Transforming Discipleship

Missional church, discipleship and the discourse of transformation amongst the urban poor.

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Abstract

Bevans' concept of transforming discipleship foregrounds a fundamental symbiotic relationship between discipleship and mission. The interplay between both practices is central to the wider debate of contemporary church social engagement under *missio Dei*. He explains that the notion of baptism and *theosis* embedded in the idea of transforming discipleship points to a concrete transformation of the human experience and condition. This forms the premise of this article in exploring how Christian practices of discipleship and mission articulate a process of human becoming

and participation in the life and mission of God that centres on a critical engagement with lived reality. This understanding offers a consistent framework of fostering a mutual relationship between local churches and communities in the poorer urban context, which often face the twin challenge of church and social decline. It questions a simplistic binary correlation between the practices of discipleship and mission. Such correlation often leads to a seeming dichotomy in Christian practices, with mission being portrayed as a means of achieving a quantitative outcome and discipleship a qualitative one. Instead, the focus of this article is to elucidate how discipleship and mission are interwoven, that both start with God and are integral to the actualisation of God's salvific plan in the world.

Introduction

This article adopts Bevans' (2016) notion of transforming discipleship in an attempt to address the apparent dichotomy that often emerges from the question about the relationship between mission and discipleship, and their objectives. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate that both mission and discipleship are critical in the general flourishing of Christian ministry. As such, both contribute to personal and social transformation, and the growth of church in numbers and depth of discipleship.

The examination of the notions of baptism and *theosis* embedded in the idea of transforming discipleship offers a critical analysis of the process and participation of human beings in the life and mission of God, an actualization of salvation in the world. These notions underpin a transformation in the relationship between human beings and God and the transformative work of the God in the world, in and on believers individually and as a community, which is attuned to *missio Dei*.

By paying attention to urban ministry, theology and social theoretical frameworks in advancing transformation discourse amongst the urban poor, the article asserts the importance of an inductive approach to both practices of mission and discipleship

that is rooted in people's experience and reality of the local context. Importantly, the argument draws also on my experience as a Church of England incumbent in this context. Essentially, this forms the basis of the complex task of this work in seeking to demonstrate how church's participation in *missio Dei* requires paying attention to the diverse and multiple factors that give meaning to the experiences of communities in this context.

Overall, it is the hope of this work to make a critical contribution in rethinking *missio Dei* amongst communities and individuals who are on the edge of hegemonic powers and discourses.

Conceptualization of the idea of Transforming Discipleship

In the keynote address *Transformed Discipleship: Missiological Reflections* (2016) to the World Council of Churches, Bevans makes a bold claim that

> the phrase "Transforming Discipleship" does not appear in the three major documents on mission that have appeared in this second decade of the twenty-first century . . . These two words, nevertheless, form a significant part of the vocabulary of the contemporary missiology across the churches . . . They offer a rich entrée into missiological thinking and practice today (75–76).

Bevans draws the idea of transforming discipleship from the seminal writing on missiology *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (1991), by David Bosch. He points out that discipleship underpins a transformation of an individual and of their lived experience, thus intimating an inherent relationship between mission and discipleship:

> discipleship, rooted in baptism is not something static, something that is not only focused on the transformation of personal holiness and personal relationship with the Lord . . . In the same way that Bosch speaks of mission, discipleship at its most profound level . . . is to transform reality around it (2016: 78–79).

In summary, Bosch's notion of transforming mission charts the concrete changes (paradigm shift) in the understanding and practice of mission in Christian mission history. A key aspect of his argument, the one that has influenced contemporary thinking and practice in mission is that Christian mission is inherently God's prior activity towards the world. The participation of the church in mission, therefore, transforms the church as well as the reality in the world. Bosch emphasizes that the church must continually undergo transformation if it is to remain faithful to the call to join in the mission of the Triune-God, *missio Dei* (1991: 181–189).

