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Youth ministry: Offering hope in a COVID-19 South Africa through community

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The president of the Republic of South Africa has addressed the nation many times during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) restrictions and lockdown of 2020, and has spoken very strongly about and against the violence toward the vulnerable in our society. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has affected many societies, it has mainly revealed the brokenness in our society and the violence against the vulnerable on multiple levels. Arguably, a place where we can discover God is in the midst of our challenges and struggles, a place where God reveals plans and hopes for our lives. It, therefore, is in a place of hopelessness that wholeness can be discovered. This process, whilst painful, can also be transformative and even healing. This pandemic has created a context that has revealed brokenness in lives, systems and economics.

Contribution: This article will look at how the church through its youth ministry can offer hope, specifically for the youth, as a vulnerable group, so that they may experience the transforming power of God amidst a global crisis through the creation of an alternative community.

Keywords: vulnerable; youth; youth ministry; hope; crisis; COVID-19; church.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the world in unprecedented ways and has revealed the many incongruities between the developed and the developing world with poverty being a major concern in the spread of the virus (Deguma et al. 2020:363–364). The aged and people with underlying health conditions have been the most vulnerable to the virus (Deguma et al. 2020:364), which, coupled with the underlying conditions of poverty, has proven to be a concern to the World Health Organization (Deguma et al. 2020:364). The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, has posed more than just a health risk, and has resulted in furthering the suffering of the poor, the most vulnerable peoples of the world, including in South Africa (Gittings et al. 2021:947). Poverty fundamentally is about the threat to life and about placed in harm's way (Deguma et al. 2020:366). It, therefore, is understandable that poverty is, in fact, a human rights violation (Mubangizi 2007:93) as poverty deprives a person of 'opportunities and choices, which could lead to a healthy life and a decent standard of living with dignity, self-respect and respect from others' (Nieman 2010:38).

After the lockdown was announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa, the economy has contracted, unemployment has increased, there has been a surge of violence against the vulnerable and there has been a continued rise in state corruption (Counted et al. 2020:1–2). The lockdown has not been merely about restricting the spread of the virus in the hope to build sufficient capacity in the health sector; it has also resulted in numerous resistances to what was perceived as a human rights violation by restricting movement and access. The restriction of movement and access was not only limited to social life but also religious life, as all physical spaces were off-limits to the public. The various religious sectors have argued that pastoral responsibilities are essential services and should therefore not be restricted as the normal trade (Pillay 2020:2). Furthermore, Bryson, Andres and Davies (2020) state:

> Fellowship shapes the relationships between people and place through the development of relationships that are centred in shared worship. These principles have been disrupted by social distancing measures and lockdown. (p. 363)

The resultant opinions have been that people have suffered enormously under the lockdown and had no recourse and access to the essential services of the religious leaders.

According to an international study, there is clear evidence that there is a positive relationship between church services and the transmission of the virus (Vermeer & Kregting 2020; cf. James et al. 2020), which would imply that the decision made by the national government of the Republic of South Africa, was indeed justified. As a result, the religious sector has had to evolve at a tremendous pace within a short period and acclimatise to social media and technology to host virtual church services and spiritual services (Bryson et al. 2020:370; Pillay 2020:2) – something religious leaders argued was not effective for religious life.

For Deguma et al. (2020:370), when people ask, 'where is the church?', they are in fact 'looking for God'. This era of the pandemic offers 'an opportunity for the church to renew its vocation to serve' (Deguma et al. 2020:370). The most fundamental questions, therefore, should be, 'what should the role of the church be during a pandemic, such as COVID-19?'; and 'how does the church offer hope in and after a pandemic that has caused extensive damage to the economy and well-being?'

This article will attempt to address these two questions within the narrow confines, however, of the role of the youth ministry – as an integral part of the church – in the lives of one of the most vulnerable people's groups, namely the youth, by offering hope to people who are 'looking for God'. This article proposes that hope is realised in community; the challenge is, how will the new community look during and even after times of a pandemic.

