A Contextual Youth Ministry Philosophy: A reflection on the Evangelical Baptist Church of Malawi

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Abstract

In the last 30 years, there has been a growing interest in contextualization among theologians in Malawi. Theological platforms have been set up to guide and shape the discussion. However, despite this growing interest in contextualization, mainline evangelical churches have been very slow in responding to the need for theological relevance. Contextualization of youth ministry has similarly been neglected. Recent research has shown that much as youth and youth leaders are aware of contextual realities that shape the worldviews of the youth, they do not understand how these realities shape or inform youth ministry philosophy that speaks to the needs of the youth. As a result, youth ministry in many ways lacks relevance. The article, therefore, proposes steps that should be considered if evangelical churches in southern Malawi are to develop a youth ministry philosophy that effectively engages youth in their world.

Keywords: Youth ministry, Malawi, Evangelical Baptist Church, contextualization.

Introduction

The presence of youth in churches in large numbers justifies the presence of formal youth ministries. Almost every church in Malawi has a form of youth ministry. A critical question to ask is "are these youth ministries effectively speaking to the needs of the young people". Youth ministry in most evangelical churches in southern Malawi do not take context seriously. Youth ministries in these churches are not utilizing contextual realities prevalent in southern Malawi to develop a relevant youth ministry philosophy that effectively engages the youth. Compounding the challenge is the failure of youth pastors or leaders to understand how contextual realities inform a relevant youth ministry philosophy. This article, therefore, seeks to identify contextual realities that inform a relevant and effective youth ministry philosophy by reflecting on the social-political and religious context of the evangelical churches in southern Malawi as a case study. This was done through the empirical qualitative research approach.

There is a clear lack of relevance in the way youth ministry is practiced in most mainline evangelical churches in Malawi. This challenge has led to, among others, the migration of youth to Pentecostal and charismatic churches. In worse scenarios, youth have completely moved out of the church altogether. It is the assumption that these challenges exist due to a lack of contextual relevance in ministering to the youth in evangelical churches in Malawi. The article, therefore, addresses what needs to be done in order to develop a contextual youth ministry philosophy that influences a dynamic reflection upon its praxis in order that there would be meaningful ministerial engagement with the youth in evangelical churches in Malawi.

The need for contextualization

Theologians across the diverse theological continuum have attempted differing contextualization theories. Critical to the proposals however, is validity (Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989:127). To this end, Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989) have proposed a number of frameworks of analysis to ascertain faithfulness of the theories to the original gospel message. The frameworks include, philosophical, theological, anthropological, and communication perspectives (Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989: 127-196). For the purposes of this research, we focused on the theological perspective as our theoretical framework.

Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:145) have identified four matrices of contextualization or theological soils out of which models of contextualization arise. These include orthodoxy, liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, and neoliberalism. All these matrices yield very different contextualization models. Orthodoxy and liberalism represent the opposite ends on this continuum. These varied roots, according to Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989: 145) bear "varied meanings and methods of contextualization and, therefore, divergent contextualized Christologies, soteriologies, and eschotologies". To this end, Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989: 144-157) posit that orthodoxy result into apostolic contextualization because it uses a didactic method of contextualizing the gospel message. Liberalism leads to syncretistic contextualization because it uses a dialogic method of contextualizing the gospel message and finally neo-orthodoxy and neoliberalism lead to prophetic contextualization because they use a dialectic method of contextualizing the gospel message. According to Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989: 127) each of the analytical tools "provides a perspective which, if rigorously applied, will further our search for the normative 'bottom line' of contextualization".

A biblical Justification for contextualization

The quest for contextualization of the gospel has a biblical precedence. The bible is in fact a product of contextualization. Its writing was influenced by contextual realities of world the New Testament. The writers of the biblical message were aware of the contextual realities surrounding them and their readers and therefore laboured to express the biblical message in the language of the day (Kato 1985:24; Roetzel 1985). They were, in a sense, practical theologians and therefore, ensured that their message was relevant to their audiences.

Historical evidence shows that, the New Testament church was born and nurtured in the background of socio-cultural setting of the Roman world. A number of factors influenced the authors and readers bible. These include but are not limited to religion, politics, culture/philosophy, technology and social life.

The Augustinian age fostered city life/urbanization as such "city vied with city in the magnificence of public buildings, town halls, temples, theatres, baths, aqueducts" (Martin 1978:25). The mission expansion strategy in the Acts of Apostles reflects this reality (Acts 14-20).