Crucially, Bevans uses the notion of transforming discipleship to unpack how both mission and discipleship are fundamentally interwoven and grounded in God's prior activity towards the establishment of his reign in the world, within the economy of salvation. The following section explores how Bevans draws on the notion of baptism and *theosis* to demonstrate that transformation both in discipleship and mission underpins a process of becoming and participation of human beings in the life and mission of God in the world. This provides a strong foundation for this work in addressing the apparent juxtaposition of the missional and discipleship commitments of the church. Christian practices and activities of mission and discipleship express a process and concrete participation in the *missio Dei,* "in ways both prior to and beyond the conventionally ecclesial or religious" (Graham, 2018: 215). Therefore, it is the argument of this work that such participation is enhanced by practices that are essentially rooted in the reality of human experience.

The notion of baptism in Transforming Discipleship

Bevans states that baptism transforms "our understanding of discipleship, committing us to constant transformation as we continue to follow Jesus" (2016: 80). He points out, further, that this transformation is rooted in the incarnation and attested in Scripture (Rom. 6.3; 2 Cor. 5.17; Jn 8.12; Gal. 3.27-28). It is mediated

and articulated simultaneously in the baptism service with the help of different liturgical practices and cultural elements (2016: 79–81). Therefore, baptism embodies a process of becoming and participation in the divine life that engages with the whole of human existence.

The centrality of the Christian rite of baptism in Christian tradition has drawn great interest over the years, with emerging multiple perspectives that have significantly influenced contemporary discourse and practice. For instance, Croft (2002) notes a fundamental shift that locates baptism as the foundation for the ministry of all God's people:

> Roman Catholic and Protestant churches have made enormous strides since the middle of the last century in recovering and developing [the] concept of ministry of the whole people of God linked with the recovery of a richer understanding of baptism. The development has vital implications for the ordering of the life of the church (88).

I argue that this dominant perspective which places baptism as foundational for ministry and accessible to all God's people has a significant influence on the understanding of the relationship between discipleship and mission and their objective. It underlines what happens when human beings are incorporated into the life of God by faith and form a community in which everyone's gifts are set free to serve and actualize the realities of the Kingdom of God in the world (Williams, 2016: 68).

Zizioulas (2011) makes a key point that links the principle of transformation in baptism with the transformation of the world, as a kind of salvation. He argues that baptism as practiced by the church today "cannot be understood apart from a pre-existing baptismal reality in the mystery of salvation" (116). This reality comprises the historical and eschatological dimensions of salvation which are united in the person of Christ. The historical factor is attested in the act of baptism with water, signifying the crossing of the Red Sea to freedom in the Promised Land. As for the eschatological dimension, he states that, "it is only by the virtue of the

outpouring of the Holy Spirit that Christian Baptism could exist as the Baptism of both water and the Spirit" (2011: 116).

The historical and eschatological dimensions therefore underpin baptism as a process of transformation that involves human beings' participation in God's salvation plan. It is fundamentally an incorporation of humans into "God's prior initiative and action in effecting the work of reconciliation and redemption in the world" (Graham, 2018: 215). Zizioulas asserts, further, that the primary reality that grounds baptism in the church, "is a reality which does not depend on the belief or unbelief of the individual since it is the reality of Christ himself" (2011: 117). This point presupposes that practices of mission and discipleship by the baptised members of the church are essentially grounded in God's prior initiative.

Both discipleship and mission, seen through the lens of baptism within the wider context of salvation history, offer the starting point in talking about the world and humanity not as wholly chaotic and in need of remedying. Instead, as the *locus* of real and concrete transformation effected through the mysteries of the incarnation. This transformation involves an intimate sharing in the divine life and an ongoing participation in that life through faithful engagement with the daily realities of life. This engagement becomes the very means by which Christian practices of discipleship and mission are continually transformed and informed. Groome articulates this point lucidly:

> because the world is the arena of God's saving activity, human history must be the primary locus, the point of both departure and arrival for rational discourse about God. This means that the praxis of God in history as it is co-constituted through human praxis is our primary text and context for doing theology [and ministry] (cited in Stoddart, 2014: 24).

