experiences of people at the Mission Centre was compiled from observations and interviews.

4.3.1 Modus operandi

Residents at the Mission Centre are poor whites who can no longer afford their own housing for various reasons: pensioners who cannot afford to pay high monthly rates; destitute individuals and families of those who have lost their jobs because of retrenchments and affirmative action, and individuals who are working, but earning less money. Pensioners are expected to contribute R200 each, whereas those who are working as cheap labourers contribute R400 towards the community fund which is managed by the Crause family. Their contribution is far less than the total amount of electricity and food that they use in this centre. They receive breakfast in the morning, lunch in the afternoon and supper in the evening. These meals are prepared in the communal kitchen and members of this community take turns to prepare them. Residents eat together, but those who choose to go and eat their meals in their Wendy houses are allowed to do so. I have witnessed this during one of my visits to the Centre and was very encouraged to observe the kind of community love that residents share.

The accommodation and services rendered to the residents by Arnold and his family account for more than charity work; residents are required to work half-day on various agricultural projects hosted at the Mission Centre. Each individual is paid a nominal wage for his/her work from sponsored resources. The outputs of these projects, *inter alia* vegetables, chickens and bread, are utilised for both the Mission Centre and distribution to the needy elsewhere in Pretoria. Distribution points include regular soup kitchens, street services and temporary tents placed in key locations of need, namely Danville and Elandspoort. Bethlehem residents are also involved in the distribution process. Some of the residents are empowered to a stage where they are able to return and participate in the mainstream economy of our country. As and when they find decent jobs and proper housing, residents at the Centre are allowed to move out and start a new life.

4.3.2 Faith-based focus

The primary ethos at Bethlehem is faith-based and Christ-centred. The distribution points focus on both spiritual nurturing as well as providing for physical needs. The Centre has a chapel where residents meet every Wednesday at 18h30, and every Sunday at 09h00 and 17h00 for worship and prayer services. Arnold is a committed Christian who leads some of these services, but there is a pastor who has dedicated his ministry in serving Bethlehem informal settlement and the neighbouring areas. Counselling and prayer ministries are also offered to residents. In addition to these services, regular camps are held for various sectors of the residents where ministry, development of individuals and healing take place.

This is exactly how churches in mission should respond to the needs of city-dwellers in their context. Ellison (1997:94) provides at least three reasons why churches (evangelicals, in particular) should address the felt needs of city-dwellers in this way: it provides a point of missionary outreach or witnessing connection with those who are spiritually lost; it adds credibility to our communication of the gospel, and it is commanded by God and demonstrated by Christ. The story of Bethlehem Mission Centre is one case that can be used to illustrate this truth. Some community members confess that their stay in Bethlehem has helped them to have a close relationship with God. Some of them were drowning in alcoholism and drugs, but they experienced the love and mercy of God through their participation in the prayer ministry of Bethlehem.

4.3.3 Funding

According to Arnold, Bethlehem Mission Centre relies on God for providence. He left his job in April 2008 to take care of the Centre and minister to the poor whites in Pretoria with the hope that the Lord is going to provide for their material needs. This ministry depends on the generosity of individuals and corporates who contribute to both the infrastructure, running costs and allowances at Bethlehem. Arnold shared many stories with me on how they have experienced God's hand in this regard.

5. CONCLUSION

The story of the informal settlement of Bethlehem in Pretoria is a story of "mission as action in hope", as David Bosch preferred to call it, and it should be treated as such. A few preliminary conclusions can be drawn:

- Urban poverty in South Africa is on the rise.

- Poverty in the context of South African cities is not only limited to blacks, as they used to be the face of poverty in the past, but white poverty is on the rise and Bethlehem informal settlement is but one example of this reality.
- Bethlehem informal settlement is not a museum of white poverty, but a living testimony of how best the church in mission can live out her hope, “mission as action in hope,” as she reaches out and touches the needs of the people she serves where and when it hurts most.
- The church in mission cannot therefore withdraw herself from this reality; she must work with individuals and faith-based organizations to attend to the question of urban poverty without marginalising those affected.
- The church’s efforts should be more than just charitable activity; it should be about empowering the people whom she seeks to serve. This will entail elements of both spiritual and physical transformation of the people she serves, as we have noted with the story of Bethlehem Mission Centre.
- Mission as hope in action opens up the old debate of the dichotomy between mission as evangelism and mission as social involvement, but at the same time it brings us closer to such a debate. The church should find a balance in her proclamation of the gospel through words and deeds.

In describing the experience of people involved in Bethlehem Mission Centre a story unfolds of how hope may be restored to a seemingly hopeless situation. Further study is needed regarding the effect of Centres such as Bethlehem Mission Centre on the community. The church living out “mission as action in hope” can address the issue of poverty in the context it serves and may learn valuable lessons from the story of Bethlehem Mission Centre.

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