

## **Title: A poor community as a sending hub of transformation agents.**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper is written from the perspective of a black African who has been unfairly subjected to colonialism, apartheid and neo colonialism. This African is learning to simultaneously blame others for mistakes done to him and interrogate his own agency in being an answer to his own prayers. He has observed that communities of poverty are usually seen as undesirable. As a consequence of this, most of its residents prefer to move out of them, if they have the choice to do so. This paper explores the concept of thin places as a vehicle to nurture agency amongst people living in communities of poverty such as Soshanguve. It uses the narrative approach of storytelling to recount particular past events that happened as a tool to cultivate a 'I can do it attitude' in ordinary people. The end in mind is to raise agents of hope who will be good news to their neighbours and anybody else, using biblical principles as a critical tool in their toolkit.

### **1. Introduction**

Communities of poverty are usually seen as undesirable. As a consequence of this, most of its residents prefer to move out of them, if they have the choice to do so. Some of its residents feel trapped in an undesirable place where they live because of lack of choice. InnerCHANGE, a missional team, serves in the township of Soshanguve. It is exploring a theology of place that could be articulated in a way that could develop and nurture agency from within. The concept of thin place is explored in this paper as a vehicle to nurture agency amongst people living in communities of poverty such as Soshanguve. Thin places are a spiritual concept which describes "the veil between this world and the eternal world as thin" (thinplacestour, 2018). In such places, individuals can walk in two worlds: the physical world as we know it and the spiritual realm (thinplacestour, 2018).

This paper focusses on InnerCHANGE efforts to help its staff and community members from some northern Pretoria townships, to view their neighbourhoods as a thin place. It uses the narrative approach of storytelling to encourage and challenge its neighbours to view themselves as change agents both in their neighbourhoods and beyond. This narrative approach focuses "on the spoken recounting of particular past events that happened" as a tool to nurture and develop agency in people (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2013). The advantage of a narrative research is that it "allows people to effectively make sense of their world-and communicate these meanings-by constructing, reconstructing and narrating stories" (Polit & Beck 2008:236). Through it, "individuals construct stories when they wish to understand specific events and situations that require linking the inner world of desire and motive to an external world of observable actions" (Polit & Beck 2008:236).

A change agent is described here as someone actively seeking the peace and prosperity of the neighbourhood, township or city they live in (Jeremiah 29:7), using biblical principles. The end in mind of this storytelling narrative is to attempt in a small way to equip people with hope. Many of these people feel disarmed and helpless as they face overwhelming realities such as poverty, violence, crime and lack of fairness in society. The question this article is, therefore, asking is how can storytelling equip ordinary people to be agents of their own hope? A reflection on agency will help pave the way of the process of answering this question.

## **2. Reflection on agency**

Steve Biko and his Black consciousness movement, inspired this reflection. Biko (2007:156) stresses that people need to “rally together with their fellows in order to bring transformation” and build the kind of society they want to become. He also points out that people’s “self-examination and determination to bring a humane society in South Africa”, should be prioritised. In his appraisal of black consciousness, the urban theologian, Stephan de Beer (2008:172) believes that Black consciousness movement is “a philosophy of communal solidarity among an oppressed people. Although Steve Biko’s premise was blackness as experienced in South Africa, he deliberately sought to situate his work in a more universal humanist framework, identifying it as part of a global movement of solidarity with all oppressed people” so that they could be agents of the kind of society they desire (de Beer 2008:172). He (de Beer 2008:174) continues by stressing that the work of “fostering black consciousness should continue, calling blacks back to solidarity with their communities of origin, as well as black people who are still living with the scars of stolen dignity to a discovery of their own humanity, giftedness and agency”. The church could be a catalyst of such. Scott Bessenecker (Hayes, 2006) rightly says that “Jesus calls the church to attach itself uncomfortably to marginalised people and use its hands to do something that would empower them”.