The argument linking the transformation embodied in baptism to the concrete transformation of lived experience is critical in formulating a key argument of this work, as outlined later. It stresses how important it is for transformation discourse in the poorer urban context to adopt a contextual approach that

acknowledges local experience and lived reality as normative in shaping Christian practices of discipleship and mission.

The notion of theosis in Transforming Discipleship

According to Bevans, the idea of *theosis* (deification) offers "a helpful language to describe the reality of participation in the life and mission of God" (2016: 81). The notion of *theosis* is premised on the principle of the incarnation. It highlights the view that God in Christ became human so that humans could become divine (Bevans, 2016; Zizioulas,1985; Russell, 2004; Morris, 2014; Gorman, 2015). The scope of this work does not merit further investigation into the scholarly material around the study of *theosis*. The focus of our investigation is on the reality of the transformation of human beings articulated in the notion of *theosis* that is pertinent to the main thrust of the discussion about Christian discipleship and mission.

Drawing on the work of Russell (2009), Bevans claims that the theological idea of *theosis* intimates an understanding of Christian participation in the divine nature of God as a combination of personal transformation and the transformation of the world. Russell argues that *theosis* rooted in the incarnation and embodied in Christian baptism "is nothing less than our entering into partnership with God, our becoming fellow workers with him for the sake of bringing divine economy to its ultimate fulfilment" (2009: 36). Accordingly, Gorman (2005) posits that the idea of the call for Christians to "live the gospel" in Pauline writings is premised on the principle of transformation in *theosis.* This stresses the invitation to the church to participate in the life of God and his transforming mission in the world, and the engagement in mission and discipleship embodies the response (300). Gorman's latest work, *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John* (2018), goes further and marks what could be a turning point in articulating how *theosis* and mission are interwoven through the lens of the Fourth Gospel. He delineates how participation and

transformation in *missio Dei* is embodied by life together with one another and a changed world, by dint of the Spirit:

> Participation in God's mission effects transformation. However, this does not mean that human beings accomplish their own salvation or deification; participation means, at least for John (as for Paul), a mutual indwelling of the triune God and believers that entails the empowering and transforming work of God, by the spirit, in and on believers individually and as a community (23).

Therefore, *theosis* provides a rich language and a useful conceptual framework to talk about how a believer's incorporation into the life of God in baptism is lived out in practice. The transformation articulated in both baptism and *theosis* is linked to the transformation of the world within salvific history. This transformation does not suggest that human beings become part of God's substance or nature, a fourth member of the Trinity, but that they become God by being embraced evermore into the existence of God's self (Zizioulas, 1985). The incarnation is the ultimate fulfilment of the transformation and incorporation of human existence into the life of God. This is attested in the Scripture, "For in Christ all the fullness of the God lives in bodily form, and in Christ [humanity] has been brought to fullness" (Col. 2.9-10). This view is helpful in developing an understanding that presents practices of mission and discipleship as an embodied expression of the incarnation within the economy of salvation.

In the following section, the article sets out the framing of transformation embedded in *theosis* and baptism from a soteriological perspective. But before this, it is important to highlight that the World Council of Churches' Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, *Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship* (2018) in Arusha, assimilates Bevans' notion of transforming discipleship with its deep embeddedness in *theosis* and transformation:

> Discipleship is both a gift and a calling to be active collaborators with God for the transforming of the world (1 Thessalonians 3:2). In what the church's early theologians

> called "theosis" or deification, we share God's grace by sharing God's mission. This journey of discipleship leads us to share and live out God's love in Jesus Christ by seeking justice and peace in ways that are different from the world's (John 14:27) (Jukko and Keum, 2019: 2).

This work does not seek further analysis of the report. However, this is recommended for critical examination of various perspectives emerging from the notion of transforming discipleship, which are shaping the church's engagement in *missio Dei* globally.

