

Future(s) for the church on the corner: A proposed praxis of spatial justice for South African congregations

**Author:**Caroline J. Powell¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Caroline Powell,
caroline.ot@gmail.com

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South Africa, is a racially, economically and spatially divided nation, a legacy of our colonial and apartheid histories. Thirty years into democracy, discourse across all spheres of society around land, spatial and housing justice continues to provoke questions about the political and societal will for making access to land ownership and space for dignified, humane living an accessible reality for all who live in South Africa. All denominations are not and should not be separated from this discourse as they are an integral part of the colonial and apartheid land, spatial history and current reality of contestation. A study focusing on suburban churches in previous whites-only southern suburbs of the City of Cape Town was conducted in the few months before the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdowns of 2020. An emancipatory approach explored the praxis of these churches in relationship to South Africa's ongoing concern with land reform within the context of urban land (in)justice and put this into conversation with the questions of church-owned land and property usage. This article revisits the key findings of the study incorporating two key elements of a praxis-based approach: theological reflection and action towards transformation. The article connects the findings to the authors' autoethnographic reflections and research on the unfolding praxis of (sub)urban churches during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. To conclude, South African churches are invited into an ongoing emancipatory approach to address the issues of urban land injustice, and embrace a praxis of spatial justice, which includes concrete steps towards creating faith-based 'Just Housing'.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article presents a conversation on church and spatial histories, and current realities alongside emerging theologies that 'foster inclusive and just social imaginaries' and 'make room for utopic possibilities to play out'.

Keywords: churches; land; spatial (in)justice; praxis; land; jubilee; housing.

Introduction

Land reform is central to the recovery process of post-colonial nations. This is the case in South Africa, a country with this question being central to our ongoing struggle for justice and equality. Government and civil society must reckon with the many possible approaches to addressing the land theft of the colonial project and the deliberate design of apartheid spatial planning. Wholesale cross-generational land redress might be quantifiably impossible to achieve or at risk of remaining in rhetoric void of concrete proposals. However, land reform at the least must pursue the creation of safe, dignified, well-serviced homes and neighbourhoods in which to live for all who live in the country. Soja (2010:2) defines this as the pursuit of spatial justice, 'an intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice' that requires the 'fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and the opportunities to use them'. In countries where colonial powers operated alongside Christian mission endeavours, as in South Africa, many of today's churches own and occupy land, space and property as direct or closely linked acquisitions via the unjust laws and practices of colonialism and apartheid.

A research study conducted between 2019 and 2021 was undertaken by the author of this article as a contribution to a wider endeavour to nurture a praxis of spatial justice with churches in Cape Town, South Africa. This article has three focus areas: (1) revisiting the background to the study, (2) engaging with the key findings of the study, subsequent research and emerging praxis and (3) proposals for a future praxis of spatial justice for South African churches.

Note: Special Collection: Just housing. The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Just housing: Transdisciplinary perspectives from theology and the built environment,' under the expert guidance of guest editors Stephan F. de Beer & Thomas Wabel.

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Church, land and spatial justice in South Africa

Land justice movements in South Africa cry 'Land for people, not for profit!' (Reclaim the City n.d.) and 'Umhlaba – Izindlue – neSithunzi (Land – Housing – Dignity)'¹, while South African churches are still reckoning with the challenges of making a practical contribution to land restitution as an acknowledgement of their complicity in land injustice.

Powell (2021:7, cf. Bolnick & Van Rensburg 2005; Ntsebeza 2005; SACBC 2012; Tsele & Butler 1998:42; ed. Gillan 1998; Philpott and Zondi 1999:23) asserts that ecumenical and denominational church expressions have asked these questions for decades and chronicles the following few examples:

The Rustenberg Declaration, written from a gathering of delegates from 85 South African churches in 1990 stated: 'For many years, greed has led to the taking of land from the poor and weak. But church and state must address the issue of restoring land to dispossessed people'. The consultation on the effective use of Church Land in 1997, resulted in a policy framework including theological reflection and practical outlines for the way forward, as well as a call for a nationwide audit of church-owned land. The Church Land Programme released a series of articles in the *Bulletin for Contextual theology: The Land Issue*, that included a report of a preliminary church land audit. According to the top six land-owning churches showed a marked difference between church denominations (Lutheran, Moravian and Roman Catholic) that own the most hectares of land (i.e. mostly rural), and those (NGK, Anglican, Methodist) that own the most properties (i.e. small urban plots). As a result, church-led land restitution endeavors focused on rural areas, including documented case studies from the Roman Catholic and Moravian churches.