The impact of COVID-19 on youth: The need for hope

Hope is a complex phenomenon and cannot be simplified just to wishful thinking (Walsh 2020:906; cf. Braun-Lewensohn, Abu-Kaf & Kalagy 2021:2). Hope has a positive effect on one's well-being and equips people to look for ways of achieving goals toward success, overcoming setbacks, coping, decision-making, and having a positive view of life (Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2021:2; Counted et al. 2020:1). Resilience is often an outcome of hope (Walsh 2020:906).

Gittings et al. (2021:947–948) argue that COVID-19 may have life-long effects on children and youth as they are in their developmental stages. The effect of COVID-19 is further exacerbated because of lockdown restrictions, as '[f]indings document participant experiences of lacking basic necessities, food insecurity, lost livelihoods, changes to social service provisions, school and work disruptions and psychosocial stress'. The experiences mentioned previously are further compounded by psychosocial impacts of COVID-19, with a general feeling of being lost and 'a lack of purpose … expressed alongside sentiments of stress, anxiety and sadness', which are tell-tale signs of depression and emotional trauma (Gittings et al. 2021:957). Indeed, the concern regarding these COVID-19-related experiences cannot be divorced from an already traumatic reality for many youth (Gittings et al. 2021:958).

Govender et al. (2020:6) discuss the impact that lockdown and school closures have on basic education and nutrition programmes that many children in South Africa are reliant on. They argue that the lockdown also exposes children to 'risk of exploitation, abuse, and violence'. Furthermore, it is important during a time of crises that constant communication between primary stakeholders, such as teachers and parents, is maintained to realise infrastructure for support (Gadermann et al. 2020:7–8; Govender et al. 2020:6). It is in and through community that hope can be realised as a result of lament amidst and through suffering (Ross 2021:95–96).

Trauma, and in this case COVID-19-related trauma, has affected and disrupted familial, friendship and even church connections (Ross 2021:86). Ross (2021:86), reflecting on the writings of Rebecca Solnit and Arundhati Roy, sees hope in the 'newness' that could arise from the pandemic. This newness, for Ross (2021:877; cf. Walsh 2020:909), is achieved through remembering how the past was changed to bring about good, and this struggle for good can be achieved despite disruptions. Furthermore, throughout the article, Ross argues that hope is also realised through lament when people endure the pain and suffering, not rush through the experience and name it for what it is – this itself is a measure of hope.

Hope, therefore, is not only possible during traumatic times but it can be a source of resilience and meaning-making when space and opportunity are created for lament and grieving, and talking about trauma and loss.

Who and what is the church?

Whilst the question 'who and what is the church'[1] may seem rudimentary as there are well-established doctrines on ecclesiology, it has become much more complicated in the contemporary context as there is often the blurring of lines between the church as people and the church as the physical space. However, to answer the question 'what is the role of the church', there must be a clear understanding of the church. Bryson et al. (2020:365) attempt to interrogate the sacredness of the church by asking if the church is the space where the sacred is practised; in other words, is the church building synonymous with the people who are the actual church? Alternatively, is it the space that makes practices or experiences sacred or sanctified practices? In other words, can what is practised in the church building be practised at places other than the church building and still be considered sacred? Furthermore, the church can never be more than those who gather under the banner of Jesus Christ. However, what is practised in the church encompasses much more riches around the communal belief in God; it also includes communal practices, rituals and creating a common identity through pray and fellowship, worship services and missional

1. When referring to church, in this article, it will be referring to the people who gathered under the common belief in God to worship in communal spaces, the building. Furthermore, the church is also the individual person who professes and has a confessional belief in God. When referring to the space, or church building, I will make explicit statements accordingly.

activities, to mention just a few (Vermeer & Kregting 2020:2–3). Bryson et al. (2020:363) state, 'attending and participating in shared worship is a central pillar of religious life based on close intertwining between individuals'. Vermeer and Kregting (2020:9) argue that religious traditions, such as the church, have a definite impact on communities and even countries irrespective of an individual's belief systems. This, therefore, may raise the caution that the church needs to be even more careful in what is practised and how it is practised.