Transformation and Salvation

There are multiple perspectives on salvation and the attempt to distinguish them is complex (Sobrino, 2008: 57). However, Sobrino (2008) makes an important point that highlights the perspective that locates salvation in the concrete reality. He stresses that "this concreteness should be recalled in order to counter the danger of 'universalizing' in nonhistorical ways the concept of salvation and realities that accompany it" (57). Morris (2014), accordingly, advances an argument that makes a significant contribution towards an understanding of the concreteness of salvation through the lens of *theosis*. He draws the distinction between the idea of being made in God's image and growing into the likeness of God underpinned by the notion of *imago Dei:*

> The starting point for talking about human beings is not that they are utterly wretched and lost, but that they were created in God's image, to grow into God's likeness and that, despite their capacity to sin, still reflect the beauty and goodness of their divine creator. The sin from which human beings need salvation is the sin that leads to the suffering and oppression of any human persons at the hands of others. It is real and concrete [salvation] (52).

This argument underscores an important point on human transformation and participation in effecting salvation on the plane of history, embedded in the notion of baptism and *theosis*,

and actualized in the incarnation and the proclamation of the message of the Kingdom of God:

> Jesus' embodied life and ministry in particular, rather than his death, is where salvation can be discovered . . . It is also in his teaching and ministry, his praxis . . . he reveals an alternative understanding of salvation (Morris, 2014: 55).

Vincent Donovan in his writing on cross-cultural mission, *Christianity Rediscovered* (1978), similarly, explains that the basis of salvation is best envisaged in the role of Israel's messiah fulfilled in Jesus to establish the *Shalom*. He contests that, "Shalom is much more than personal salvation. It is at once peace, integrity, community, harmony, and justice" (157). From this view, we can draw the conclusion that the salvation plan realised through the incarnation and encapsulated in the Judeo-Christian salvation history unfolds in the realities of human life and experience.

Therefore, the understanding of salvation from this perspective provides an essential framework that is helpful in the examination of how the incorporation of human beings into God's initiative (*missio Dei*) through baptism is lived out and practiced as expressed in *theosis.* The call for the church to participate in *missio Dei* cannot, therefore, be reduced to a simplistic binary correlation between the mission and discipleship imperatives of the church. It is understandable that the attempt to examine the relationship between practices of mission and discipleship, including their theological bearings is a complex undertaking and requires sophisticated methods of enquiry and interpretation. However, the notion of transforming discipleship underpins the importance of an inductive approach to the church's engagement in *missio Dei;* that acknowledges lived experience and context as fundamental in shaping Christian practice. This provides a fundamental critique to Christian ministry in general. Before turning our focus to ministry in the poorer urban context, the article first evaluates the juxtaposition of practices of mission and discipleship, which tends to polarize their relationship and objective.

Juxtaposition of mission and discipleship

The Church's prolific literature and training resources on contemporary discipleship is replete with the view that discipleship provides a fundamental mechanism of engaging in the wider mission of the church. For instance, Croft (2002) points out that the church has the crucial role of "providing context for growth in discipleship. . .where commitment can be encouraged nurtured and sustained and where ministry can grow" (89). Davison and Milbank (2010) however raise the question that "if everything is for the sake of mission, even worship and the Church, then what is mission for?" (53). This view not only highlights the apparent tension in grappling with the question of the relationship between mission and discipleship but reveals a dominant view that tends to place mission as the outworking of Christian discipleship.

A recent research project by St Peter's Saltley Trust (2017) addressing the question about what helps Christians grow explores the significance of social engagement in inspiring personal faith. The finding indicates that "Christian mission work is best seen not as the fruit of discipleship, but as interwoven in discipleship" (Jones, 2017: 5). This outcome, substantially, supports the argument in this article that mission and discipleship are complementary as far as the church's participation in *missio Dei* is concerned. However, the idea that 'mission is interwoven in discipleship' plays into the hands of the dominant view that sees discipleship as everything.