Furthermore, ethically, the Greco-Roman society presented many problems to the early Christians. Paganism promoted extreme forms of perversion as Martin (1978:25-26) attests "Immorality of some cities was notorious, in the park of Daphne, five miles from Antioch in Syria, the worship of Artemis and Apollos was tainted with the immoral practices connected with the Syrian goddess Astarte and her consort". The biblical texts in Galatians 4:8-10; 1 Corinthians 8-10; and Revelation 2:6, 15, reflect this social context.

In the Roman world, slavery was institutionalized and many early believers were former or serving slaves. Paul's letter to Philemon was a passionate call for Philemon to forgive his runaway slave and accord him a brotherly treatment since he had become a believer. A vast number of New Testament letters reflect the existence of slave institution and the writers use legal language of the slave institution. For instance, to the Corinthians, Paul writes, "for he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman [freed person]; similarly, he who was a free man [free person] when he was called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to" (1 Corinthians 7:22-24, cf. 1 Corinthians 9:19, Galatians 3:28, 5: 1; Philippians 4:2-3; Colossians 4:1).

The writers of the bible, being people of culture, engaged their cultural realities to provide meaning to the gospel message. The social-cultural context of their times was crucial in the development and propagation of the gospel. The bible, therefore, is a model of how context informs the propagation of the gospel in ways that do not compromise the integrity of the inspired word of God. Although the Apostles struggled with issues between Jews and Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-16; Acts 15) to get a consensus on relevant models for contextualization Paul's dictum in 1 Corinthians 9: 20-24, sums up much of the Apostle's approach to contextualization,

> To the Jews I become like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I become like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I become like one not having the law (though I not free from God's law but I am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I become weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men [people] so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, I may share in its blessings.

The Malawian context

It is against this background of contextualisation that we now turn our attention to Malawi and how these all come together to have an effect on the youth. This section will briefly look at the cultural, religious, and political contexts.

Cultural context

Malawi is a multicultural society. There are myriad internal and external cultural influences. Internally, Malawi has nine major ethnic people groups, each with unique cultural heritage. These include, Sena, Mang'anja, Lomwe and Yao, Chewa, Ngoni, Tumbuka, Ngoni, Tonga, Ngonde (Mandryk: 2010: 552). The majority of Malawians live in rural areas and are thus influenced largely by a traditional rural culture. Despite a rising urbanization, few Malawians live in cities (cf. Blantyre SEP 2017, Lilongwe Sep 2017) and provincial towns where the main influence is the post-modern culture. Notwithstanding the growing postmodern influences from the western world, such as tolerance and a relativistic lifestyle that often stands in contrast to the rural and traditional lifestyles, Malawi remains with a strong rural culture. For the church to stay relevant in Malawi there is need for critical reflection upon its praxis, which is strongly multicultural. Borgman (1997:19) argues that because "theology is the work of translation: the wisdom of God must be translated into a given culture in a particular time and place," which compliments the Malawian context.

Religious context

Religiously, Malawi is a multireligious society even though there is a popular sentiment that Malawi is a Christian nation. This perception remains theoretical. Although Christians are the majority of the population (cf. NSO 2018, Mandyrk 2010: 552), Malawi is however a secular state and religious freedom is one of its fundamental principles as enshrined in the Malawi constitution. The 2017 international freedom report indicates that Malawi is a multireligious society. This religious diversity, therefore, forms the bedrock of the nation's social-cultural setting.

Political context

Politically, Malawi has a developing democracy. After years of autocracy, under one a party system when fundamental freedoms were non-existent, in 1992, Malawi embraced a democratic system of governance (cf. Mandyrk 2010:552, Schoffeleers 1999, Immink et all 2003). At the core of the nation's democratic system are fundamental freedoms and rights, which would include the freedom of religion and its practices. Any theological discussion has to take this emerging political setting seriously if it is to be relevant.