Theologies are not something that should be cast in stone but should be realised as dynamic and need to either take shape or be contextualised based on the context of the era or community where such theologies are practised. It should come as no surprise that in the twentieth century, there remain discussions regarding the nature of the church, the purpose of the church, and how the church should and can change, adapt and become contextually relevant to the time it finds itself in (Beukes 2020; Pillay 2020:2; ed. Seibel 2019). After all, the church is meant to discern and engage in the ministry of Jesus Christ in the world (Cloete 2019:74), which would include its immediate context. Indeed, the praxis of the church will always require constant reflection as it is being influenced, and often determined, by contextual realities. Yet, for the most part during the COVID-19 pandemic, the church was forced to re-create itself by moving its services to an online platform, through the use of technology, because of restrictions such as lockdowns and social distancing. The church, in its attempt to maintain its ministry, attempted primarily to take what happens during a Sunday worship service and transplant it as precisely as possible to what is perceived as its normal worship services (Pillay 2020:2–3). There seems to not have been much thought on the purpose of the worship service, and more specifically how the church should serve during times of the pandemic.

One thing that always does come out strong is that the church ceases to be the church if there are no people. The church, in any context, will always refer to people. This gathering of people is seen in the practise of many rituals and liturgies such as worship, service and fellowship, and these expressions manifested differently according to the community or culture that is present in and around the church. One thing is for certain; as previously stated, the church is not a building or an institutionalised organisation, but people (Pillay 2020:6). In other words, the church is about a community that has a common reason for its existence and this reason is to offer hope of new life whether in the current or future dispensation of the individual.

So, what is the purpose of the church especially during times of a pandemic? I want to suggest that the church is to offer hope to people (Bryson et al. 2020:371), for both in the immediate and the eternal. It is through the various rituals and actions of the church that this hope is realised, and the concern during COVID-19 is how has this hope been disrupted and how is this hope restored and sustained? The community has an important place in the construction and sustenance of hope amongst the different generations (Brittian, Lewin & Norris 2013:654).

The creation of community

Discussing the creation of community does not imply that there currently is no community in the church; instead, it simply challenges the church to be cognisant of how things have changed within society and of course would have an effect on the programmes of the church (Pillay 2020:6). The church is comprised of many generations coming together where they learn from one another, interact through fellowship and worship together, but ultimately community is 'the dialogue between God and the church necessitates community' (Cloete 2019:75). Furthermore, the creation of community also identifies the need for history, traditions and practices to continue through the various generations (Aziz 2019a:136), but more importantly that individuals are also allowed to reinterpret these traditions from their perspectives (Cloete 2019:73). In a time of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, being together through community allows for great creativity in building and strengthening relationships (Cloete 2019:72), something that is vital during a time of crisis where the loss of lives has become common ground. Furthermore, community allows for recognising the other, building respect for the other, increasing diversity and thereby acknowledging the journey of the individual (Cloete 2019:73). Through all of these actions, the creation of community is really about belonging and contributing to something greater than oneself – it is about transferring 'the living faith of the community' (Pillay 2020:6). When the church wants to offer hope during times of crisis, it needs to extend to people a community where they may simply be themselves and contribute their unique talents to build the other person. Community, as an expression of congregational support, has a positive effect on a person (Walsh 2020:907).

Pillay (2020:7) speaks about a virtual community, something that has had great focus during the emergent church movement and whilst he argues that it is not the ideal because of inherent challenges it places on ecclesiology and related theologies, it at least creates an opportunity for community. Pillay (2020:7) lists many examples of how the virtual community have employed technology and social media to create these forms of community as a means for 'relational ecclesiology' whereby people are distant but yet connected even through weekly activities such as 'Bible studies, cell groups, council meetings, prayer meetings, youth groups, pastoral care and counselling, and even fellowship and "coffee" is done virtually'. Yet, the use of technology and social media is nothing new or unique to young people. Technology and social media have long been used by youth for just that purpose, to create community (Zirschky 1995:5). These virtual communities, according to Zirschky (1995:5), are continuous and a sort of 24/7 reality where access to each other is not restricted but always available. For Zirschky (1995), community in this sense is not about proximity but

access to relationships. This virtual community is also not restricted to geography as the local and global merge and blur and essentially becomes interconnected and inseparable (Nel & Thesnaar 2006:95). As Bryson et al. (2020:370) speculate, '[p]erhaps the "fellowship of the saints" will emerge anew through digital mediation which will shape the future of physical-space ecclesial interactions'.

