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# BENEATH THE CHURCH<sup>1</sup> EPITAPH “TO THE GLORY OF GOD” SCREAM THE VOICES OF THE UNEMPLOYED

## ABSTRACT

The unemployment crisis is a growing threat in the socio-economic fabric of South African society. Close to fifteen million people live on social grants, while seven million are registered as unemployed. The number is growing exponentially. High-school leavers and university graduates have no assurance of employment at the end of their academic careers. The church, in general, is bombarded by demands of these masses for survival. The number of beggars at the urban church doors increases daily. In the meantime, the church is, in a broader context, silent or passive towards the voices of the unemployed. There is not only deafening silence, but also no plans, strategies, or initiatives to launch projects that can assist in minimising unemployment in society. However, acknowledgement is attested to many churches undertaking some programmes to address this threat. The unemployed feel marginalised. They are robbed of their dignity through short-term interventions instead of proactive initiatives that can make them employable

- 1 In this instance, the word “church” is used in two senses. First, in a general sense, to refer to a particular body of faithful people, and the whole body of the faithful. Secondly, as a reference to “assembly, congregation, council”, or “convocation” in a specific geographical setting. The epitaph is always visible at the entrance to the building where the second sense of the word applies.

and streamline them into job accessibility. Handouts and charitable activities that offer no long-term solutions enhance the dependency syndrome. This article promotes a proactive approach to the threat of the unemployed as a way of hearing their voices in the midst of poverty. Unemployment affects the economy of the church in a more tangible manner, and should thus be addressed.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that the latest South African job statistics continue to reflect a shockingly high unemployment rate that will take some efforts to reverse. The results of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) for the fourth quarter of 2018, released by Statistics South Africa (2019), reveal that the unemployment rate decreased by 0,4% to 27,1%. The South African working-age population increased by 149 000 or 0,4% in the fourth quarter of 2018 compared to the third quarter of 2018. The number of employed persons increased by 149 000 to 16.5 million and the number of unemployed persons decreased by 70 000 to 6.1 million in the fourth quarter of 2018. The absorption rate increased to 43.3% in the same period. Many political, business, and religious platforms regularly express concerns about the high levels of unemployment and the resultant social upheavals accompanying this. A large section of the population suffers from chronic joblessness and the escalating figures of youth unemployment. The latest Trading Economics Portal alludes to the fact that the youth unemployment rate in South Africa increased to 54.70% in the fourth quarter of 2018 from 52.80% in the third quarter of 2018. The youth unemployment rate in South Africa averaged 52.15% from 2013 to 2018, reaching an all-time high of 55.90% in the second quarter of 2017 and a record low of 48.80% in the fourth quarter of 2014. Many young people struggle to find their first job, while the middle-aged face the problem of long-term unemployment after forfeiting their jobs. They lose their jobs at a prime age through retrenchment, business and/or industrial redundancy, or firing for various reasons such as transgressing moral codes, inefficiency, ethical misconduct, and so on.

There are obstacles to job creation in South Africa. Work or employment ethics form the bulwark of the unemployment threat. The country's labour market is hobbled by inefficient hiring and firing practices, the wide gap of cooperation between employees and employers, including a poor relationship between living wage and productivity. These practices contravene the current labour laws of the country. Employers and potential employers are inevitably left with no option but replacement of labour with capital that discourages them from hiring new workers. In a sense, unemployment is almost exclusively the result of economic victimisation. Manyaka-Boshielo (2017:1) is prophetically correct in stating that

[i]f this phenomenon continues, there will be no future for our communities and the country at large. So something has to be done quickly and wisely. The people will continue relying on grants from the government.

## 2. DEFINITION AND CONSEQUENCES OF UNEMPLOYMENT

There is no universally accepted definition of unemployment (Green 1985:8). Unemployment in South Africa should be considered along with factors such as mobility barriers, marginalisation, and the characteristics of labour market facets. The unemployed person's experience may be affected by social and interpersonal contextual factors such as stigmatisation, ignorance of authorities, and society's unwillingness to understand unemployment and its effects (Du Toit *et al.* 2018:1). Since South Africa is a wage-economy country, an unemployed person is a person without a wage-job, and is looking for one, therefore currently available for employment (Bromberger 1992:2). Statistics South Africa defines unemployment as

when someone aged between 15 and 64 is without work in the week preceding the interview, but who looks for work and is available to take up employment or open a business (Statistics South Africa 2013:n.p.).