Re-engaging the churches

In light of the rapid urbanisation of our country and continent and shifting demographics of church attendance and property use, research that focused on the question of church land justice towards how churches grapple with the questions of spatial justice was identified as a research gap (Powell 2021:10). A focus on suburban churches in socio-economically well-located parts of Cape Town was chosen to contribute to the relatively under-researched category of suburban churches. Research from Bowers Du Toit and Nkomo (2014) focuses on perceptions of poverty, injustice and inequality in Cape Town suburban churches. Eliastam (2016) reflects as a former pastor of a Cape Town suburban church on the fears and prejudices that hold congregations back from a liberative praxis of spatial justice. Swanepoel (2016) tells the story of a suburban church in Johannesburg that repurposed the use of their under-utilised property showing hospitality that challenged the status quo of the exclusive suburb. These studies helped to form the research question: What does a spatial justice praxis look like in churches located in former whites-only suburbs of Cape Town? (Powell 2021:5). Sub-

1. See the website of *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (The Residents of the Shacks) at <https://abahlali.org/>.

questions sought the presence of (1) awareness of issues of spatial injustice in their historical and current context, (2) developing theologies of spatial justice and (3) factors that influence a praxis of spatial (in)justice.

An emancipatory method to explore a praxis of spatial justice in churches

This study, and the praxis preceding and emerging from it, was based on an emancipatory approach to research, promoting research design that addresses issues of inequality (Baker et al. 2004:169). Practical theology seeks ways to describe the conditions that hold people captive and offers 'the hope of pathways to other possibilities' (Powell 2021 citing Reader 2008:12). The neighbourhoods, people and communities in this study and subsequent studies and interventions are at the centre of a city's quest for freedom from its segregated and oppressive past and present in which large numbers of its citizens live in precarious housing and homeless people living on the streets is on the increase. This style of research complemented the journey of churches in the sample group, and others like them on pathways to other possibilities of ecclesial expression and presence in the post-apartheid neighbourhood (Powell 2021:21). The study was motivated by two convictions: (1) addressing issues of land and spatial justice is a theological imperative for churches and (2) a praxis of spatial justice can offer local churches a pathway to their own liberation and open future possibilities for them in the cities in which they are located.

Data collection was influenced by emancipatory social theory that requires 'an empirical stance which is open-ended and dialogically reciprocal' and is 'rooted in a commitment to the long-term, broad-based ideological struggle to transform structural inequalities' (Baker et al. 2005:179 citing Lather 1986:269). Swartz and Nyamnjoh (2018:3) state that research as freedom has an 'intentional continuum of research methods'. Interviews and focus groups were thus also an opportunity to introduce the possibilities of a faith-based praxis of spatial justice to the participants. The ongoing praxis of the churches in the study and many others remains a focus of intervention for the researcher and related communities of praxis long after the empirical research concluded.

The empirical study included interviews with six ministers and two focus groups with 13 ministers that culminated a month prior to the COVID lockdowns in March 2020. The ministers were from churches located in formerly whites-only, affluent southern suburbs of Cape Town.

An area in which colonial planning and the forced removals of people of colour during apartheid had a direct effect on church-going and property acquisition. The church denominations were chosen from four denominations that according to the 1999 church land audit (Philpott & Zondi) ranked as the highest property and urban plot owners in South Africa. Subsequent findings and reflections came from the researchers' ongoing involvement in a community of

praxis seeking church-based social and spatial justice. Ethical clearance was sought and granted through the Ethics committee at the University of Pretoria, and all participants willingly participated in the research according to confidentiality agreements and the opportunity to read the paper before publication as part of the emancipatory approach.