Community, rightly understood, is about relationships and access to what these relationships offer, for example, support, passing on traditions when considering ecclesiology, as well as resources through skills development or experience. In other words, community does not just become a means of creating social capital but is social capital in itself.

A value of community: Creating social capital

At a time of crisis, it remains an important endeavour to create various support systems. When referring to support systems within the church, it has to be noted that a network of relationships remains the most conducive to foster support and offer hope (Ross 2021:93–94). It was discussed earlier that communities not only allow one to engage with current traditions but also to preserve traditions for future generations. It was also discussed that interaction within community allows one to interpret these traditions from one's perspective. Thus, there is a creative dynamic that exists between the past, the present and the future within the community. However, social capital is more than preserving or continuing traditions, whilst these can be results of social capital. Social capital is a resource that is comprised of a network of mutual relationships where trust is engendered and interaction is free from critique. However, social capital is also more than merely receiving resources and support as an individual; it is also the contribution of the individual that serves others within that specific community (Brittian et al. 2013:643; Leonard & Bellamy 2015:1046–1065; Swart 2017:221–249). It is within the faith community that social bonding, a specific type of social capital, is generated positively when there are consistent engagement and attendance in congregational activities producing solidarity, loyalty and identity (Leonard & Bellamy 2015:1046–1065). Other benefits of the creation of social capital include a connection to the past (Brittian et al. 2013:651, 654) but also the 'fostering of unity and meaningful relationships across all generations, greater faith formation and perseverance, and fostering leadership development' (Aziz 2019a:141).

Whilst the creation of social capital remains an element that is not earnestly expressed within the faith community and is often a result of accidental long-term relationships that developed over time, the creation of social capital for the benefit of all those present should be intentional and an element of all activities within the church (Aziz 2019a:141). On a cautionary note, whilst social capital improves and grows with mutual commitment and contribution and may offer future benefits, it also needs to actively be worked on as

it can also be easily destroyed if there is no mutual engagement, respect or value (Cloete 2014:2), as the most basic elements of social capital are mutual trust and respect between individuals.

Youth ministry: A source of social capital

Of course, the question is similar to that of the church. What is youth ministry and how does it serve as a source of social capital? It has to be a given that one's understanding of youth ministry cannot be separated from one's ecclesiology and that youth ministry is not a separate function or entity of the church but is an essential part of the church. This is not to advocate that there should not be any specialised focus on the youth as the youth are in a special period of the lives where they are forming and shaping their identities as well as their role and place in society. Yet, through the specialised and unique focus that is required for youth ministry, it remains an essential part of the church and the responsibility of the church (Aziz 2019b:3). The community that is vital for the church, too, is vital for the youth ministry. If it is correctly understood that community serves as an essential aspect of social capital, then youth ministry, which is highly prized on relationships amongst not only peers but also intergenerational relationships, is a great source of social capital (Aziz 2017:5).

Root and Bertrand (2011:218) argue that there are different philosophical approaches to youth ministry but focus on what they term as the Kierkegaardian perspective. The Kierkegaardian perspective sees the complete inability to save oneself because of the human condition being completely lost. Whilst they argue that no amount of human action can save the person or transform a context, the action is still required from the person. This action, however, can only exist in the realisation of this complete brokenness and dependency on God. The action to which Root and Bertrand refer is serving others within the hopeless contexts where they may find themselves. It is a 'participation not through our strength but through our yearning and need' (Root 2012:40). Root and Bertrand (2011:235) see this participation as an 'encounter of divine and human action, in being found deeply in the lives of young people, in being their place-sharers'.

