


African youth, African faith(s), African environment and sustainable development: A missional diaconal calling

**Author:**Johannes J. Knoetze¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Practical Theology and Mission Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Johannes Knoetze,
johannes.knoetze@up.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 07 Mar. 2021

Accepted: 07 June 2021

Published: 12 Aug. 2021

How to cite this article:

Knoetze, J.J., 2021, 'African youth, African faith(s), African environment and sustainable development: A missional diaconal calling', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(2), a6607. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i2.6607>

Copyright:

© 2021. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article aims missional diaconate as a method of sustainable development in Africa. The focus is on the interdependence and relation between African youth, African faith(s) and African environment within the context of spirituality and religiosity. Africa is a youth continent, where 200 million of the population is between the ages of 15 and 24 years of age. Although African people are known for their religiosity and spirituality, not much attention is given to these aspects when thinking of and planning for development. Speaking about African traditional beliefs, Africans live close to nature and the environment; traditionally, they were and some still are subsistence farmers, making a living from the natural environment, while most of the youth struggle to survive in a more industrialised, modern and global world. As such, the sustainability of development, especially in the form of urbanisation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution – which hit Africa as a reality with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) – remains in question, where so many seemingly valuable developments have failed in the past.

Contribution: The research question this article wants to answer is: What is unique in the contribution of missional diaconate as method of sustainable development amongst African youth in their context? The question is answered when missional diaconate is applied to the five elements of faith formation as discussed by Weber. It became clear from this article that while development is designed to overcome material needs, missional diaconate motivated from the unconditional love of God is focused on identity, relations and values.

Keywords: African youth; African faiths; African environment; development; missional diaconate.

Introduction

In the global world, currently caught up in the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (2019–2021), the predominant thing experienced by people is developments that transform their lives like the use of zoom meetings and e-learning. Some might think that Africa is exempt because of its vast rural and desert areas. But that which is not debatable is the undeniable reality that COVID-19 is also impacting development in Africa. 'African' or 'Africa' are known as a people and a continent, respectively, with great potential to influence or even transform the world. 'Youth' implies natural physical and spiritual development on a continent where 200 million of the population is between 15 and 24 years of age (Counted & Arawole 2015:7). 'Faith' implies the expectation of change; otherwise, faith becomes knowledge, especially in Africa known for its spirituality. In terms of 'environment', worldwide people are discussing environmental challenges and changes, such as global warming. New developments in weather patterns, such as droughts and floods, are specifically changing and challenging the African environment where subsistence farming is the traditional way of living. Unequivocally, change in the natural environment is transforming society. Natural disasters are compelling many Africans to migrate to cities or denser populations around industries in search of social and economic security. The natural richness of Africa in the form of land, minerals, oil and people also creates unnatural migration developments in the form of international-, national- and tribal wars and conflicts, mostly for economic reasons. The most obvious examples are the historical slave trades of the 16th–19th century where between 10 000 000 and 12 000 000 enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic Ocean to America. The impact of Africa's colonial history and the exploitation of its richness continue because the colonial powers divided the continent into geographical countries (areas), irrespective of social and tribal implications. Another example is the Rwandan genocide

Note: Special Collection: Youth, Faith, Climate Change and Environmental Consciousness: A Case for Sustainable Development, sub-edited by Jacques Beukes (University of Pretoria), Juliane Stork (Humboldt University, Berlin) and Ignatius Swart (University of the Western Cape).

from 07 April to 15 July 1994 when 800 000 Tutsis were killed within the time span of a 100 days by ethnic Hutu racist extremists. However, more recently, (East) African countries have had to contend with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) extremists, targeting, especially the youth.

Within the global context, Africa is also targeted as a developing continent. To clarify further, developing countries have most of the following characteristics in common: little access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene; energy problems or shortages; high levels of tropical and infectious diseases; lack of infrastructure (e.g. roads, etc.); widespread poverty; low education levels; high gender inequalities; many informal settlements and high levels of corruption. It is noteworthy that development discussions undermine the complex role of religion as if development and transformation happen in a spiritual vacuum, or even view religion and/or spirituality as a barrier or obstacle to development (Adogame 2016:1; Steenkamp-Nel 2018:7). A noteworthy point made by Amanze (2011:13) is worth mentioning here. He does not see African spirituality as a fixed collection of spiritual means but rather as a political scenario lacking specific cultural content; as such, African spirituality is closely linked to development.