Factors influencing a praxis of spatial justice in churches

The theological placement and posture of the congregation

The commitments of this study were theologically influenced by theologies of spatial justice (cf. De Beer 2016; Mlambo & Mbaya 2022), black liberation theologies of land (cf. Mofokeng 1997; Mosala 1989; Resane 2019; Velle 2016), theologies of prophetic imagination (Breuggemann 1978) and contextual readings of the Bible (cf. Nadar 2009; West 1993).

None of the ministers in the study referred directly to these influences when reflecting theologically on space, place and justice. Spatial concepts reflected on, focused predominantly on concepts of incarnation as God with us here on earth, The Kingdom of God as a partnership between heaven and earth and the centrality of neighbourliness in the outworking of faith. The holistic gospel emphasising the equal importance of word and deed was prevalent in their reflections, and several ministers spoke about biblical economics and specifically theologies of land, including references to the land restitution Jubilee laws of Leviticus 25.

Mlambo and Mbaya (2023) in their subsequent research with a subset of ministers in this research set, reflected on a hermeneutic of liberation in many of her interviewees and its potential for nurturing spatial justice:

Finally, the readings of the Bible from the interviewees, show a sense of reading with a liberating hermeneutic towards right living, justice for all, and inclusivity. These leaders reflect the understanding that the Bible is a tool for opening up spaces and minds toward balance and justice. It is clear then, that a theologising that breeds inclusivity and justice, is one that will develop the spatial consciousness and desire for spatial justice. (p. 7)

The geographical placement and posture of the congregation

The specific location of the church in the suburb made a difference in how buildings are used. For churches tucked away in exclusive spaces, their praxis of addressing social injustice tended to be further afield, reaching out in charitable ways to communities far from the reality of their suburban context and usually involved a small number of congregants (Powell 2021:47). In contrast, churches closer to the main road and some of the more economically stressed parts of those suburbs made more tangible attempts to address the social and spatial disparity in their location, reaching beyond their buildings

to the streets and people around them. For others, the immediate presence of homeless persons provoked praxis seeing the homeless as 'a problem', 'an opportunity for outreach' or 'a member of the neighborhood' (Powell 2021). One minister spoke about security concerns:

[W]e just get vandalized ... in one month I had three break ins. The stained glass windows were broken and it costs us a lot of money. And its heritage and so we can't just do anything. That is the other challenge. We can't just put any security up because of heritage. The churches are scared – We as rectors are scared. (pp. 71–72)

Several ministers spoke about their suburban neighbours and the 'Not in my back yard' phenomenon, especially when it comes to homeless persons living on or near the church property. 'And you know the area, they complain that because of the church looking like it does the property prices of their houses are going to deteriorate'. This statement was made by a minister who struggles to keep their graveyard clear of the debris associated with people sheltering there. Another minister reflected on local neighbours shutting down the proposals for a social housing project and fielding calls from housed neighbours accusing the church of affecting the general aesthetic of the neighbourhood by encouraging the presence of homeless persons near their property (Powell 2021:71).

The posture of the church people

Very few ministers spoke directly about their role in influencing the praxis of the church, and yet ministers can have a significant influence on the decisions made by the church to pursue spatial justice or not (Powell 2021:129). They decide who preaches, what is prioritised at church council and guide discernment on the vision and/ or mission of the congregation. The following reflections spoke to how the posture of the minister and their view of their role shapes praxis (Powell 2021):

'I've got a lot to do, my role is to make sure that we survive financially and grow spiritually ... so if you are going to ask me to do anything outside of that that takes time away from that...' (p. 130)

One minister spoke about 'big dreams' for his church space, which included social housing, highlighting that while there would be financial feasibility queries from the treasurer 'whose job it is to think about such practical things', there might be others who say 'these are not the kinds of things church buildings should be used for'. But he describes feeling confident that he would use his role as a theological influencer in the space to convince them of vision for a just use of space.

