

DECLARATION

COMMUNITY-BASED DISCIPLESHIP: A MISSIONAL

APPROACH TO URBAN AFRICAN YOUTH-

THE CASE OF NAIROBI, KENYA

by

ABID RANGOONWALA

DISSERTATION PRESENTED FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF THEOLOGY (D.Th)

in

MISSIOLOGY

at

THE UNIVERSITY OF STELLENBOSCH

PROMOTER: DR. D. XOLILE SIMON

March 2008

ABSTRACT

In response to the declining interest and participation of youth in urban churches in Africa, with a specific focus on churches in Nairobi, this study investigates a missiologically related problem of ecclesial praxis that seems to ignore or fail to address the social needs of youth, particularly concerning the need to belong. The churches in Nairobi, as in other parts of Africa, have inherited ecclesial praxis that was shaped in the dualistic cultural context of the Western Enlightenment and the clerical paradigm of Christendom. This dualistic view of reality has dichotomised the understanding of the gospel by compartmentalising it into a spiritual sphere while failing to address the social and cultural dimensions of human life. Consequently, the church hermeneutically understands its primary mission as saving souls and meeting the spiritual needs of its members through the institution of clergy and laity.

In order to address the problem, the study proposes the praxis of discipleship based on a community approach that correlates three integrated dimensions of mission (worship, fellowship, and intentional mission) with a community structure guided by specific urban context, cultural values and missional theology. This constitutes the thesis of this research study and also provides a methodological framework for organising the study. In the first chapter, discipleship is conceptualised in the comprehensive missional understanding of the church as missionary in its nature and calling, sent by Christ into the world for the redemption of the world. In that sense, the proposed discipleship community must be understood as missionary in nature.

The second chapter focuses on understanding the urban context. It examines some of the urban features of Nairobi that could be typical of other African cities, like rapid urban growth, high proportion of youth in the population, housing problems, unemployment, increasing poverty, family disintegration, crime, violence and disease. In that context, the study assessed the church's youth ministry by gathering primary empirical data through observation and personal interviews with youth pastors and leaders. The findings confirmed that most youth ministries are based on the clerical paradigm and are driven by programmes. Participation by youth has been found to be low in most churches. Many churches do not seem to address their real needs. Often the youth ministry is seen as a marginal ministry in the church.

In response to understanding the community from an African cultural perspective, the study investigated the traditional African community on the basis of literature and by using the ancestral anamnesis (remembrance of ancestors) as the interpretative framework for analysis. In traditional African society, the community is understood as the heart of the culture, the stage where the whole of life is dramatised. Even those who live in modern urban contexts carry with them African community values which have their origin in the traditional African community. Some of the African community values were measured among the urban youth through a survey questionnaire; most of the young people regarded these as important in their lives

(Chapter Five). Empirical findings have shown the validity of considering cultural factors in constructing any kind of model for community-based discipleship.

The importance of community was also validated theologically and missiologically by demonstrating the normative praxis of discipleship through community structure in the life of the early church. Theologically, the early church understood itself as the community of Christ on the basis of the concept of *koinonia*, a fellowship based on common faith in Christ. Missiologically, the church perceived itself from its inception as a missionary community sent into the world to witness to the gospel. The research demonstrated that community was the means through which the normative praxis of discipleship formation was carried out in the early church. There was no sense of dichotomy between the spiritual and social dimensions of the gospel as it is normally understood in today's church.

The importance of community as a means for the formation of identity and character was demonstrated through this having been the cultural norm in traditional African society and the theological norm in the life and praxis of the early church. Through the empirical research, the study also confirmed the positive perception of community values among the urban youth. Based on the evidence that was gathered, the study confronts the church in Nairobi and elsewhere to examine its present praxis critically and consider approaching its youth ministry from a community perspective in response to the present missiological problem in youth ministry.

In order to construct youth ministry on community foundation, the study suggests a model called *the covenant model*. It takes the form of a small group existing as a part of the local church but coming together specifically as a community guided by a discipleship covenant that integrates three missional dimensions. The group seeks to adapt in its specific urban context and integrate cultural values that complement the gospel. The covenant model assumes that the urban context is complex and diverse. It allows each group to develop its own shape and features, informed by its context, culture and tradition. It calls for diversity in cultural and contextual expression while maintaining unity as God's people in Christ. The early church exemplified it in being one, holy, catholic and apostolic.