This brief introduction attempts to establish a contextual understanding as a basis for the rest of this article, which will later argue for a missional diaconal approach to youth ministry in Africa. As will become clear in the discussion that follows, this article will show how a missional diaconal youth ministry will contribute to sustainable development in Southern Africa.

African¹ youth

In discussing African youth, faith, development and missional diaconate, it is imperative to give attention to faith formation amongst African youth. Although there are many faiths in Africa such as African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam and Hinduism, this article will only focus on faith formation from a Christian faith perspective. The five characteristics of Christian faith formation amongst African youth, as described by Weber (2015:3–4), will be used as a framework in this article.

Firstly, the characteristic of faith formation amongst African youth is: 'Christian faith has little connection to God's redemptive work' (Weber 2015:3); rather, it relates to public behaviour and neighbourly love. As such it might be viewed more as a spirituality of love your neighbour than Christian faith.

Secondly, African youth find it difficult to articulate their faith because of a lack of understanding of doctrinal-loaded terminology, for example, salvation, redemption and

1. For many, it is important to define who is viewed as African. Is it determined by geography, the place where you live? Or by the colour of your skin? Are all black people Africans even if they grew up in Europe? Are all white people Europeans even if they grew up in Africa? Knoetze (2019) builds a case to define African by spirituality, as how people identify themselves, how they view the world, interact with others and make decisions.

righteousness. Because of this lack of intellectually and spiritually grasping the Christian faith, they struggle to own their Christian faith. As a result, they move away from a theological (I would argue, a Christological) understanding to a humanistic understanding of spirituality (Weber 2015:4). To elaborate on this characteristic further, I would rather argue a socialistic or even political understanding of spirituality than a humanistic understanding, thinking of the #FeesMustFall (South Africa 2015–2016) and other youth movements in Africa. This also closely relates to the following characteristics discussed by Weber.

Thirdly, for African youth, 'identity and faith formation are connected' (Weber 2015:3). Most youth seek social belonging and are optimistic to get involved in youth groups that are connected to moral (and perhaps even 'political') values they adhere or aspire to. Part of faith formation and identity is choosing a god, but the youth soon discover that not just any god will do. In a globally competitive world, and as 'liberated people'², many of their lives are directed by power, status and money. Thus, they enjoy youth gatherings that may arouse specific youth sub-cultures, whether positive or negative. One such example is the *Skothane* sub-culture amongst the youth in South Africa (Knoetze 2015a):

Izikhothane (or Skothane or Ukukhothana) refers to South African showmanship or dance battles in which individuals or groups of individuals compete against each other in front of large crowds to determine which party is wealthier. These 'battles' are performed using material items such as money, mobile phones, clothes, and/or alcohol. In most instances a battle is won by the intentional destruction or wastage of one's own expensive items in order to demonstrate the lack of concern for such material possessions due to the ability to afford more of the same. A competitor's chances of victory are improved by having items that are more expensive than those of their opponent. (p. 3)

Consistent and authentic relations with peers, parents and mentors are of utmost importance in the identity formation of African youth in a globalised world. In the dawn of the Fourth Industrial Revolution in Africa and with the virulent COVID-19 pandemic currently wreaking havoc across the globe, such contexts have contributed to the youth spending significant amounts of time on social media (Knoetze 2020:57–73).

The fourth characteristic alluded to by Weber (2015:3) is: 'a Christian identity is formed through the process of socialisation'. There is no doubt that it is closely linked to the above discussion, but now the focus is more on the church community. It is important for the youth to be mentored so that they are able to critically reflect on 'behaviour patterns, values, beliefs, symbols, traditions and shared worldviews' (Weber 2015:4), that they may be able to own and through this process take responsibility for their own faith. As such, many mainline churches brought

2. I use this as a generic term to include all forms of liberation that might be applicable for a specific context in Africa.

with them European ways of worship and church practice that influence how African people dress when attending church and relate to theological concepts that are strange to traditional culture.

Finally, the fifth characteristic is: 'youth moral and faith formation are connected' (Weber 2015:3). For this reason, parents, extended families and faith communities must allow the youth to discern and make their own life choices in the plurality of values, beliefs and cultures they encounter daily (Knoetze 2019a:1–2).