Overall, the report is symptomatic of a shift towards a richer understanding of how contemporary experience and situation are key in framing the question of the relationship between mission and discipleship. The acknowledgement that lived experiences and the realities of the local context are critical in shaping practices of mission and discipleship challenges their juxtaposition. This is well highlighted in the Church of England recent report *Setting God's People Free* (2017):

> We, ordained and lay, must teach and equip lay people to follow Jesus confidently in every sphere of life in ways

> that show the difference the Gospel makes . . . We need to enable every member of our congregations—lay and clergy alike—to follow Jesus confidently wherever they are.

Several emerging discipleship and mission resources such as *Fruitfulness on the Front Line* and *Frontline Sundays* by London Institute of Contemporary Christianity (LICC) are beginning to embody this shift. They are providing resources for worship, mission and discipleship that predominantly use an inductive approach rooted in people's daily experience and shaped by the reality of their context. LICC sees its role as equipping God's people to see their mission field beyond church organised activities and to "create open, authentic, learning and praying communities that are focussed on growing whole-life disciples who live and share the gospel wherever they are" (London Institute of Contemporary Christianity).

The emerging inductive approach adopted by churches for their mission and discipleship initiatives affirms the central tenet of the idea of baptism and *theosis*, mapped earlier. The transformation underpinned in both ideas points to the possibility of human beings being able to participate more fully in the divine life in the concreteness of lived experience. Moreover, it repudiates the view of baptism offered by the church as simply a means of transmitting Christian belief. Instead, baptism is presented as a church tradition that enhances the transformation of a believer who is already incorporated in the salvific plan embedded in *missio Dei* and unfolds in the concreteness of life.

In that case, the objective of Christian engagement in practices of mission and discipleship has less to do with what the church does, and much more with their significance as an embodiment of God's reign and activity in the world.

This emphasizes the fact that lived experiences and realities of a local context are fundamental in shaping practices of mission and discipleship. They are essentially a response to and an expression of God's initiative in bringing salvation to the world. Pope Francis (2013) points out how this understanding is important

especially among communities on the edge of hegemonic powers and discourses:

> we need to let the poor and marginalized evangelize us. Through struggles in and for life, marginalized people are reservoirs of the active hope, collective resistance, and perseverance that are needed to remain faithful to the promised reign of God (198).

Description of ministry in the parish

In this section, I set out the urban context where I practice as the incumbent before investigating and analysing the reality of ministry amongst the urban poor, broadly. The Church of England parish statistics (Church Urban Fund) indicate that the parish is ranked among the most deprived, 1382 out of 12,425. It has above average levels of child poverty, with 27 percent of primary school pupils receiving free school meals compared to 23 percent nationally. Ethnically, the parish demographic shows, noticeably, little diversity with just over 16 percent of the population being non-white British. This contrasts significantly with the surrounding areas which are over 77 percent. In the past two decades the parish has experienced multiple new housing developments, which have attracted young families.

In the past few years, the church has run multiple social projects aimed at the local community on a weekly basis and occasionally. These activities include parents and toddlers' play session, community social forum (Natter's Café), family summer camp and a collection centre for the local food bank. Interestingly, in comparison to worship activities, these activities draw a wide range of members of the community from diverse backgrounds; economically, socially and culturally. The majority of those attending the social activities tend to be from the social housing and new housing estates. In activities such as parents and toddlers and summer camp, young families' attendance is higher with an average of thirty families with children between 1–10 years old attending

regularly compared to five in Sunday worship. While less than 1 percent of people of non-white British background make up the regular worshipping congregation, social activities tend to attract a higher percentage of over 5 percent.

Although these projects are aimed at meeting some of the growing social needs of the local community, the church lacks a consistent framework of understanding the experiences of those who attend. This amounts to a missed opportunity of drawing on the experiences of the participants in shaping how the activities are run and understanding if they are meeting the intended objectives. Importantly, while some of the social projects in the parish are mainly informed through the National Church and Diocesan mission initiatives, several others have been tried and failed. This presents a serious question on how the relevance of the projects to the reality of the local context is taken into account. This work, therefore, addresses a wider problem in church ministry and reveals how grassroots reality and experience is critical to the church's social engagement and practices of mission and discipleship.