The church serving in communities of poverty can participate in the collective imagination of a better community and help implement a vision that will come out of the imagination exercise. All community stakeholders should be brought together in order to articulate “ways in which they can contribute to make such a vision”, a reality (de Beer 2008: 6). The church could then recruit “sensitive designers, planners, and bureaucrats from within the community in order to integrate diverse visions into one coherent, cohesive vision for a particular neighbourhood” (de Beer 2016: 6). Katongole (2017:205) believes that “Christianity needs to be grounded on the African soil”. It should be an instrument of hope for the poor in helping them to be agents of the resolution of their “everyday problems” (Katongole 2017:205).

In reflecting on their experience as mission workers in communities of poverty, Huckins & Yackley (2012:6) stated that “real life and real transformation happen in the context of intentional practices and authentic relationships” that lead people to be agents of the kind of society they desire. This is in line

with Biko's thinking stating that: "The most powerful weapon in the hand of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed" (Biko, 2007). John Henrik Clarke argues along the same line in saying that: "To control a people you must first control what they think about themselves and how they regard themselves and how they regard their history and culture" (Clarke, 2019). In his reflection on black African Christians who were persecuted because of their prophetic witnessing, Katongole (2017:xiii) stresses that "their agency and activism was born in and through the experience of suffering and social dislocation". He also points out that the high capacity of these faith activists to embrace, hold, and transform their "experience of personal and communal suffering and tragedy into energy, commitment, and advocacy for non-violent alternatives". Many of these faith activists became martyrs. According to Katongole (2017: xix) "martyrs provide the most decisive and clearest example of hope, and their memory is a form of resistance against cheap hope that struggles to transform the structures of violence, poverty, and marginalisation into an excess of love" Africa needs.

Talking as a black person, I would like to stress that "freeing ourselves from the inferiority complex" inculcated in us "by systems that apportioned value and human dignity according to a colour code remains the most important stepping stone to true freedom. Psychological freedom from self-imposed limitations is an essential step to freedom from relationships that are based on physical and material oppression. A mind that is imprisoned by prejudices and negative characterisations instilled in it by others is unlikely to be open to freeing itself from oppression" (Ramphele 2017: 22-23). Hence the need to nurture and develop agency in ordinary Africans. For as long as they expect answers to their own prayers to be parachuted to them, inside out transformation will be minimal to none.

In Africa, we need an active citizenship in our communities of poverty. In order for this active citizenship to be beneficial, it will require a motivated, "educated and empowered citizenry. Faith communities and churches can play a much more dedicated and informed role to prepare their members to be participating, to be responsible citizens and to understand the practices and possibilities of citizenship" (de Beer 2008: 6). Kritzinger (2008:99) is optimistic in this process because he believes that there "exists among humans, because they are humans, a solidarity through which each shares responsibility for every injustice and every wrong committed in the world, and especially for crimes that are committed in his presence or of which he cannot be ignorant". There also exists among people a solidarity through which they could together build the kind of society they would like to become. This is the truth this paper would like to share. Storytelling seems to be an appropriate vehicle to convey this message of hope. The township of Soshanguve has breastfed Christian activists such as Elisabeth Matsemela, Smangalis Mkhathshwa, Benny Makena and Hans Hlaethwa (Pretoria news, 2007). These activists sweat and blood has inspired this story telling approach so that their legacy could be resurrected and incarnated in the lives of ordinary people.