African faith(s)

There are many descriptions of 'faith', but the most common dictionary descriptions are 'belief in God or a god' or 'strong belief in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual conviction rather than proof'. Faith is also understood as the substance or assurance of things we hope for but have not yet received (Heb 11:1). Usually, we link faith to a specific religion, such as ATR, Christianity or Islam. Linking a faith (like African Christianity) to people living on a specific continent is an indication of a unique inclusive development of different religions, while various groups of people have diverse dominant religious faiths without excluding other religious faiths. Or it might indicate exclusiveness in their faith.³ Discussing African faiths, we at least need to be aware of the interrelatedness and be able to distinguish between the original ATR; the impact of Christianity; the impact of Islam and the impact of the modern and postmodern cultures in Africa. While the distinctions between the different dogmas of the various religions are clear, the interrelatedness in Africa only becomes clear in the way faith is experienced, to name but a few: through worship, rituals, ceremonies, African festivals, sacred places and religious objects, music and dance, naming people and indeed, in any aspect of life. Although it is possible to identify the core religious beliefs in Africa, it is difficult to disentangle them from Africa's cultural heritage (Amenga-Etego 2016:2). Just to give one example of African traditional beliefs (Knoetze 2019a):

Although original African traditionalism is rarely found today, together with the impact of Christianity, it still influences the worldview of many Africans, for example over 12 000 young African males participated in initiation schools in Mpumalanga province in South Africa during 2018. Most African people are somewhere on the way to modernity in tandem with large-scale urbanisation. Especially young (African) people in the cities have largely become part of the global modern-postmodern African culture. (p. 2)

Considering the above, traditional values and knowledge systems still continue to serve African societies in diverse ways, despite other major religions like Christianity and Islam, and cultures like modernism and urbanisation

³In this regard, I am referring specifically, for example, at the AICs. As far as I know, there are no white people who are members of an AIC, although there might be some white people who are associates.

(Amenga-Etego 2016:3). Christianity in Africa is also described as 'African Christianity' to indicate some of the uniqueness I have referred to above. African Christianity is mostly a combination of Christianity and ATR. The best proof of this is seen in the African Independent/Initiated Churches (AIC's), representing a wide range of religious understandings and practices 'ranging from groups only one step removed from traditional African religious reality to Christ-centred, Spirit-led, biblical orientated communities of faith' (Oduro et al. 2008:6). Based on the incarnational teachings of Christianity as well as the incarnational nature of the church, many African people believe that Christianity is the fulfilment of ATR, and therefore, view these two religions as interdependent (Amanze 2011:9). Inclusive of all the different faiths and combinations of religions, I will now use the term 'African spirituality'.

Steenkamp-Nel (2018:3) indicates that research in the transformative capacity of African spirituality is a relatively new field, especially with a focus on personal transformative capacities within the communal world view of Africa. As such, many Africans acknowledge that they have been formed by African traditional beliefs, but they are no longer being transformed by these beliefs. This relocation of identity is clearly seen in the African youths' purposeful engagement with global political, sociological and religious issues, such as decolonisation, racism (Black Lives Matter), Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel in Africa. This is described by Higgins (2016, quoted in Steenkamp-Nel 2018) as follows:

I and my generation were without choice educated in a schooling environment that in its content orientated us away intellectually from our formative environments of home and community. This resulted in dangerously high levels of alienation as 'our affective imaginations progressively got anchored elsewhere', with the inevitable consequence that 'our own immediate world' became 'less real'. (pp. 4–5)

When African youth and faith formation was discussed, the concept of 'identity formation' came to the fore; now we find it again when dealing with African faith(s), and a word like 'alienation' is used. I will later show how missional diaconate may help African youth in identity formation. Before shifting attention to the African environment and sustainable development, it is important to note that identity can be described by three actions: knowing, claiming and recognising (Chrysochoou 2003:225). Up to know in the discussion of youth, we have not found these three actions together. The point, however, is that if African youth do not find identity, or do not identify with development and development projects, development will not be sustainable.

African environment and important African beliefs

African beliefs closely link the spiritual world and the environment with reality and destiny (Turaki 2001:60). In the African traditional belief system, there are two groups of

nature spirits, namely: nature spirits from the sky (sun, moon, stars, rain, wind, thunder, lightning, etc.) and nature spirits from the earth (mountains, trees and forests, metals and water in different forms like ponds, rivers, waterfalls, etc.) (Mbiti 1991:70–81). Not all African people believe in sky and earth spirits, and believers do not always attend to them with prayers and offerings. These spirits rather help people to interpret what and mostly why things are happening in the world around them, and they will acknowledge this, for example, when giving a name to a newborn (Mbiti 1991:92–95).

It is clear that nature is viewed as both sacred and secular, and there is no clear distinction between these. This perceived sacredness of nature affects the way natural resources are used and harnessed, because any serious transgression may have serious consequences. When people become aware of any transgression, it is corrected with prescribed ritual performances. However, rituals are not only used for corrective measures but also to ensure harmony and balance between the sacred and the secular. For example, in many places in Africa, before any work commences on a new mining site, rituals are performed to seek safety and permission from the spirit of the land to harvest that which lies within her safety (Amenga-Etego 2016:3–4).