Several ministers spoke about what they called 'justice champions', 'activists' or 'do-ers' in their congregation. One described the 'critical mass needed to get things done'. Another described that he preferred to be the one feeding ideas and making sure that others are empowered to

implement it. But this requires buy-in as one minister in Powell (2021) observes:

'[U]nless you get buy-in from the grassroots level in the church it's never going to happen. Unless you get somebody in the community becomes aware and says "we've got to do this" only then it will happen.' (p. 131)

One minister spoke about a 'consumer mindset' of suburban churchgoers. He reflected that the main opposition factor to his church addressing the spatial injustice of their neighbourhood would be 'apathy and lethargy, that it's just too big we can't even get our heads around that'. He thought this was because of people's attitude towards church-going (Powell 2021):

'[T]he greatest barrier is having a critical mass of people who believe in the same vision of the church's mission and don't just see the church as something I come to only for me.' (p. 130)

There were also reflections on what it means to be a congregation with mostly elderly members 'who have more time on their hands but less energy and then our younger members have less time on their hands, loads of energy but too many commitments'.

Ministers described the church board as holding ultimate responsibility for the fiduciary and property decisions of the church. Some included a congregational voting system for the 'big decisions' such as buying, selling or adapting buildings. Others had to submit to the higher decision-making power of the denominational governing body. Some churches had property committees that conducted the business and maintenance of the buildings separate from the rest of the church's decision-making.

The financial position of the church

The financial sustainability of churches and their properties was cited as a major factor, and different financial models are used concerning church space (Powell 2021:131). For some, it is essential to make money off their properties to cover the maintenance costs. While attempting to find church spaces during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdown for accommodating homeless persons, it was clear that the fear of lost income was a factor for churches feeling they were not able to offer their space (Powell 2021:131). For some, congregant contribution income is enough to cover the costs of running the church, and they can freely offer space to others to use while others choose to charge for the use of properties to support various bursaries, ministries, social outreach and/or justice initiatives and others described how buildings were bought and sold to suit the churches changing and perceived needs (Powell 2021). For one minister, the expenses related to maintaining properties provoked many questions about the ownership of property:

'[T]here's a possibility we are going to offload some of our properties because more and more of our budget is going to maintaining them

and we don't feel that that's our primary business is property, we feel our primary business is people. (p. 132)

The disparity between churches, some undergoing costly building projects and others facing severe financial challenges was clear. Financial constraints can halt the pursuit of creative solutions to spatial injustice in the suburbs (Powell 2021) as reflected here:

If we had limitless resources I think the ideal usage of this property would be mixed-use and would probably involve parts of urban office space to bring in an income and partly for lower-income accommodation. (p. 133)

Fear of harm: To us and them

The question 'when does helping hurt?' was asked with regard to addressing spatial injustices. Interventions with homeless persons, including offering a place to stay, brought concern that this would create dependency and ultimately not be helpful towards them finding a 'step up in life'. Conversations emerged about the role that suburban churches could play in creating affordable housing. One minister explained that people in their congregation would come to ask for help when facing evictions or homelessness for various reasons and lamented the absence of working models (Powell 2021):

'If the church had a model by which we could help people become accommodated which is one of the biggest needs it would be awesome ... should you just buy a block of flats and accommodate people?' (p. 138)

This question led to reflections on the dynamics of an expensive neighbourhood and the conundrum faced when assisting 'poor and disadvantaged' congregants (Powell 2021):

They get their kids into a place where they are getting decent education but they can't afford to live there. Ok so now you have put them under even greater stress, they're getting the education, but they can't afford to live here. The nature of what's going on here it just keeps getting more and more expensive so at the end of the day I ask myself the questions ...there's a sense in which you've helped them but there's a sense in which you are also hurting them massively because they don't have the resources to be able to function and it's not just accommodation its everything ...everything you do here. (p. 138)

The same minister also wondered if churches could work towards changing the attitudes and socio-economic demographics of the suburb, not just their church (Powell 2021):

'I don't know if you know down the road there's a massive piece of land ... and they wanted to develop it into social housing. And everybody was up in arms about that, and they closed it down. I think one area we would have to work on would be to change the sentiments, or the feel of your neighborhood in terms of the peoples' willingness to be supportive of something like that, that would be a whole project on its own.' (p. 139)

Others referenced times when availing their buildings for residential use to people facing spatial injustice led to difficulties. An example of this was the very unfortunate attack suffered by a homeless woman who was living in space in the church grounds that they had allowed her to

use for shelter. For another church, it was a homeless community that pitched tents on the pavement in front of the church and refused to leave, leading to endless complaints from neighbouring residents. For another, it was the ongoing stress of the general mess left behind by people living on the church grounds. One minister reflected on damage to the church property that happened during a time when they hosted people seeking refuge and the difficulty they faced in finding alternative places for them to stay.