### **3. Storytelling**

Woodside & al. (2008) point out that "storytelling is pervasive through life. Much information is stored, indexed, and retrieved in the form of stories. Although lectures tend to put people to sleep, stories

move them to action. People relate to each other in terms of stories". The majority of black Africans live in contexts that are primarily oral in terms of how people build knowledge capital. They are raised in a world that is primarily understood "through proverbs, stories, and relationships" (Sample 1994:3). In traditional Africa, "proverbs and stories" were the most used vehicles to communicate knowledge (Sample 1994:3). Chinua Achebe (2000) once stated that "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten and the horse on which conversations rides". This paper uses this familiar vehicle of knowledge and wisdom acquisition to nurture agency in people. Katongole (2011:2-3) stresses that "who we are, and who we are capable of becoming, depends very much on the stories we tell, the stories we listen to, and the stories we live. Stories not only shape our values, aims, and goals; they define the range of what is desirable and what is possible". According to him, "stories are not simply fictional narratives meant for our entertainment; stories are part of our social ecology. They are embedded in us and form the very heart of our cultural, economic, religious, and political worlds" (Katongole 2011:2-3). He adds that Africa as a continent is "not so much a place, but a story-or set of stories about how people of the continent called Africa are located in the narrative that constitutes the modern world. Christian social ethics must uncover the underlying stories of the key social institutions in Africa that affect both their performance and the types of characters they produce" (Katongole 2011:2-3).

In this storytelling, I was inspired by Barack Obama in his book "Of thee I sing. A letter to my daughters". From this book insight, I wrote letters to my neighbours. I wrote 15 letters, picturing 15 individuals InnerCHANGE works very closely with. Each of these letters asks questions that depict these individual's uniqueness.

Dear neighbour,

### **3.1 "Have I told you how wonderful you are"? (Obama 2010:5)**

You are Soshanguve.

You defy the virus of separation that slavery, colonialism, tribalism, xenophobia and homophobia have spread on your shores.

The spread of this virus is like the strong signal your armpit gives you, when your body needs to be refreshed.

You have intentionally chosen to pursue the beauty that the kingdom of God in its diversity brings. You have decided that Sothos, Shanganis, Ngunis and Vendas must live together as one people. Through your bold act, you affirm God's truth that all human beings were created with equal worth (Genesis 1:26-30).

### **3.2 "Have I told you that you are" resilient (Obama 2010:6)**

Originally, all your families came from outside this township.

You faced the adversity of the apartheid government.

You also faced the adversity of your next-door neighbour, the Bophuthatswana government.

You remained steadfast and kept believing that a better future was around the corner.

You wanted to be known as a loud voice that sings an alternative song.

Where apartheid was the order of the day, you chose to affirm diversity.

Where murdering was a fashion, you chose to rescue victims.

Where destruction was encouraged, you chose to carry Isaiah's legacy.

You wanted to be known as the rebuilder of houses left in ruins,

A builder and repairer of our township walls and streets (Isaiah 58:12).

### **3.3 “Have I told you that you” are part of a rich history (Obama, 2010)?**

The history of inequality and oppression around you is a growth pain.

Some of it is like a pregnant woman's birth pain,

Some of it is a cancerous tumour.

A birth pain is part of a process of bringing life into existence; it is therefore necessary.

A cancerous tumour has to be removed because it is toxic to your body.

Nelson Mandela is a good example of a birth pain.

He converted his pain of spending many years in prison,

As a resource and an opportunity to be a reconciler.

Many of our African politicians have displayed a type of leadership,

That is a cancerous tumour for their countries and our continent.

May you be in tune with your rich history so that you can be a birth pain where God places us.

### **3.4 “Have I told you that you were” a star (Obama, 2010)?**

Solomon Mahlangu, a young man, from the nearby township of Mamelodi, inspired the whole world.

He graciously embraced a painful death, because the cause he stood for was more important than his own life.

Every time there is oppression, injustice and corruption, Solomon Mahlangu reminds you this: “My blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom. Tell my people that I love them. They must continue the fight” (sbffranktalk,2019). He reminds you of one of Jesus' messages to his disciples:

“If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross each day and follow me. If you want to save your life, you will destroy it. But if you give up your life for me, you will save it. What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself or waste your life?” (Luke 9:23-25).

He is to the young people of this continent, what Paul encouraged Timothy to be about:  
“Don’t let anyone make fun of you, just because you are young. Set an example for other followers by what you say and do, as well as by your love, faith, and purity” (1 Timothy 4:12).