Besides the two groups of nature spirits, there are also human spirits – again, these can be divided into two groups: those who have passed away long ago and those who have died recently. The spirits of the most outstanding leaders are raised in myths and rituals to the status of divinities, and even portrayed as God. Overall, people fear the spirits of the unknown people of the distant past, as they can be described as ‘ghosts’. ‘Some diseases, such as meningitis, lunacy, and the condition of being deaf and dumb, are associated with spirits of this kind in some societies’ (Mbiti 1991:77). For this reason, family planning and contraceptive use, as examples, need to be dialogued with the specific socio-political system’s leaders, keeping in mind the gender dynamics in a respective community. These dialogues are important because of the strong interconnected cyclical world view that links the present – the family (living), the future – childbirth (unborn), and the past – ancestral beliefs (dead) (Amenga-Etego 2016:5).

African environment and sustainable development

It is essential to determine what is meant by ‘development’. Development means different things to different people in different contexts. Development is defined theologically by (Knoetze 2018) as:

[T]he goal to engage people to discover their true identity as created in the image of God and discover their vocation as productive stewards who care for creation and all the people in it. (p. 484)

Or it can be economically defined as ‘simply having more things’ (Myers 2015:3). In the beginning of this article, the characteristics that developing countries have in common were described as: little access to safe drinking water,

sanitation and hygiene; energy shortages; high levels of tropical and infectious diseases; lack of infrastructure (e.g. roads, etc.); widespread poverty; low education levels; high gender inequalities; many informal settlements and high levels of corruption. The problem with these characteristics is that poverty is reduced to material things; the absence of money, or water, or whatever else; or the lack of social justice, which, in the end, is also materially defined. A further problem is that development is designed to overcome these needs (Myers 2015:5). This leads to the question, why do developers want to develop? What are they gaining? When we start asking these questions our world views are put on the table. For example, the dualistic Western world view that separates the physical and the spiritual worlds, together with our modernistic overestimation of our human capabilities, thinking that we can fix everything. Soon, it becomes clear that in many instances, development is about control; it is to gain or to remain in a power position, whether economic or political power.

Therefore, the whole development dialogue is closely connected to the history of colonialism and imperialism, and currently, neo-colonialism in Africa. From this history, the implications of separating the spiritual and physical become clear in many of the lifelong tragedies it caused in human lives, despite some of the benefits. Ter Haar and Ellis (2006:351–352) mention how religion seemed irrelevant to the development process or even an obstacle to modernisation by the European Union, and then argued in the rest of their article for rethinking this position. It is these same countries responsible for colonialism who now want to develop Africa. The dominant features of colonialism were not only dark and entrapping, but also transforming, just like European education was not only liberating and transforming but also entrapping. Against this backdrop of colonialism of unequal humanity (racism) and economics of unequal exchange, there are serious questions about development ‘from above’ or ‘from outsiders’ today (Adogame 2016:2).

Against this background, I refer to Swart (2020:73–92) who argues for a ‘development from below’ in Africa and the importance of the AICs, which is of importance to the context of this article. Development from below implies that the developed people are part and parcel of the whole process from the need’s analysis, through the planning and the implementation. As such they take responsibility and ownership for the process and their environment. Adogame (2016:2–3) refers to ‘development from below’ as grassroots development, and is closely related to people’s life experiences, which includes religious, moral and cultural dimensions.

Without referring to Africa or the AICs, Myers (2015:18) affirmed that the ownership of the development process must be with the people ‘being developed’ themselves. The reasons for this are: firstly, that ‘outsiders’ focus on a specific need in people’s lives, like education, or water, neglecting the spirituality of the people. Secondly, the people ‘being developed’ have indigenous or contextual knowledge as well

as experience on how to survive poverty in their context. Thirdly, participation is not the end of development. Only when participation empowers people to have more and make better choices do they become actors in their own development. Fourthly, participation that does not build community is also flawed. As such, development that transforms will be less focussed on goals and milestones, and more on vision and values.

It is against this background that I want to argue that missional diaconate as youth ministry will contribute to sustainable development.