In general, the idea to examine the relationship between mission, discipleship, and social engagement began to develop in 2013. I was in my second year in the post when a decision was made to close the church building in the neighboring parish, which had served the local town since the middle of the nineteenth century. Two decades before, the parish had a thriving congregation attending church regularly and an important ministry to children and families through the local Church of England primary school. However, the steady decline in church attendance meant that the existence of the parish was no longer viable. The church closed in September 2016, triggering the process of finding a new way of providing ministry to the local community with the help of neighboring parishes.

I began to think about the future of my parish which despite facing similar challenges of numerical decline continues to be an integral part of community life through social engagement. In this work, I argue that the complex task of measuring church growth and the impact of ministry should take into account multiple

factors connected to both the reality of the local context and the changing shape of church life.

In his reflection on the history and changes in the inner-city and church life, in light of industry and globalization, Brown (2018) emphasizes that the development of an ecclesiology and missiology adaptable to changing times remains critical (89). Such development draws on an inductive approach to the practices of mission and discipleship and is premised on a dialogical framework that pays attention to people's experience, Christian tradition and doctrine. So far, the examination of Bevans' idea of transforming discipleship through the prism of the Christian tradition of baptism and the doctrine of *theosis*, offers a critical framework of engaging with the tension inherent between the three dialogical poles. Importantly, Brown maintains that, "all discipleship, all mission, takes place in the theological interim, between Pentecost and the Parousia" (2018: 90).

Therefore, the task of the church is to work with this tension and embody the spirit of Christ until God's Kingdom is finally revealed in fullness. As outlined in the following section on general analysis of ministry amongst the urban poor, this requires integrated theological and social perspectives that encourage seeing and thinking about mission and discipleship as complementary. As such, this supports a key premise of this article that seeks to articulate how discipleship, mission and social engagement are interwoven. Indeed, they play a critical role in personal and social transformation, and congregational growth in numbers and depth of discipleship.

A broader analysis of ministry in the poorer urban context

Ecclesiological studies and theological reflection in this context emphasize that it is critical for the church to pay attention to the social and cultural dynamics in engaging the local communities. This is particularly in response to new geographies of poverty and marginalization under global urban hegemony (Atherton, 2000

& 2003; Sheldrake, 2001; Green, 2003; Inge, 2003; Lynch, 2005; Baker, 2009; Davey, 2010; Shannahan, 2010). In the last two decades, urban social meaning and cultural identity have focussed on the impact of globalization and the effects on the social and cultural reality of the urban communities (Atherton, 2000; Castells, 2000 & 2010; Baker, 2009; Shannahan, 2010; Davey, 2001 & 2010; Baker and Graham; 2018). Significantly, Andrew Davey notes that "the urban population changes with social transition, migrancy and community tensions. New demands are made on urban settlements to accommodate a vast array of groups and minorities within a common space" (2001: 30).

I draw on Manuel Castells's work *The Rise of Network Society* (2003) and *The Power of Identity* (2010) in which he links globalization with emerging patterns of social forms and cultural identity in the urban context, with significant impact on the experiences of local communities. He uses the concept of "Network society" in arguing that in a globalised urban context, "the search for identity, collective, or individual, ascribed or constructed becomes the fundamental source of social meaning" (2003: 3). For Castells, identity therefore is people's source of meaning and is constructed "on the basis of a cultural attribute . . . that is given priority over other sources of meaning" (2010: 6). These identities and associated meaning stand in stark contrast to those traditionally "defined by norms structured by the institutions and organizations of society" (2010: 7).

Castells's analysis charts key social and cultural processes in contemporary urban societies with cumulative effect on social and cultural experiences. His argument is fundamental in demonstrating how identities constructed on the basis of common experiences can generate shared meaning among heterogenous urban communities and galvanize them for social action and change. Various theological studies draw on his work in examining the constantly changing social landscape in Britain's urban society, and the effects of emerging social meaning and cultural identity on the experiences of communities and Christian ministry (Gilroy, 2000; Beckford, 2004; Baker, 2009; Davey, 2001 & 2010; Shannahan, 2010).