### **3.5 “Have I told you that you are” authentic (Obama, 2010)?**

In 1792 in Sierra Leone, a man who was proud of his culture, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Introduced the use of his local language, Yoruba, among his own people in worship (Schroeder 2008:76).

He was so in touch with who he was created to be,  
That nothing stopped him from expressing that.  
You are uniquely designed to be a blessing to others and to this world  
He encourages you to be authentic and proud of your identity.  
Your uniqueness is a lamp that is meant to shine and enlighten others.  
Hiding that lamp under the table will unearth tears of melancholy in our society.  
Your uniqueness is needed to help our land rise and shine.

### **3.6 Have told you that you are courageous (Obama, 2010)?**

Our ancestors in faith such as Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita, Simon Kimbangu, Engenas Lekganyane, Isaac Shembe and Glayton Modise rose as a voice of contextual expressions of the church.  
They were the sign of alternatives.  
They were the sign of what holy discontentment looks like (Huckins & Yackley, 2012).  
They were the sign of rocking the boat so that diversity of expressions is welcome.  
They were the sign of the genius of imagination.  
They are passing the baton to you.  
They are blowing an assertive, yet gentle breeze in your ears.  
They want you to know: this is your turn.  
Make God relevant.

### **3.7 “Have I told you that you are” respectful (Obama, 2010)?**

You have risen above the patriarchal bias of our society,  
You have allowed good hearted and minded people to influence you regardless of their gender.  
Elisabeth Matsimela was a woman who walked in the dust of your streets, slept between the walls of your township and raised her family under your watchful eyes.  
She decided to open her eyes in order to face injustices around her.  
She decided to speak up when she saw the apartheid system torturing her neighbours.  
She accepted to go to prison because she refused to collide with injustice through her silence.  
In your hearts, she is a living epistle.

Through her actions, she removed the chains of her emotionally and psychologically imprisoned neighbours.

Her protesting was to be the voice to her voiceless and abused neighbours.

And she was generous.

She reminds you today: 'I was just an ordinary person who learned to make extraordinary impact'.

She is asking you: 'What about you'?

### **3.8 “Have I told you that you are” creative (Obama, 2010)?**

Lucky Lekgwathi, a former footballer, is a son who was raised in the dust of your streets.

He was able to make a living through entertainment.

He has taught us that formal school is not the only way out of poverty,

And that a focused pursuit of our gifting and talent could lead to a better quality of life.

Like him, God gave you a talent and gifting (Matthew 25:14-30). He expects you to multiply and make this world, a better place for all.

### **3.9 “Have I told you that you are” brave (Obama 2010: 10)?**

You have been a pioneer at different fronts.

This is a difficult gifting to express in our society that seems to be comfortable with status quo.

You are a reformer, which can be a lonely space to live in

Reformers usually have enemies in all those who profited from the old order (Machiavelli, 2007)

I am proud of you because you are a roaring lion in the streets of your township.

You roar sounds of peace, reconciliation and mutual support amongst your neighbours (Jeremiah 29:1-12).

You roar sounds of solidarity so that together we can build the ruined walls of our township (Nehemiah 2).

Your daily motto is to bring the kingdom of God “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9).

You are a true ambassador of Jesus.

### **3.10 Have I told you that you are adventurous?**

In your pursuit of being a prophetic witness,

I have seen you glow when your support came from your neighbours.

I have also seen you struggle when you were rejected.

It seems like societies tend to reject its cornerstones.

Jesus Christ, your mentor was a rejected cornerstone (Acts 4:11).

Desmond Tutu was called a sell out by some people.

Patrice Lumumba was silenced by the neo-colonialist political elite of his country.

You are not alone.

Jesus foresaw the challenges you are going through.

He told you: 'It is hard to be a prophet at home' (Matthew 13:57).

He is telling you today: 'I will feel dishonoured if you are not the prophet I created you to be'!