Missional diaconia

Diaconia has to do with creating new opportunities in life and or to find purpose in life. In this regard, *diaconia* is best understood in terms of the verb *diakoneoo*, which, 'in some instances, may be best translated as "to have responsibility to help others"' (Louw & Nida 1988:541). Thus, *diaconia* finds its foundation in creation theology with God's call to stewardship, which is also a call to relationship. When *diaconia* is understood as relational, it is easy to realise that it originates from the being of the Trinitarian God, firstly and foremost, as mercy, where no one needs to do or prove anything to deserve a new life or life opportunities. *Diaconia* is God's mercy towards humans and creation, and humans' mercy towards creation and each other. Using the tautology, *missional diaconate*, I want to confirm and emphasise that originating from the being of the Trinitarian God, the *diaconal* ministry must be focused on the whole of creation. *Missional diaconia* also has to do with the acknowledgement that different people read the Bible, understand life and experience God in various ways in diverse contexts. There is thus no one-dimensional *missional diaconal* ministry, and no other motive than the unconditional love of God for getting involved with the marginalised and the less privileged people (Knoetze 2019b:5). *Missional diaconate* comes from a position of unconditional love and not from any position of power.

There have been many debates and documents about the relationship between the involvement of religion within development (Amenga-Etego 2016; Ter Haar & Ellis 2006; Knoetze 2019b; Myers 2015; Swart 2020), but religion is still ignored by many developers. There are also many examples of the developmental influence that the religious institutions and actions have on communities; for example, Christian schools, children's homes (run by faith communities like churches) and faith-based organisations (FBOs), such as gift of the givers. I believe that people who are helping in communities (developers, such as governments, businesses, corporations and others) 'as outsiders' need to be in constant dialogue with communities, especially different groups in communities, such as youth, and religious groups, 'as insiders'. Such dialogues will reveal to developers how their own biases influence their perceptions and understanding of the community. I am convinced that development in Africa is not possible without the involvement of the religious society and a diaconal ministry.

An important cognitive psychological tool for deepening self-awareness during such dialogues is the well-known 'Johari window'. The Johari window aids in becoming more aware of how we see ourselves, how other people see us and how we think other people see us in our social interactions. Kritzinger (2008:776) described the Johari window (See Figure 1) with its four quadrants as follows: First is the open quadrant, which contains information about yourself that both you and others know. Second is the blind quadrant, which contains information that others know about you, but you are not aware of. Third is the hidden quadrant (Façade), which contains private information that you know about yourself, but others do not know. And fourth is the unknown quadrant that contains information about yourself that both you and others do not know.

Applying this as a tool to engagements with the African social and natural environment will help decision-makers identify the greatest risk for both insiders and outsiders as they 'overestimate what they know, and underestimate what they do not know' (Kritzinger 2008:776).

Dealing with missional diaconate as relational ministry, I will link it to Kritzinger's (2008) referral to Koyama's praxis model known as 'neighbourology', describing it as 'exegesis of the Word of God and exegesis of the life and culture of the people among whom he lives and works' (Koyama, in Kritzinger 2008:770). This understanding of 'neighbourology' may also be a good description of missional diaconate. Kritzinger indicates that he prefers the term 'encounterology' instead of 'neighbourology'. I would then describe missional diaconate as the participation of the church in God's life-giving, healing, and restoration encounters with a broken world. For missional diaconate to be transformational, those who participate in God's mercy, engaging the community as well as those being engaged, must be aware of all their different 'ideologies' behind the actual (development) encounter. As alluded to earlier, when we discuss African faiths, there are different 'theologies of salvation' that people articulate 'in their heads' because of their own understanding, experiences and contexts. This will be

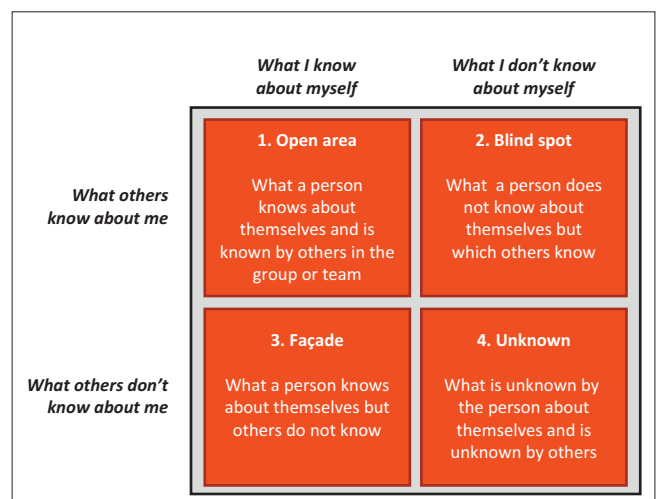


FIGURE 1: The Johari window.