Urban ministry and theology

There is evidence that models of ministry in urban communities that become normative often are formed in completely different social and geographical contexts, thus failing to take full account of experiences at the grassroots (Davey, 2001 & 2010; Green, 2003; Vincent, 2003; Shannahan, 2010; Sheldrake, 2014). In the last few decades many communities in the deprived urban context have faced the "double whammy" of community and church decline (Atherton, 2003: 94). Nevertheless, the relationship between church and community in this context is explicit in social engagement (Atherton,2003; Baker and Miles, 2010; Baker and Smith, 2010; Charlesworth and Williams, 2017; Church Urban Report, 2014). However, despite the explicit positive links between churches and community in this context through social engagement, there is little impact on numerical growth reflected in church attendance. This situation is clearly reflected in my parish context, as already explained. While this reality places the future existence of the church in the balance, nonetheless, it provides an opportunity to explore new ways of engagement that will transform both the church and community and enhance their relationship.

Given that urban spaces are generally contested and fluid, there is real concern that the ministry of the Anglican Church, based predominantly on the parochial system with an entrenched idea of localism, may not have adequate flexibility in its ability to fully embrace the complexities of urban reality (Baker, 2009). Sheldrake (2014) notes the tension in the contemporary British urban context as the sense of identity embedded in a locality is de-emphasized in favour of one that relates to a wider framework of people (117–118); thus, underlining Castells's idea of network society as discussed above. Shannahan calls for models of British urban theology that express the complex fluidity of the contemporary urban life and forge new cross-cultural theology for the contemporary globalized urban landscape by paying serious attention to migrants and diasporan communities (2010: 11–15). Davey (2010) argues for a theological and ecclesial practice based

on an inclusive and participative model of ministry. As an example, he cites ecumenical ministries in the urban context involving migrants who are equipped to contribute to life in their local communities primarily through engagement with the local church (29–33).

From a practical theology perspective, the primacy of Christian practice hinges not on the privileged position over theory or tradition but as the starting point in the attempt "to understand human action and thought and the meanings inherent in practice including their theological bearings . . . and requires sophisticated methods of enquiry and interpretation" (2017: 12). This is denoted by the term 'praxis' which "points towards something that is more reflexive, that is both value-directed and value-laden. It is the meanings we bring to practice, and the meaning-making associated with our actions" (12). The participation and focussed attention on the lived reality of urban communities in practices of mission and discipleship, therefore, has a significant role in orientating the practices of the church and shaping its overall ministry in this context.

Crucially, the theological reflection framework underpinned by praxis encompasses values and meanings beyond religious practices, which are constructed through social processes involving human interaction within a social context (Ward, 2012: 4–5). This liberates the church to work in partnership with other social agencies in contributing to the common good without comprising its fundamental Christian principles. The contribution of the church to the common good is generally referred to as faith-based social capital, which is a combination of religious capital and spiritual capital (Baker and Skinner, 2006; Baker and Miles-Watson, 2010). I would recommend an in-depth exploration of faith-based social capital in relation to Christian community engagement as a future undertaking.

In the following section, the article draws further on examples of transformative ministry amongst the urban poor to articulate how the idea of transforming discipleship challenges the church to commit to a discipleship and mission that is attuned to life together

with the people in the concrete reality of their daily experiences. Such commitment orientates church practices towards the world, which both the church and the community inhabit together.

Advancing transformation discourse amongst the urban poor

There is strong evidence indicating that for local churches in the poorer urban setting, transformation discourse involves tackling poverty and other social challenges that tend to disproportionally affect their communities. This is seen as an actualization of salvation (Atherton, 2003; *Church Urban Report*, 2014; Ruddick, 2014; Eckley, Ruddick and Walker, 2016). For instance, in her qualitative research in Manchester, Ruddick engages with the transformation discourse in a poorer urban context by adopting an inductive approach to the practices of discipleship and mission. This is underlined by a fundamental shift in the team's perception of mission: "We changed the language from 'entering in to transform' and replaced it with 'joining in with God's transforming activity'" (2014: 60).