Persons are unemployed when they want employment, but cannot find jobs:

Globally, a country's unemployment is defined as a number of jobless people as a percentage of the total labour force (economically active people). Persons are unemployed if they are in an economically active group, would like to be working but are unable to find work (Mtembu & Govender 2015:2).

To be unemployed is to be in a state of worklessness, exclusion and non-involvement, and defined as a non-member of the working society or class. There is a stigma attached to the unemployed. Bergh (1992:62) correctly highlights that unemployment breeds the feeling or the sense of bereavement

in which the individuals and their families experience certain feelings and certain accompanying behaviour that may manifest in order to adjust to the non-work situation.

It can be correctly pointed out that unemployment means absolute poverty, hunger, illiteracy, poor health and a short life expectancy (Kopiec 2019:4). Generally speaking, in agreement with Bergh (1992:62),

[u]nemployed people are those who want to work in an employer-employee relationship for financial reward, but who are denied jobs or are unable to secure work.

To summarise Bergh (1992:64-67), employment gives all persons a meaning of life. Employment as a religious, moral, and ethical obligation gives an employee a sense of eschatological meaning of vocation. Vellem (2014:2) alludes to the fact that

work in African ethics should be understood as part of the sacramental whole of life, inseparable from all spheres of life and inseparable from God and ancestors too.

It is not merely a source or activity of and for income; it contributes towards a social exchange. It is an expression of self-identity or self-esteem. It assists an employee in structuring time and provides a sense of creativity and mastery. Employment gives a sense of purpose and provides an adequate space for learning life skills such as relationships, problem-solving, decision-making, discipline, and leadership. Nkasa-Obrempong (2013:198) rightly points out that

[w]ork includes jobs or labor for which we are paid. It also involves all we do to meet our physical and social needs. Work serves our basic self-interests and interests of others as well as society. We work in order that we can provide for our personal needs, ... we are able to help make life better for others and ourselves.

Indeed, as Bergh (1992:61) deliberates:

Work is a fundamental ingredient of the individual's identity, self-esteem and general wellbeing; work is central to family development and it determines the order and quality of life in societies at large.

Unemployment causes some serious socio-economic disruptions and societal instabilities. It is

one of the major socio-economic problems in South Africa, unemployment implies hunger, misery and loss of self-esteem for those who are jobless (Roux 2008:51).

Roux continues to point out that unemployment leads to anger and resentment towards legal policies that lead to people's inability to find a meaningful job. Service delivery strikes, civil uprisings, industrial actions, community unrest and public violence are clear manifestations of the frustration of a jobless South African society living in poverty with no sense of hope. It is an uncontested fact highlighted by Perkins (1993:96-97):

It comes with no surprise that the nation's poorest are also the nation's unemployed. Someone who is poor for the first time probably arrived at that status through unemployment.

This then gives a strong message to ecclesial communities, government and other socio-economic partners to give this issue a priority attention. Barker (2007:172-173) describes unemployment as

probably the most severe problem in South Africa and is conceivably the root cause of many other problems such as crime and violence.

The church, politics, and business are vocally in unison that South Africa has a profound culture of violence, and they agree with Kgatla (2016:59) that

[e]nabling factors of the violent culture are poverty, unemployment, and acute socio-economic inequalities that have a high propensity of exclusion and marginalisation.

Physically, unemployment contributes extensively to poor health and immunity. Sobrino (1984:243-244) is correct in stating that unemployment causes slow deaths, complete inequality of opportunity and oppression with physical ill-health. This sentiment is also highlighted by De Vries (1998:29):

Unemployment [d]emoralizes and marginalizes the afflicted, and it may severely impair their health, their life expectancy, and even the health of their families; their poor health weakens their chances of finding new employment.

This may lead to hopelessness and a poor quality of life. Unemployment has a higher potential of destroying the basic structure of society, namely the family. In South Africa, families are disrupted due to lack of employment especially for the breadwinner. In this patriarchal society, the jobless husband or the father will always feel emasculated, and his male ego seared, due to his inability to provide for the family. For our society, employment leads to the ability to provide for one's own and/or one's family's basic needs (Van der Westhuizen & Swart 2015:736).

### 3. THE VOICES OF THE UNEMPLOYED

The unheard voices of the unemployed are on the doorsteps of the church, beneath the epitaph engraved at the church entrance. This epitaph reads: TO THE GLORY OF GOD. It speaks loud and clear as a memorial symbol that the church building or facility is built to the glory of God. Currently, the unemployed are inside and on the steps of the same facility, begging

for the return of their dignity: pleading for employment. They are part of Psalm 29:9b: *In his temple everyone shouts, "Glory!"* Their voices are loud and clear, but who is listening? Their purpose of life has been stolen by economic injustice that cannot offer them a job. "Humanity has the right to work because their creator created them for that purpose" (Nkasah-Obrempong 2013:198). They are creaturely not satisfied. Volf (1989:447) points out that work "is an instrumental activity serving the satisfaction of creaturely needs". Work is divinely given for the fulfillment of human beings. "People thrive on purposeful activity, and work is a constitutive part of human life in the world" (Wells et al. 2017:284).