discussed again in more detail later. However, for now, remaining with the current discussion, I refer to Kritzinger's argumentation of Lochhead's (1998) ideologies for dialogue and apply it to missional diaconate. The five ideologies mentioned and applicable to missional diaconate are: *hostility, isolation, competition, partnership* and *dialogue [diaconate]*. The theological agenda for Christians who are concerned with the development of communities need to focus on a new theology of missional diaconate (as encounterology or neighbourology), not on a new doctrine of God, or a new doctrine of Christ, or a new doctrine of salvation, engaging in new doctrines may happen when we focus on ideologies or experiences when we engage a community. Missional diaconate should not require any prior conversion on either side, other than the conversion, and commitment, to the Trinitarian God.

Although terminology such as 'missional diaconate' or 'encounterology' is not used in the AICs, their attention to the holistic needs of Africans, namely 'well-being, healing, and protection from evil powers', is all part and parcel of what they understand as the salvation ministry of the church (Oduro et al. 2008). As such:

Salvation, healing and sanctification are ... linked in an outlook that makes little distinction between the sacred and the profane, between earthly and eternal salvation ... the gospel is related much more realistically to the whole of human life than often happens in the historic churches. (p. 26)

A missional diaconate approach to youth ministry

In many instances, there are great emotional gaps between the youth and the different institutions or powers in society. These gaps are because of the personal attitudes of the youth or the power attitudes of institutions. Kritzinger (2008:774) used the 'emotional distance scale' of Overdiep (1985) to distinguish the following five types of emotional distance between people: *enemies, opponents, strangers, colleagues* and *friends*. Interestingly, enemies and friends are emotionally the closest to us, while strangers are emotionally the furthest. Strangers are the people who leave us emotionally cold, while an enemy, for instance, may have a much closer relationship with us. Through relations, an enemy can grow into an opponent, which is a huge conversion or growth in the relation. But there are some examples of strangers (who do not affect us emotionally) that suddenly turned into enemies. Think for a moment of the many ignored or tolerated immigrants who lived as strangers in South Africa and then suddenly transformed into enemies when South African citizens started with xenophobic attacks. When dealing with any form of development in a community, the youth in most instances are strangers to the process, although much attention is given to developments that are focussed on them, such as education, job creation and health. Within the South African context, we have also experienced how the youth, previously 'strangers' to the development of higher education policies, became enemies of higher education in 2015–2016 with the #FeesMustFall protests, while currently, many of them are opponents taking part in determining the higher education policies.

This article is about sustainable development. Within the context of the arguments in this article, sustainable development has to do with transformation. It was argued that youth are physically developing in a natural way, while faith also carries within it the expectation of change or transformation of circumstances or persons. It is in this regard that Knoetze (2018:483–487) argues that African youth and the AICs are some of the most obvious agents that need to participate in development in Africa. This view is also confirmed by Öhlmann, Gräß and Frost's book *African Initiated Christianity and the Decolonisation of Development* (2020). Unfortunately, the youth are in most instances 'strangers' to development discussions, while the AIC's or African spirituality is seen as too complex, or even a barrier or obstacle to development. Amenga-Etego (2016) argues against this view:

For if the indigenous religions, culture, and knowledge systems are fluid and dynamic in such a way that every generation can adapt and modify them to suit their existing context, then it is unreasonable to argue that they are militating against Africa's development. As indicated above, the worldview of people underlies their development. Why, therefore, should Africa's case be different? It is for this reason that development workers need to actively engage the indigenous religio-cultural system for genuine and sustained development in the continent. (p. 7)

With all the above in mind, I want to argue that when faith formation (identity and moral formation) of African youth happens through the ministry of missional diaconate, it will contribute to sustainable development of the African environment. In the discussion below, I will now apply a missional diaconal ministry to each of the five Christian faith formation characteristics amongst African youth, as previously identified by Weber (2015).