Further investigation into the experiences of both team members and members of the local community suggests that transformation discourse from this perspective confronts the dominant understanding of salvation. It provides a language that aligns it with *missio Dei*. It enables those involved to articulate concrete positive changes in the neighborhood as signs of hope and acknowledge profound changes in their lives and others. Ruddick explains that these experiences embody the biblical models of salvation, mission and discipleship that are core to the team's ministry (60–77). Interestingly, a recent survey by British Social Attitudes (2019) suggests that 40 percent of people who go into a church building regularly do so not for worship but for a social or community activity. This resonates with the argument that contemporary urban ministry contributes "to social transformation through community activities rather than church-centric perspectives and practices" (Ruddick, 2018: 143).

According to Barrett (2019), the challenge for the Anglican parish church with its well-defined geographical boarders is on how it can fulfil its role of a "common space" for the socially and culturally diverse urban communities (30–33). His reflection is based on an examination of the emerging role and identity of his local parish church in a multi-ethnic urban parish context following the destruction of the church building in a fire incident. This has led the congregation to engage the local community through various social activities such as street parties held in the open spaces on the street corners, including multiple venues provided by the local schools. He notes that these events often draw participants from diverse social-economic and ethnic backgrounds who, otherwise, would not have any connection with the church. He draws a conclusion that while the role of the church as a "host" has dissolved with the loss of the building a new one has developed: "a place of interconnectedness, interdependent 'common' spaces serving many and diverse functions" (2019: 32).

Importantly, the analysis above illustrates how critical reflection on the relationship between church and community challenges the framing of the question about the relationship between mission and discipleship, and their expected outcome. The missiological idea underpinned by *missio Dei* insists that the goal of church mission and discipleship must be understood "as less a matter of personal salvation or institutional church growth, so much as a participation with the triune God in the task of redeeming the whole of creation as a work of reconciliation" (Graham, 2018: 215). This challenges the pervasive binary framing of the objectives of both mission and discipleship in terms of quantitative and qualitative outcomes. Normally, mission tends to be presented as the means of achieving the former and discipleship the latter. However, the argument presented in this paper emphasizes that church practices and activities embody a kind of salvation in the world, encapsulated in *missio Dei*. Furthermore, it draws to the attention the fact that practices of mission and discipleship, through the agency of the baptised members of the church, are critical in contributing to numerical growth and depth of faith.

A consistent theological reflection drawing on ecclesial and missional perspectives is therefore vital in affirming faith and activities that give meaning to Christian belief at the personal and corporate levels. This is whilst facilitating a process of practical discernment that allows new perspectives to emerge as churches engage with the complex realties of lived experiences that define individuals and their local context. It is from this perspective that the anticipated research underlying this work, aims to develop a consistent method of inquiry and theological reflection that enables the church to draw on the realities of the local context in shaping its practices and overall ministry. To achieve this, the research seeks to use an ethnographic method of inquiry into the experiences of members of the local community who attend social activities provided by the church in the parish.

Conclusion

If the logic of the notion of transforming discipleship discussed in this paper is assimilated and developed, then this means addressing, critically, the question about the way in which the relationship between churches and local communities is framed. First, it is understandable that speaking of mission and discipleship separately may be conceptually useful for churches in formulating their Ministry Action Plan (MAP). However, the theological idea of *missio Dei* underpinning the notion of transforming discipleship challenges a binary approach that polarizes personal and social transformation. This is inconsistent with the understanding of salvation explored in this paper.

Second, an attempt to frame the relationship between churches and their local communities requires paying serious attention to people's experience and reality of the local context. This calls for an openness to diverse voices and even contradictory meanings arising from the experiences of members of the community from different backgrounds. As such, church's participation in *missio Dei* in the complex urban context requires paying attention

to the diverse and multiple factors that give meaning to the experiences of communities: religious, historical, cultural, social and economic.

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