Faith and hope in God should be a faith and hope that youth can use in the world (Dean 2001:32–33). It should also be a faith and hope where youth can identify with the other in their struggles as they 'discern and execute faithful action' (Dean 2001:33). It is the concept of 'place-sharing' where youth are 'to search for God in these places where yearning and brokenness are shared, where others join us, binding themselves to us not around but within our yearning and brokenness' (Root 2012:86). However, to facilitate youth to not only share in but also change such contexts, we have to consider new and relevant action theories and expressions, such as our understanding of community, especially during tumultuous times.

Youth ministry, as an integral part of the church, can play a vital role in meeting the needs of these youths and providing hope for them amidst their various contexts (Brittian et al. 2013:653). It is a generally accepted premise that the period of adolescence is not an easy journey for many youths, as young people have to deal with issues such as puberty, identity discovery, individuation and careers. This journey, for the majority of the South African youths, is further complicated because of the economic and social conditions in the country (Brittian et al. 2013:643) and has now been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It can easily be argued that the youths, too, are asking, 'where is the church?' as they have to deal with these existential dilemmas (Aziz 2017:6).

'The COVID-19 economic turmoil hit young workers the hardest', and has witnessed an increased unemployment rate of 63.2% for youths between the ages 15 and 24 at the end of 2020, police brutality on university campuses, and limited access to tertiary education particularly for poor students, as a result of the economic downturn (Smit 2021; cf. STATS 2021:15). Youth unemployment, argues Cloete (2015:513), is ultimately a theological task as it infringes upon human dignity as a direct result of poverty. Many scholars view poverty as a human rights violation which results in restricted and limited access to socio-economic resources, education and a healthy and holistic lifestyle (Dreyer & Aziz 2020). Apart from the contemporary challenges that the youth face, there is also the historic injustices of apartheid and the dehumanising of persons of colour based upon race that have mainly given rise to these challenges. Youth ministry, therefore, has an ideal opportunity to support youth and offer them hope through the difficult journeys that they may be experiencing.

Challenges to community

The article, in its attempt to discuss how community, albeit an alternative community that is virtual and connected via technology, raises some challenges as the church and youth ministry wades in new waters during times of crisis and trauma. The challenges raised in this article would include one's understanding of ecclesiology, the understanding and effective usage of technology, and finally, creating and sustaining community.

A first and obvious challenge resides in the understanding of ecclesiology. How do we understand 'church' in a time when the gathering of believers is in a formal building during a time of great conflict where such gatherings are restricted or even not allowed? Furthermore, how do we understand church or sacred spaces where the gathering of the 'saints' is not restricted by geography or even denominational boundaries and such gatherings occur in a virtual space where practices and rituals cannot take place in the presence of fellow believers? These factors have a direct impact on our understanding of community in a time when space, place and the sacred have different meanings for intimacy and connection.

A second challenge resides in the understanding and usage of technology. Whilst the youth, understandably, may have access to technology and social media giving rise to many different expressions of community, the adult community may not have either the access or the understanding of technology – thus, how can they effectively create such communities in question? The challenge, therefore, is how exactly the various generations can access and utilise technology meaningfully so that there will be community and the creation of social capital?

Finally, another threat to the creating and sustaining of the alternative community is where the views and values of the other are not respected or where there are perceived hypocritical behaviours between the adult and youth communities. It has been argued that if these challenges do persist, it remains not only a threat to the community but can also lead to an exodus of the youth from such communities (Brittian et al. 2013:653). The interrelational engagements, therefore, remain a paramount part of such communities.

Conclusion

There are clear benefits of religion and the church supporting young people with coping mechanisms during difficult times, being a connection between the past and the future, and offering a community where one can just be themselves. The loss and trauma during COVID-19 have been immense and the aftermath is yet to be calculated as the pandemic wreaked havoc on families, communities, economics and a general sense of well-being.

This article has sought to discuss how the church, through youth ministry, can offer supporting mechanism by creating an alternative community of meaningful relationships through technology, a community that is not bound by geography and proximity but one that is defined by respect, support and safe spaces that allow for lament, grieving and talking about loss and trauma. Whilst there may be inevitable threats and challenges to such communities, these threats and challenges should not restrict the creation of these communities as the benefits far outweigh the potential threats and challenges.

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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.

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