### **3.11 "Have I told you that you" take ownership (Obama, 2010)?**

I admire your wisdom.

In many instances, you have been struck at the foot of your society (Mbembe 2017: ix).

You have boldly called out the perpetrators of injustice,

You have called out the corrupted.

You have also admitted your short comings.

In some instances, you have been the enabler of injustice and corruption.

Your silence is sometimes the enemy of wisdom.

Your commitment to your family has impeded your task of building your society.

You have loved yourself at the expense of others.

You have confessed your participation in putting your society in ruins.

I have also seen you making bricks under the sun,

Digging sand in the rain,

Transporting cement on your head,

So that your township can rebuild its lost beauty.

### **3.12 Have I told you that you are smart (Obama 2010:8)**

Your ability to form relationships cross culturally is spectacular!

You are the paragon of African genius.

A genius out of which flows the capacity of Africans to inhabit several worlds at once (Mbembe 2017: 102).

You have been a bridge builder.

You have been a connector.

Through your prowess, we have learned how all creatures are united to their creator.

Through your life, we have learned that rainbow is not just a collage of colour,

But it is a platform where colours have a symbiotic relationship.

### **3.13 Have I told you that you are strong? (Obama 2010: 16)**

You spend 3 hours on the road to get to work,

Yet you find time to be an ambassador of Jesus there.

You spend 3 hours on the road from work to your house,

Yet we make time to love others in your community.



You have an exceptional ability to harmonize your knowledge of God and your passion to love others through sport.

Lao Tze is very proud of you.

He founded Taoism to teach us to find the way:

To strike a good balance between the yang (knowledge) and the yin (passion) (Max-Neef, 2005).

You exemplify such a balance.

### **3.14 Have I told you are hospitable? (Obama 2010:18)**

Every day, many children from other townships come to knock on your doors.

You have opened your schools to educate them.

People from all over the world come to live with you.

You opened your arms of embrace to welcome them

You are a conduit of God's blessing to others (Genesis 12:1-3).

You tirelessly look for opportunities to bless.

You are generous with your place and your assets.

### **3.15 Have I told you that you are part of a historical narrative (Obama, 2010)?**

Many people before you have contributed to what Africa is today and what Africa could be today.

They warned you that "the negation of the history and intellectual accomplishments of Black Africans was a cultural and mental murder" (Diop 1974: 47).

You can learn from your fellow "descendants of European settlers who usually draw their strengths from their history as a people group (Ramphela 2017:52).

As you are putting yourself out there as a change agent, please remember that "in the face of cultural aggression of all sorts, in the face of all disintegrating factors of the outside world, the most efficient cultural weapon with which a people can arm itself is the feeling of historical continuity" (Diop 1974: 54). I plead you to hold this truth as the credo of your cultural emancipation. This is because:

"The most significant damage wrought by imperial and colonial conquest was the cultural and mental murder of indigenous Africans... The continuity that history gives to people is their most powerful weapon against attacks on their identity and self-confidence (Ramphela 2017: 55-56).

As a way forward, "the path is clear: on the basis of a critique of the past, we must create a future that is inseparable from the notions of justice, dignity, and the in-common" (Mbembe: 2017: xiv).

I get the privilege of reading these letters to neighbours who are transformation agents.

## **4. Transformation agents**

Several scholars have shaped InnerCHANGE understanding of who a transformation agent is. Burns (1978:4) describes transformation agents as individuals "who generally observe principles of human