The first characteristic was: 'Christian faith has little connection to God's redemptive work', but it is supported by some good behaviour and neighbourly love. Though the reason for this is not discussed by Weber (2015), I assume that it is because of different views of Christ within the African context. Adeyemo (1997:14) elucidates this further by explaining that there can be revelation without salvation but no salvation without revelation, and proposes the question: How much knowledge of the Trinitarian God as revealed in Scripture do the traditional people of Africa possess? The main identity of Christianity has to do with the Trinitarian God's complete and specific revelation in the incarnation in Christ as the only Redeemer of our sins. To connect to God's redemptive work, we need a faith community that discerns amongst the different gods and spirits (1 Jn 4:1) accepting the Trinitarian God's revelation in the Bible and the person of Jesus Christ (Knoetze 2015b):

The apostle Paul relates spiritual (trans)formation to the resurrection of Jesus Christ in three different ways: firstly, as a process of personal identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus; secondly, as the believer's submission to the all-encompassing reign of Jesus as Lord; and thirdly, the behaviour of believers from the perspective of the *parousia*, the future hope of the resurrection. (p. 3)

Missional diaconal ministry can help connect African youth to the redemptive work of the Trinitarian God when they experience that they are called and have the privilege to participate in his redemptive actions, because they are redeemed and transformed. They need to experience that they are different (not better) because they belong to God.

The second characteristic is: African youth find it difficult to articulate their faith because of a lack of understanding of doctrinal-loaded terminology, for example, salvation, redemption and righteousness, and the fact that they do not own their faith. Growing up with an African world view where, for example, to experience salvation, or receive redemption or righteousness, you have to own it through bringing some sacrifices or participating in specific rituals, this is understandable. Especially considering the first characteristic where it was said that Christian faith has little to do with God's redemptive work. I believe that a missional diaconal ministry can help African youth to own their faith when it does not stay empty concepts and terminology to them. African youth are in many instances 'strangers' to Christian theology, and the church is keeping them strangers as they are seen only as the objects of the ministry. If the church does not involve them in the encounters of Christianity with their context (encounterology) and help them to discern the revelation of God in, amongst, and around them, they will stay strangers, and may even later become enemies of the church.

The third characteristic described was: 'youth identity and faith formation are connected'. We are all familiar with and, at some point, have experienced peer pressure. As adults, some of us deal better with peer pressure, while other's lives are determined by it. In many instances, the African youth have even more peer pressure than adults because of social networking through social media and postmodern expectations. If the African church is able to make the youth colleagues in their missional diaconal ministry, for example, by forming a group who care for and are involved in a 'street soccer competition', or home-based care for sick people, I am convinced that it will influence the way they see themselves. When youth participate in a *missional diaconal* ministry, it might transform not only their own identity but also how society sees them, when they find that they are important to others and are used by the church and by God. By developing and facilitating ministerial youth groups, the church might be able to create positive peer pressure amongst the youth in a society and amongst denominations. In this way, faith formation will contribute to identity formation, and vice versa.

The fourth characteristic: 'a Christian identity is formed through the process of socialisation'. This once again highlights the importance of an inclusive congregational approach in youth ministry (Nel 2000). The context of the congregation, inclusive of all generations, sexes and races, who have all experienced and lived from the grace of God, is the ideal place for faith formation and developing the

Christian identity of the youth. Unfortunately, this cannot transpire in a homogeneous context where everyone thinks, acts and values the same things. Instead, it requires diversity – differences in generations, sexes and races – to grow. In this regard, I believe that a *missional diaconal* ministry will be able to help us again, because the focus is not only on the specific faith community but also on the society, and as such, it has everything to do with relations (as discussed) and socialisation. Furthermore, I am convinced of the usefulness of the Johari window as a tool to become aware of different blind spots that the different participants might have will make our socialisation in the faith community a growing experience.

The fifth characteristic: 'youth moral and faith formation are connected'. Going back to the first characteristic, when Christian faith is connected to the redemptive work of Christ, it is the unconditional love of God that guides us. When youth experience and own this faith through their actions, they will live moral lives, participating in God's actions in this world. As a result, missional diaconate becomes a way of living and not just another ministry of the church. It is a way of living because I am forced by the love of God, because I have experienced that I am saved because of his unconditional love. In essence, I am already transformed, and I am not engaging in any ministry to be saved. Thus, my faith formation ensued through the missional diaconal ministry which I am able to do because I found a new or transformed identity in Christ. It is because of who I am in Christ that I am participating in his transformational acts in society, and the only reason that it is sustainable because of his acts in which I am privileged to participate.