Globalisation is a reality to be reckoned with, as it brings along numerous population hybridity such as immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, capital migration, urban centers decays, cultural contours, and so on. Irvin (2009:181) of the New York Theological Seminary warns that

[t]he actual world that we are living in, however, is one of transnational migrations, hyphenated and hybrid identities, cultural conjunctions and disjunctions, and global theological networks or flows.

These population movements end up on the doorsteps of the church. They are the unemployed voices that scream daily for the church to pay attention. Human beings perceive the church environment as sufficiently passionate to attune and respond to their cries.

There is no population settlement pattern with no echoes of the unemployed voices. Their voices echo from the balconies of our city centers' skyscrapers, suburban areas, townships, villages and informal settlements. They are the *vox populi* of the citizens by birth or naturalisation, immigrants and asylum seekers, economic and political refugees, university graduates and matriculants, professionals and non-professionals, all races, and all genders, ages, and generations. They are all seeking to regain or restore their dignity. They knock at the door of the church, and find it ill-equipped to hear their cries.

South Africa is faced with the problem of refugees and immigrants who rummage for survival by all possible means. As in Europe or elsewhere, these unemployed people are at the receiving end of socio-economic justice. Adogame (2013:53) enlightens us that

[t]he persistent high rate of unemployment has the implications for immigrants and foreigners, particularly the undocumented, ghost migrant population. Where job vacancies are available, discretionary tactics and preferences are employed in their allocation, to the detriment of even legal migrants.

The national laws on employment (such as Black Empowerment, Affirmative Action, and so on), racism, xenophobia, and homophobia, all contribute towards the employment marginalisation of immigrants and foreign nationals. This is exacerbated by employment equity that is muddled with convergence of legal terminology, and divergence of cultural understanding (Alidadi *et al.* 2012:256). The church community is bound and restricted by these laws, as far as providing employment, especially for foreign nationals (refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, and so on). They can exercise their freedom to provide basic services and skills to the unemployed, but in the vast majority of cases, they cannot employ or refer them to potential employers, due to these phenomena in the societal landscape. It is true that

[t]he vulnerability of African immigrants therefore becomes more complex as they are on the receiving end of two enigmas ... they are most vulnerable to unemployment while at the same time the locus of public vendetta and animosity. In a sense, it could be argued that immigrants are usually the hardest hit of unemployment (Adogame 2013:55).

The unheard voices of the unemployed are not only hitting foreign nationals. The pressure is also felt by the nationals. The majority of the unemployed are South Africans, of whom the majority are young adults who are also part of the church or have some form of religious affiliation. Ismail (2017:2) points out the rationale for this:

South African young adults in search of employment face challenges such as an economic downturn, poverty, a lack of experience and a skills profile that tends to be widely divergent from what is required by employers.

These voices come from all racial groups and generations. The South African youth, who obtained their basic and higher education qualifications, are the hardest hit.

South Africa has been described as having a high level of poverty and this is unacceptable; youth unemployment in particular is excessive (Manyaka-Bosielo 2017:1).

For the past ten years or so, some protests have continued unabated in South Africa. There has been an escalation in industrial protests where angry residents have taken to the streets over a range of issues, including wage discrepancies, appalling working conditions, labour brokers, retrenchments and some industrial redundancies. Thousands went into the streets, trying to voice their opinions regarding joblessness, nepotism,

and unfair dismissals. For many, their voices were and still are not heard. Nkasah-Obrempong (2013:197) highlights the reason for these uprisings in a workplace: When people find employment, they often work in such deplorable conditions that rob them of their human dignity.

#### 4. THE CHURCH'S MISSIONAL TASK TO THE UNEMPLOYED

The church is, in a broader context, silent or passive towards the voices of the unemployed. There is not only deafening silence, but also no plans, strategies, or initiatives to launch projects that can help minimise unemployment in society. The unemployed are marginalised. They are robbed of their dignity through short-term interventions instead of proactive initiatives that can make them employable and streamlined into job accessibility. Handouts and charitable activities that offer no long-term solutions enhance the dependency syndrome.

