

Theology and Religion

The impacts that informed my life-changing decisions and career choice

by Wayne Renkin



Left to right: Wayne Renkin, Mandla Sithole and Tebogo Mpuwane

'From a very young age I knew I wanted to play a part in transforming society one day. I decided to move to Pretoria and enrol at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at UP, to equip myself. Very soon I realised that, although invaluable – all the book knowledge in the world couldn't really prepare me for the need I witnessed in the inner city of Pretoria.'

'I joined Echo Youth Development. They create places of safety for youth at risk. I shared my living spaces with youth at risk and immersed and committed myself fully to understand their circumstances and what contributed to their situation.

During 2011, I became part of organisations that responded to a large-scale illegal and violent eviction of Schubart Park in the inner-city of Pretoria. Two-thousand people were suddenly left homeless, with little to no possessions, exploited by the systems.

I recall vividly standing among men, women and children in the middle of the night – feeling completely powerless and dumbstruck. This unnecessary tragedy that perpetuated injustice and vulnerabilities, moved me to seek answers, new platforms and to learn

all I can from people and organisations who didn't hesitate to stand in the gaps. My fundamental understanding of the world was challenged and turned upside down and my theology was put to the test.

My theological understanding was that of a saviour: I am the one who must give the answers to pain and injustices, to correct all the wrongs of the world. Being immersed into the world of homelessness, vulnerabilities, and injustices in the city, I quickly realised that I do not have the answers nor can I be the saviour. But I am called to journey with people through the pain and seek answers together, sharing our lives and caring our burdens together, and stand in radical solidarity within the pain and suffering. My theology is continuously being informed by people who are vulnerable, homeless and who face exclusion and discrimination on a daily basis.

As part of a student group, I had the opportunity to go to Germany through a DAAD scholarship. I also spend one semester at Fordham University, New York City, USA as part of my two-year master's degree.

I returned to South Africa and joined the Tshwane Leadership Foundation (TLF). The organisation's *vision* is to see healthy and vibrant communities flourishing in God's presence. As TLF we are tasked to find sustainable pathways out of homelessness, creating platforms where people are empowered and once again become active citizens in society. We also lobby for systematic transformation in terms of laws and

policies to ensure the city truly becomes a city for all who live in it.

I joined the Centre for Contextual Ministry as a research assistant to Dr Stephan de Beer. It is here that I learned to articulate my theology through the experiences in the city. I have been challenged to critically engage my theology with issues of social justice. One intensive research project we launched in 2014 is that of Pathways out of Homelessness.'

'My practical work informs my research and my research informs my practical work – a true praxis cycle. I am pursuing a PhD in which I will continue to reflect academically on my work and engagements with people in the city who not only enrich my life but continuously transform it.'

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