

M. Laubscher

Dr. M. Laubscher, Department of Practical and Missional Theology, University of the Free State.

E-mail: laubschem@ufs.ac.za

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4240-1991>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v43i1.7390>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2023
43(1):1-4

Date received:
23 May 2023

Date published:
30 June 2023

Interview with Nadine Bowers Du Toit



Nadine Bowers Du Toit is a professor in the Department of Practical Theology and Missiology at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch. She holds a PhD in Practical Theology (Theology and Development) and her research over the past 20 years has focused on the role of faith communities in addressing the intersecting issues of race, inequality, gender and poverty. Her most recent projects have been funded by grants from the National Research



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons
With Attribution (CC-BY)



Foundation and the Nagel Centre for World Christianity. Besides lecturing, publishing and supervising postgraduate students, Nadine is often invited to address congregations, church leaders and faith-based organisations on topics pertaining to social justice. She sees herself as an “activist academic”, always advocating for more diverse voices to be heard: to this end, she chairs the transformation committee in the Faculty of Theology. Nadine is the director of the Unit for Religion and Development and serves on the boards of several non-governmental organisations. She is the current vice-president of the International Academy of Practical Theology.

How space, place and race intersect frames much of our lives and this conversation with an old classmate and now fellow colleague is no exception. Many moons ago, our paths crossed for the first time when we, as first-year theology students, stepped into the same classroom at Stellenbosch University. For me – white, male, Reformed and Afrikaans-speaking – it was familiar territory because of the trajectory I had chosen, whereas for Nadine, it required much more courage. Don’t get me wrong – I was also a bit nervous, but in speaking to her again, I realise how daunting it must have been for her entering this world as a female Pentecostal person of colour. To stand tall, knowing how different you are, on that white Reformed soil was, in itself, quite an accomplishment. On a Thursday morning in April, we reconnect online to ponder what it means to move through these same shared spaces.

Nadine starts off by recalling her theological journey up till this point. She rightly notes that we’re often tempted to define our training purely in terms of where we formally studied, while the actual “where” of our formation consists of so many different places. In her case, she was shaped more by ordinary people and communities than by institutions. She mentions several interesting observations in this regard. Firstly, it was perhaps disingenuous of her to initially dismiss her Pentecostal background as being integral in her growth as a practical theologian. If Pentecostal theology is a lived reality, then what is lived is also integral to the theology she knows best. It just doesn’t make sense to bracket our lived reality and set it apart from the theology we know so well. Secondly, it’s interesting to hear her say that it was a “mere poster” that helped her find her feet at Maties. Prof Kallie August, who represented so many categories of “first” when he entered the faculty in our second year, had a huge poster of an ANC activist, Dulcie September, in his office. In retrospect, that was the thing – the symbolism of a poster brought into this space – that made her realise she could align herself with those who embodied the things she was also striving towards. On the one hand, it might seem odd that she should highlight this of all things, while on the other hand, she knows that the choice of wall decoration tells us so much of the spirituality being either dominantly present or starting to emerge through the cracks in the system.

Thirdly, to her the poster represented a challenge of how to engage both with demographic change and with the transformation of institutional culture. That poster revealed the creative tension between what is seen at face value and the heart of the matter. Or, as she aptly phrases it, it is a matter of claiming and creating space anew, so that our full shared humanity may arise in new imaginative ways. The flipside of taking up space is indeed whether we are also making space for others to enter. In short, our classroom is not the same any more and yet the journey is still far from done.

From here on, it's as if our conversation moves through various other concentric circles. Similar lines and trends emerge since we traded our positions as students to teachers in some of these shared places. What is said in terms of how space, place and race have intersected along the way at Stellenbosch University echoes also in much of what is shared regarding the state of the South African and International Society for Practical Theology. In the meantime, these spaces have opened up – or rather, they have been interrogated and deconstructed as far as their elitist appearance and functioning are concerned – so that more people with more varied backgrounds could join in.

The immediate assessment of this opening up is that we are in a good space – a truly South African university which embraces diversity and is able to compete on the global stage – as knowledge becomes more democratised. Moreover, it is remarkable to see how South African theologians are not necessarily following and mimicking their international counterparts, but leading and setting the pace. The leadership from our shores – crediting our predecessors, such as Jaco Dreyer, for their exemplary steps which showed us the way – should not go by unnoticed. Or, as Nadine asks, is it not telling that we stepped into the decolonial discourse two years prior (in 2017 at Stellenbosch!) before the international community did so in 2019 in Brazil? I cannot help but think how late in the day we are indulging in these conversations and yet she rightly notes we are breaking new ground for others to come on board.

However, knowing each other and this developing situation so well, I am careful not to let her off the hook too easily. Surely this “good space” we are now in has its blind spots? I ask this not to trick her, but simply because it is so difficult to deal with our blind spots as we reimagine and work towards these spaces created in hope. She responds by identifying a significant threat on the horizon, namely the increasingly polarised world we live in. As South African society and the international scene become more polarised, there is the imminent danger that it will affect any kind of scholarly work going forward. Take a word like “decoloniality”, she says, which can easily be criticised as a “suitcase” word (which means nothing in itself, even though it has a lot to

unpack), while in essence it is a promising tool to help us deal with what is affecting our communities. Again, the chorus rings true: instead of playing into the hands of these discourses on certain fixed identities, we are rather called to be innovative and creative in stepping out of our own confessional groupings into more hybrid and fluid spaces.

But does this also apply to our disciplines that we often want to protect from others who might come and rock the boat? Stated differently, is it not ironic how some proponents of decoloniality can be so overprotective, guarding at the gates of their respective disciplines? Yet again, this boundary crossing between practical theology and missiology, or community development and public theology, or sociology of religion and theology, is by no means set up to be framed as betrayal or treason, but rather to save us from our constructed echo chambers where we isolate and silence ourselves and others. In listening to Nadine, I sense that we cannot expect dynamic movement from our envisioned research results if we ourselves are not part of this crossing over the different divides.

What lies ahead for Prof Nadine Bowers Du Toit as she heads towards exploring more of these unknown known spaces? Well, given the consistency and clarity in how she responds in our conversation, it makes me expect more of the same to come. This amazing race must continue (after all, we are still in that same classroom we entered decades ago): our raced places can indeed become just, more graced and raised spaces. I conclude by congratulating her on her recent appointment to a full professorship. I cannot wait to hear more on what she has to say during her inaugural lecture in August.

A video of the interview is available on this issue's web page.