Religious people tend to seek the same confessional communities in order to gain support – either spiritual, emotional, or even economical. A foreigner who happens to be a Presbyterian will always seek association with other Presbyterians in the host or foreign country. In many instances, the endeavours go beyond denominational affiliation, but confessional premise that one is a Christian regardless of being Catholic or Protestant. Encountering the established Christian community gives hope to meet one at his/her point of need, especially shelter, food or employment. The fundamental fact remains:

The role and place of the African-led churches as spiritual vacuum fillers, as spaces for socialization, and as engines for social, religious (spiritual) and capital formation deserves special treatment ... these churches help to cushion pains and strains of unemployment by serving both as employers and as channels of information to job opportunities at both formal and informal economic sub-sectors of the society (Adogame 2013:57).

In reflecting and appropriating the epitaph at the entrance of church facilities, the church is called upon to listen to the voices of the unemployed sitting at their entrances pleading for a morsel of bread. Gone are the days of some twentieth-century theologians and philosophers who took comfort in the fallacy of saying: “There’s nothing to worry about” (Henry 1986:41). The Somali proverb helps us understand: “You will not believe until you see. You must bring your eyes and look on the problem and then you will go away and believe.” The marginalised voices of the unemployed are not heard. Like the poor, the unemployed are bewildered men and women.

Very real, very intimidated, frightened and, in many instances, very hungry. They line up our streets and city centers. Multitudes. Masses. Endless lines of what appears to be carelessly clothed skeletons (Beals 1985:21), queuing to get a cup of soup and a slice of bread – often metres if not kilometres from the church facilities dedicated TO THE GLORY OF GOD. These voices are loud enough and change even the economic stability of the very church that is silent or unresponsive to them. It should become the goal of the church to promote poverty alleviation by

seeking to restore poor people to what God created them to be. One result is that people will be able to glorify God through work and to support their families through that work (Fikkert & Mask 2015:39).

The following three proposals are some of the numerous ways in which the church can become missionally involved in hearing the voices of the unemployed.

#### 4.1 The church as social, cultural and spiritual capital

Since Africans are gregarious by nature (Kato 1975:15), it is imperative to understand the church, or religion for that matter, as an important source of social, cultural, and spiritual capital among the economically marginalised and the unemployed. This necessitates some open discourse on this social, cultural, and spiritual capital. The goal is to establish and strengthen relationships, norms and values as a way of learning a new state of social inclusion. This realisation initiates networks that mediate access to the host cultural context, opportunities, resources and information. The church should become accessible and offer itself as a platform for conducive and transparent discourse for norming and forming where trust can be cushioned. The days of silence in the face of injustice are over. Stearns (2010:193) echoes Martin Luther King Jnr's words of the church that is silent behind the anesthetising security of stained-glass windows: "A Church that has lost its voice for justice is a Church that has lost its relevance in the world." The church as a public arena should promote and embrace an interactive, constructive mode of theological discourse regarding unemployment and the unemployed. This discourse must be inclusive, interactive, participatory, and hermeneutically competent (Lategan 2015:156-157). This contributes immensely to a healthy self-esteem, which enhances people's social adaptation in the midst of socio-economic anomalies. Ismail (2017:3) rightly states:

Positive self-esteem indicates that a person fits in well with the social world, is competent and able to meet the challenges of the

world, is ready to participate in life within this social context and is able to balance social demands and personal desires.

Once the unemployed feel socially, culturally and religiously accepted, openness to empowerment for employment possibility becomes possible. When this is properly undertaken, volunteerism will follow. The employment seekers start to appreciate the value of volunteerism, which contributes towards high possibility of employability. Active people were always found active. From the church platform, beliefs, values, and norms are modelled, and these motivate the unemployed to volunteer in community affairs to provide social services such as health care, soup kitchens, education and helping the poor. By their voluntary works necessitated or offered by the church, they make their unheard voices heard.

## 4.2 Initiating entrepreneurship

Amid the diverse definitions of entrepreneurship, I associate myself with Barc and Jansen's (2011:388) definition of entrepreneurship as the process of identifying, evaluating and exploiting opportunities aiming at social value creation by means of commercial, market-based activities and of the use of a wide range of resources. It is a process of transforming both the economic environment and the transformation of social conditions. It is giving people an opportunity and the freedom to release their potential and creativity with the aim of changing their social regime.

It is a process of identifying a stable inherently unjust equilibrium that causes exclusion and marginalisation. This marginalisation is disempowering for the people who live in this kind of context. A social entrepreneurship process is a way of identifying opportunity in an unjust equilibrium and manages to come up with social value creation strategies that can help people to be aware of their autonomy and freedom to make change (Manyaka-Boshielo 2017:2).