One minister told a story that left them with theological questions about the role of the church. They describe a student in the congregation asking if the church could house people who had been evicted from a nearby occupied building (Powell 2021):

'I thought what can we do as the church? I phoned my church warden and explained ... I said 'what if I allow them to come here, we only have the church hall and we only have 2 toilets for the men and 2 for the women and what then?' They said its only for the night, but what if it's not? ... I can't accommodate 200 people. For me that was really tough. As a pastor. As a priest. As we say we are reaching out to people. As we say we want to help people. And we are preaching to this student.' (pp. 139–140)

The role of other organisations

Ministers reflected on how faith-based non-profit organisations made them aware of the issues of land and spatial justice and pointed to the role of such organisations as having the ability to network and equip them for action. In 2020, just 1 month after the completion of these interviews, South Africans were instructed to 'Stay at Home' because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Homeless communities and advocacy groups asked 'where?'. In Pretoria, the Tshwane Homelessness Forum mobilised churches to house people in eight inner-city and suburban churches making a significant contribution to addressing the needs of a large number of homeless persons (De Beer 2020:3). Cape Town-based church practitioners who were interested in nurturing a 'just' use of church space attempted to mobilise congregations to open their buildings for this purpose. Eventually, three churches, each, hosted groups of ten homeless people (cf. New Hope 2020; U-Turn Social Enterprise 2020). Without the help of these organisations, the church congregations would not have been willing to offer their space, the availability of the space being contingent on the shelters closing when churches were allowed to gather again in their buildings. Re-housing the sheltered people became the responsibility of the organisations and not the church. Where churches did avail space and work with experienced organisations and residents that became part of the church community, ongoing residential communities were established. In one case, a church property has eventually been made available to host a community that grew out of the lockdown crisis, but in other cases, the organisations needed to find the property on the rental market.

Future(s) for the church on the corner

'A Church's future is determined by neither Synods nor Classes, but solely by the witness of its every congregation' (Naudé 1960).

Soja (2010:73) cautions that seeking spatial justice can become an overwhelming and ubiquitous task. He emphasises the need to return to 'specific examination of the uneven geographies of power and privilege to determine which forms of spatial justice warrant the greatest attention' in order to 'differentiate between the consequential, as well as the feasible and unfeasible, in seeking spatial justice' (Soja 2010:73).

If the church heeds this caution, it must consider and identify feasible ways of seeking spatial justice. There is no single defined model of a church-based praxis of spatial justice. This study does not put forward a recipe to achieve it. Seeking spatial justice is part of seeking social justice through developing spatial consciousness. Tangible justice made manifest in spaces and cities will have a multitude of forms. This invites churches towards notions of stewardship of land, space and place, which Le Bruyns (2009:75) describes as moving away from 'individualistic, philanthropic and fund-raising matters coupled with its preservation of the status quo of poverty and injustice within the economic sphere' towards an 'ethics of care that is more responsive, conscientised, accountable and solidarity-oriented'. While there may not be one model to apply, pointers towards spatial justice praxis for churches have been suggested.

An audit of land and space as proposed by *The Integration Syndicate* (Webster 2018:166) could be revisited focusing on underutilised public land in wealthy neighbourhoods in Cape Town. Auditing quantifies how much church land and property is available for pursuing spatial justice possibilities, for example 'Just Housing'. The audits conducted by the Church Land Programme were met with fears that church's 'private information was to be used for someone else's agenda' (Philpott & Zondi 1999:17–39). Though a need for transparency around land ownership in the context of South Africa's history is a moral obligation, Van Donk (1994) asserts that we be mindful that:

The fact that the church is part of the problem can evoke two crippling responses. Either the Church becomes paralysed by feelings of guilt, or the church becomes defensive and retreats in its small circle. To avoid becoming involved in land disputes, the church might even decide to get rid of the burden and sell the land to any willing buyer. (pp. 1–21)

It is counter-productive to lose the church itself in conversations around spatial justice. It is therefore imperative to have churches as conversation partners, further supporting the need to adopt an emancipatory approach.