dignity and worth, human rights, good social values, and individual and socio-political transformation". According to him, they "are able to recognise existing needs" of individuals and a community, and engage them in a way that is solution-seeking. Their engagement usually leads to new insights into ways to heal or build a community through its residents. Wong (2017) defines transformation agents as people who "value being part of the fabric of a community and influence it from the inside out. They value being true and tangible witnesses of the gospel as good news". They actively participate in building thin places around them. Max-Neef (2005) uses the Taoism paradigm of the balance between the *yang* and *yin* to explain who a transformation agent is. Taoism (Pollard & al., 2011) is "a religious or philosophical tradition of Chinese origin which emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao (the way)". According to Max-Neef (2005:10), a transformation agent is the incarnation of "the way - a balance between the *yang* and *yin*". An exemplary way of marrying our relational thought to rational thought. This paradigm has been helpful in our missiology. In our team, we train ourselves to attain a logic that is capable of harmonizing our knowledge of God (*yang*) and our passion (*yin*). We are inspired by Addison (2009:49) who believes that "a passionate faith is at the heart of every dynamic missionary movement. It is the greatest resource. Today where Christianity is expanding rapidly in the developing world, it is often the only resource".

We are experimenting balancing the rational (teaching the word of God) and the emotional (tapping into people's passion) to train our neighbours as missionaries in their own community and beyond – builders of thin places. Our history and current realities as black people challenge us to go that road. Mbembe (2017:19) points out that "whether in literature, philosophy, the arts, or politics, Black discourse has been dominated by three events: slavery, colonisation and apartheid. Still today, they imprison the ways in which black discourse expresses itself". There is a dependency mentality that is clouding our ability to emancipate ourselves. We are well justified to complain about the kind of gospel the coloniser imported to Africa. At the same time, we should be ashamed of ourselves for not designing alternatives that could have improved the quality of life of all of us as a continent. In many instances, we continue to preach Marx (1976) saying: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people". To this day some church leaders still collide with the corrupted, demagogues, neo-colonisers and oppressors. Africa is longing to see in the near future a kind of society Hlumelo Biko (2013) describes:

"Building a people-centric society characterised by its equality in opportunity granted to all citizens and thereby facilitating an era of shared prosperity through a globally competitive economy will be the greatest way Africa can honour the men and women who died fighting for its liberation".

As a missional team, we are in sync with these this declaration of the World council of churches: "We are called to be formed as servant leaders who demonstrate the way of Christ in a world that privileges power, wealth, and the culture of money" (Arusha call to discipleship March, 2018). We prioritise our investment in developing our neighbours because we believe that together as a continent, we need to tangibly "build ourselves into the" continent "of our dreams" (Ramphela 2017:

27). We would like to see ordinary people in communities of poverty such as Soshanguve bring “a new spirit of hope and accomplishment to” our communities (Stearns 2011: 52). Additionally, for that spirit to “sweep across the continent” in sharing “an energy, a self-reliance and a determination to shape” our own destinies as Africa (Stearns 2011: 52). Katongole stresses that “Christianity continues to grow and thrive in Africa, but so too grow the realities of poverty, violence, and civil war... They are a number of reasons for these short comings, not least of which are deep seated assumptions about the relationship between Christianity and the social political sphere. One assumption is that the task of ensuring peace, democracy, and development- in a word, the social and material conditions of life- properly belongs to the jurisdiction of politics” (Katongole 2011:1). This paper argued that the church needs to be a participant in building Africa holistically.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper used the narrative approach of storytelling to contribute in a small way “to the prophetic role of the church in society” (Kabongo, 2018). Communities of poverty are known to overly be dependent on government in order to survive and thrive. This is not sustainable in the long term. There is a necessity to raise agency from within. Addison (2009:111) stresses that “necessity is the mother of invention. New ideas come from fresh invention”. This paper did not really come up with new ideas. It used old and existing stories to inspire imagination of what could be if individuals and communities are agents of their own hope. In this sense, this paper plays the role of a prophet. Brueggemann (2001:66) points out that “a prophet has a purpose in bringing hope to public expression, and that is to return the community to its single referent, the sovereign faithfulness of God”. He adds that “prophetic ministry consists of offering an alternative perception of reality and in letting people see their own history in the light of God’s freedom and his will for justice” (Brueggemann 2001: 116). Such a perception has the potential to orchestrate change from within and the development of transformation agents who are kingdom-like and good news to others.

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