Entrepreneurship for and from the church is another way of alleviating poverty caused by unemployment, without hurting the victims. The entrepreneurial goal is to restore the dignity and integrity of the unemployed. The unemployed are made to understand that they carry the *imago Dei*; and as a result, are endowed "with the gifts, abilities, and capacity to make decisions and to effect change in the world around them" (Corbett & Fikkert 2009:77). Through the church's entrepreneurial endeavours, the unemployed people are empowered to steward their lives, communities, resources, and relationships in order to regain the meaning and the calling of their lives. Of course, there has been some evolutionary processes of the manner whereby the church has been entrepreneurially

involved. Perkins (1993:119) explains that, in the 1960s, the community motto for development was: “Give people a fish, and they’ll eat for a day.” In the 1970s, it was “Teach people to fish, and they’ll eat for the lifetime.” In the 1990s, the focus is on: “Who owns the pond?”.

As stipulated by Perkins (1995:140), it is not a secret that the challenge for Christian community-based economic development is to enable to start local enterprises that meet local needs and employ indigenous and foreign nationals. Entrepreneurship is empowering people within their context – the integral mission principle whereby the local church is to engage

[i]n proclaiming and demonstrating among people who are poor the good news of the kingdom of God in a contextually appropriate way (Fikkert & Mask 2015:33).

### 4.3 Education on theology of development

The church is invited to partner with institutions of learning to guide in the content of theological education that will assist in reducing unemployment. There is no doubt that “lack of education, skill development, and opportunity are all qualities of poverty and are direct factors leading to unemployment” (Perkins 1993:97).

No educational programme can succeed to address the poor unemployed people when consideration is not given to the context of that community. Speckman (2007:53) rightly states that “what is not relevant to the community cannot be relevant to the academia either.” Education becomes dubious when it is not applicable to real-life situations (Bruwer 1994:27). Without the collective and organising power of churches, the ability of Christians to listen and respond to the unheard voices of the unemployed is greatly compromised. Stearns (2010:179) alludes to this cooperation when he said: “God established the institution of the Church as a key strategy for building His kingdom and for leading the social revolution required by the gospel.”

Many institutions had embraced theology of development, which cannot be accelerated without what Speckman (2007:53-55) calls *the pro bono pro publica*. This entails the possibility of interface of the academia and the community without compromising academic sharpness. Speckman (2007:53-54) continues to elaborate:

The *pro bono pro publica* principle means that the work must be of value to the public while at the same time, its academic *bona fides* are not to be doubted.

Theology of development is an engaged theology. It is a sound theology that constructively engages with real-life challenges (Magezi & Magezi 2018:2). Beukes and Plaatjies van Huffel (2016:226) expound on the impressive definition instigated by the Belhar Confession:

A theology of development focuses on holistic people-centred development from a practical theological perspective. Any involvement of churches and Christians in development in this regard can be considered as an approach which is theologically motivated and therefore implies a theology of development

Listening and responding to the voices of the unemployed is faith in action. De Gruchy (2003:21) is correct that “It would seem that faith, without the works of development, is not only dead, but it deserves to die.” Theology of development is not only a theology of involvement, but a theology of relationality. It is a theology that initiates the process by which people are able to realise right relationships with God, one another and the earth constituting towards life in all its fullness. The church gets involved by relating to itself, the Trinitarian God, and the people to be served. Klaasen’s (2013) online version reflects this fact:

The church becomes an important community for the development of persons. Through its mission, the sacraments, ecclesiastical ministries, organisations, worship, social responsibilities and teachings, the church is an agent of development. The church is actively involved in the holistic development of its worshipping community.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The country is experiencing an influx of foreigners for different socio-economic or sociopolitical reasons, resulting in unemployment for its citizens and increasing the number of unemployed people in the country. These unemployed masses, nationals or foreigners, are attracted to the church epitaph that screams silently: TO THE GLORY OF GOD. But the church turns a deaf ear to their voices. It is asked to be proactive in alleviating the poverty caused by unemployment. The church must unreservedly believe that “all people have the right to be treated with utmost dignity and given equal opportunities in life” (Tofa 2015:181). It must play a major role in championing the rights and equal treatment of the marginalised masses such as the unemployed. The holistic witness of incarnational living shows that the church’s mission to the whole person has proved to be attractive and compelling. Many will respond when they see it lived out in their midst (Delgado 1997:76):

In his temple everyone shouts, "Glory!"

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