The Centre for Faith and Community at the University of Pretoria (CFC)² convened gatherings in 2015 and in 2017 to draw input from researchers, practitioners, activists and students on 'Spatial Justice and Reconciliation'. A 'resource list for churches on how to contribute to socio-spatial justice' was produced proposing three ways in which local churches contribute to socio-spatial justice: (1) creative solidarities with different people's movements, (2) availing or sharing their own land and property and (3) participating in acts of restoration and/or restitution (Centre For Faith and Community n.d.). Another resource, *Faith Communities and Spatial Justice: Appetizers for engagement*, offers practical guidelines through questions, provocations and suggestions that can be used by a church to aid action (Centre for Faith and Community n.d.).

These calls do not entertain a superficial engagement with the realities of spatial injustice but name solidarity, presence, action, change, risk taking and transformation as central to church praxis and require trusted interlocutors and networks of practitioners to help translate analysis into action.

The use of church land and space in urban areas for affordable housing is a growing global phenomenon, albeit slowly and with only a niche interest from the wider church and theological community. Non-theological disciplines (e.g. architecture, geography of the built environment and urban planning) have shown interest in the role of spirituality and faith in urban and spatial justice (cf. Sandercock 2006).

There is a growing body of research looking at the impact that repurposing church buildings have on a neighbourhood. Losing 'sacred' space to 'secular' use in a city (cf. Hackworth & Gullikson 2013) is considered as societies are secularising, church attendance drops and church buildings are underutilised. Urban Geographers, Hackworth and Gullikson (2013) understand the complexity of a church congregation and its relationship with their building:

Often when a congregation is facing declining numbers, the conversation about what to do with their place of worship is a complicated and emotional one. Many parishioners are viscerally tied to the structure or the mission of the church so the thought of selling the land to a developer who might turn their place of worship into a superficial museum to their faith is disconcerting. (p. 84)

They suggest mixed-use models that acknowledge these ties and suggest (cf. Hackworth & Gullikson 2013):

While they may not be able to keep their church alive in its existing form, part of its central mission could live on in some form of housing advocacy ... some churches find the conversion of their property to affordable housing not only to be a way to extend their mission but also as a practical way to generate the highest value for their property. (p. 84)

²See the Centre for Faith and Community website at <https://www.up.ac.za/centre-for-faith-and-community>.

Theologically motivated para-church organisations help in advocating to and enabling churches. *Making Housing and Community Happen* is a Christian housing advocacy organisation based in Pasadena, United States, that 'equips congregations, community leaders, and neighbours with practical tools needed to transform their communities, to end homelessness' rooted in theology for their housing activism and development (Making Housing and Community Happen n.d.). The YIGBY – *Yes in God's Back Yard* – organisation in San Diego, United States, has adapted the term NIMBY, 'Not in my back yard' that is used colloquially to describe residents who oppose the development of affordable housing in their suburb (cf. Fischel 2001). They address 'the housing crisis by activating abundant, under-utilized faith community properties suitable for multi-family residential projects.' That these models focus both on the journey of churches and those suffering from the effects of spatial injustice is of particular interest to this study and to the ideas and commitments of mutual liberation.

In Cape Town, the emergence of social movements for urban land and spatial justice has been met by mixed responses from churches. Yet bonds of friendship, solidarity and mutual support are growing between the movement, churches, faith-based NPOs and individual Christians. The Central Methodist Mission in Cape Town's inner city supports urban land and spatial justice movements. They have used their prominent location in the city to host destitute people and to amplify the case of social movements such as Reclaim The City, which stated 'The Methodist (church) is right to be involved. It is unconstitutional; the government has a constitutional obligation to provide people with houses' (Charles 2018).