Conclusion

The research question this article attends to is: What is unique in the contribution of missional diaconate as method of sustainable development amongst African youth in their context? In applying this a missional diaconal ministry to the elements of faith formation of African youth according to Weber, the following unique contributions of missional diaconate to sustainable development in the African context are discovered. Many African people acknowledged not only their formation by African traditional beliefs, but also acknowledge that they are no longer being transformed by these beliefs. This contributes in many instances to an identity crisis amongst the African youth. While development is commonly designed to overcome material needs, which will always change and are not sustainable, missional diaconate contributes to develop identity, calling (vision) and values within relationships that are sustainable and empowering.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

J.J.K. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Adeyemo, T., 1997, *Salvation in African tradition*, Evangel Publishing House, Nairobi.
- Adogame, A., 2016, 'African Christianities and the politics of development from below', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4), a4065. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.4065>
- Amanze, J.N., 2011, 'Contextuality: African spirituality as a catalyst for spiritual formation in theological education in Africa', *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* XVI(2), 1–24.
- Amenga-Etego, R.M., 2016, 'Engaging the religiocultural quest in development: An African indigenous perspective', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4), a3502. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3502>
- Chrysochoou, X., 2003, 'Studying identity in social psychology. Some thoughts on the definition of identity and its relation to action', *Journal of Language and Politics* 2(2), 225–241. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.2.2.03chr>
- Counted, A.V. & Arawole, J.O., 2015, "'We are connected, but constrained": Internet inequality and the challenges of millennials in Africa as actors in innovation', *Journal of Innovation and Entrepreneurship* 5, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13731-015-0029-1>
- Knoetze, H., 2018, 'Analyzing transformational development as engagement with African millennials', *International Review of Mission* 107(2), 483–499. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irom.12245>
- Knoetze, H., 2019b, 'Diaconia as a sustainable form of transformation and development amongst emerging adults in a globalised South Africa', *Practical Theology* 12(2), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2019.1597489>
- Knoetze, J., 2015a, 'Perspectives on family and youth ministry embedded in the *missio Dei* – An African perspective', *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 49(1), Art. #1874, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v49i1.1874>
- Knoetze, J.J., 2015b, 'Spiritual transformation: Reaching and equipping Sub-Saharan African children', *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 49(1), Art. #1919, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v49i1.1919>
- Knoetze, J.J., 2019a, 'African spiritual phenomena and the probable influence on African families', *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 53(4), a2505. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v53i4.2505>
- Knoetze, J.J., 2020, 'Christ-connected discipleship as comfort in a globalised world with a fear of missing out', in J.J. Knoetze & V. Kozuharov (eds.), *Powers, inequalities and vulnerabilities: Impact of globalisation on children, youth and families and on the mission of the church* (Reformed Theology in Africa Series, vol. 4), pp. 57–73, AOSIS, Cape Town. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2020.BK229.04>
- Kritzinger, J.N.J., 2008, 'Faith to faith – Missiology as encounterology', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 29(3), 764–790. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v29i3.31>
- Lochhead, D., 1988, *The dialogical imperative: A Christian reflection on interfaith encounter*, Orbis, Maryknoll.
- Louw, J.P. & Nida, E.A., 1988, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on semantic domains*, National Book Printers, Cape Town.
- Mbiti, J.S., 1991, *Introduction to African religion*, 2nd edn., Waveland Press, Long Grove, IL.
- Myers, B.L., 2015, *Walking with the poor: Principles and practices of transformational development*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, NY.
- Nel, M., 2000, *Youth ministry: An inclusive congregational approach*, Design Books, Clubview.
- Oduro, T., Pretorius, H., Nussbaum, S. & Born, B., 2008, *Mission in an African way*, Christian Literature Fund, Wellington.
- Öhlmann, P., Gräb, W., & Frost, M., 2020, *African initiated Christianity and the decolonisation of development: Sustainable development in Pentecostal and independent churches*, Taylor & Francis eBooks, New York, NY.
- Overdiep, W., 1985, *Het gevecht om de vijand. Bijbels omgaan met een onwelkome onbekende*, Ten Have, Baarn.
- Steenkamp-Nel, A., 2018, 'African spirituality in transformation: Fragments and fractures of the shifting sacred', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(3), 4941. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.4941>
- Swart, I., 2020, 'African Initiated Churches and development from below: Subjecting a thesis to closer scrutiny', in P. Öhlmann, W. Gräb & M. Frost (eds.), *African initiated Christianity and the decolonisation of development: Sustainable development in Pentecostal and Independent churches*, pp. 73–94, Routledge, London.
- Ter Haar, G & Ellis, G. & Ellis, S., 2006, 'The role of religion in development: Towards a new relationship between the European Union and Africa', *European Journal of Development Research* 18, 351–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09578810600893403>
- Turaki, Y., 2001, *The unique Christ for salvation. The challenge of the non-Christian religions and cultures*, International Bible Society, Nairobi.
- Weber, S., 2015, 'A (South) African voice on youth ministry research: Powerful or powerless?', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71(2), Art. #2973, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i2.2973>