People in the church and faith-based sector in Cape Town are starting to look to social movements as teachers, even seeing them as a prophetic voice in the city. Consequently, leaders in the movement have been able to turn to the faith-based sector in moments of need for psycho-social support, conflict mediation, leadership development, community development support in the occupations and holding sacred space alongside other faith leaders at inter-faith events. De Beer (2017:10) suggests that if churches grow in consciousness and relationship with the landless leaders of justice we can, with humility, participate in actions to humanise people and places in the city.

Yeast City Housing is a Christian Housing Company in Tshwane that has developed 1261 affordable housing units in the inner city, 198 of these in creative partnerships with churches. The Methodist church in inner-city Pretoria made roof space available on the first floor of their property for the development of 27 communal housing units. The Christian Reformed Church in Salvokop sold their church far below market prices to Yeast City Housing who created a multi-purpose community centre, daycare centre and block of flats with 88 self-contained housing units on the plot (Yeast City Housing 2018).

One minister in the study asked 'Is there a future for the church on the corner?' while exploring ideas of decentralised church, meeting in people's homes. While he may imagine a future where the church no longer needs a building, the buildings still exist and in some suburban areas exist on nearly every corner. Despite his doubts in lively futures for such spaces, looking at the trajectory of declining numbers in his denomination, he led a church that spent much energy discerning a more spatially just future for their underutilised buildings. This culminated in making one of their buildings available at no cost to a local NGO, housing 20 previously homeless men, that continues to this day, invigorating the life of the church and diversifying the exclusive neighbourhood in which it is located.

In South Africa, churches exist as a multitude of expressions in relation to land, property and space and (in)justice. This research looked into one small part of the picture through a sample group of suburban churches. The emancipatory aim extended past the end of the interviews and focus groups. It was at the heart of the work that flowed from this research in 2020 with those who considered what to do with their 'locked down' premises, and it continues with many other practitioners to this day, bringing hope that there could be a collective that navigates the ongoing crises of inequality that has been so harshly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is consistent with research that serves social transformation remaining committed to the approach until transformation occurs (cf. Chatterton, Fuller & Routledge 2008:216–222). This approach could uncover possibilities where churches start to think and act towards their presence in the city with spatially just lenses. In this potential future, local churches could flourish, strengthen and grow, and there could be as many models for a praxis of spatial justice as there are churches.

Conclusion: Towards Jubilee?

Locating these research questions and findings in the wider question of land justice in South Africa invites the possibility for a theologically fuelled imaginative quest towards a different kind of future for the 'church on the corner' and the city in which it exists. Ministers in this study and theologian practitioners (Swithinbank & Murangira 2020) draw on Leviticus 25 that outlines a cyclical praxis for followers of the God of Israel calling for a 'Year of Jubilee' every 50 years. The Jubilee cycle is designed to end enslavement and unjust economic practices that lead to landlessness and precarious living. There are tenuous correlations between the original recipients, context and historically nationalistic worldviews of these laws and the modern-day society and church of urban South Africa. But scholars and church leaders alike seem to feel drawn to the prophetic invitation of a society that, led by religious laws and faith-based conviction, resets itself every generation towards socio-economic and spatial justice. Standing at this current threshold as our nation turns 30, this research poses a set of critical questions for the churches of South Africa to answer the question discussed in the following text:

What could it look like if, over the next 20 years of our democracy, decision makers and practitioners in denominations and local churches practically embrace a theologically fuelled imagination for just housing? What could come from this imagination if they embark on journeys of mutual discernment and practical actions to create accessible, affordable, dignified, safe housing options and communities of care with the land and properties that they own?

If this quest is embraced, churches and their neighbourhoods could undergo mutual liberation. The collective impact of this on South Africa's urban land and housing landscape could be significant. It could also offer a form of liberation to churches themselves who could experience financial and community invigoration to their spaces, communities and neighbourhoods. To achieve this, churches would need to forge courageous and creative partnerships with socially conscious investors, property developers and non-profit organisations of good faith to aid in the transformation of their buildings and land and to create communities of home, dignity and safety in the city. It may then indeed be possible for the church of South Africa to look towards 2044, our fiftieth year as a nation, as a year that we could celebrate a kind of Jubilee.

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Author's contribution

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, C.P., on reasonable request.

The data are not publicly available because of the privacy of the research participants.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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