Youth context in Malawi

The youth population remains the largest part of the Malawian context (MYS 2013:2). The youth context in Malawi is dynamic and fast changing due to so many influences, such as HIV/AIDS, poverty, and corruption, to mention a few (Phiri et al 2016:639-640; Machinga SEP 2017: 128). The home, school, street/community/village, church, and mosque however, form the basic framework of the youth context. On the other hand, politics, economics, religion, culture, and technology provide a dynamic influence on the youth lifestyle within this framework. The youth context in Malawi is therefore, multidimensional and multicultural. In order to have an effective and meaningful youth ministry in Malawi one has "to be in touch with the spirit of the age and trends of the times" (Borgman 1997:13). Unfortunately, despite the growing youth population there remains scarce research in this important area (Mateyu 2006, Kamuyanja 2012, Kamthunzi 2013, Masala 2017).

Research design

The study was grounded in the discipline of practical theology as such we utilized the descriptive-empirical (qualitative) method through the means of qualitative interviews. In this research plan, we investigated the Evangelical Baptist Church of Malawi's youth ministry as a case study.

In this research, we utilized purposive or judgemental sampling, which is a type of non-probability sampling (Babbie 2010:192). Using purposive sampling, initially four congregations were identified in four districts in southern Malawi but this was later changed to one district due to travel restrictions necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face interviews were not possible. The headquarters church was identified to represent all the congregations. The initial population sample from four congregations was between 32 and 40. Though three congregations were dropped, a sample population of 40 was still maintained. The sample represented youth ministry key stakeholders and included the top Evangelical Baptist Church of Malawi (EBCM) national leadership, headquarters church leadership, adult local church members, national youth leadership and local church youth. In order to gather additional data that would fill in information gaps left by the initial respondents, eight key and influential members of the church in Machinga and Zomba were identified. These included the Bishop, a trustee for the church, national youth coordinator, national children ministry coordinator, two bible college principals, and two missionary workers one of which is responsible for youth ministry in Zomba. Guiding this sampling process was the understanding that EBCM headquarters church has theological and policy influence over the whole church and at the same time, the additional eight respondents are critical to the development of policy and theology of the church.

All the data was collected through an open-ended interview schedules that had four sections reflecting four research questions. Out of the 40 interview schedules sent to the initial sample, 33 were returned. This represented 82.5% return rate. A further eight supplementary interview schedules were sent to other key and influential church members as follow-up on the initial open-ended interviews, five were returned representing 62.5% return rate. The data, therefore, was gathered electronically, after which the data was analyzed and interpreted before performing research findings.

Research question

The key research question looked at "how do contextual realities inform a relevant and effective youth ministry philosophy?" Other research questions aimed at identifying contextual realities surrounding the youth, how the realities affect the worldview of the youth and how to meaningfully minister to the youth in their context.

Ethics

Certain ethical considerations were undertaken regarding the data collection, analysis and publication of the research results to the academic community. Most researchers have noted the importance of ethical consideration (see Creswell 2009: 197-198; Strecker 2018:25-26). Ethical consideration is important because it respect[s] the rights, needs, values, and desires of the informant(s) (Creswell 2009: 197). Each participant was approached were the purpose and aim was discussed. Each participant voluntarily participated in the research after agreeing to and committing to

an informed consent and were given the right to withdraw at anytime from the research without any repercussion. No incentives were offered for participation.

Discussion

The following discussion is centred on the findings from the data which was organised into themes as these emerged. These themes are intentionally discussed around the contextual realities as previously mentioned.

Contextual realities affecting and influencing the worldview of the Youth

All respondents expressed awareness of the interplay between contextual realities and worldview of the youth. Responses did indicate that respondents understand that what goes on around them really affect the way they think and do things. The research found that the youth are influenced by their surrounding socio-cultural context. Their lives are positively or negatively shaped by these influences because according to Kraft (1999:384), "people ordinarily follow the patterns of their culture, but not always". Knowledge of this interplay is critical in the development of ministry approaches that speak to the needs of the youth.

Contextual realities informing a relevant and effective youth ministry philosophy

The majority of the respondents demonstrated their lack of awareness of how knowledge of contextual realities informs relevant and effective youth ministry philosophy. All five church leaders gave responses that did not answer the question posed to them.   This revealed that they did not understand the contextual realities surrounding the youth. Instead, they mentioned challenges youth ministry is facing such as youth leadership training. The research shows that church and youth leaders are not aware that youth ministry philosophy ought to be informed by these realities if it is to be relevant and effective.

Meaningful service to youth

Respondents proposed a myriad of practical ministry approaches meaningfully to serve the youth. Proposals ranged from recruitment of youth workers, ministry capacity building, paradigm shift in the way ministry is facilitated, and the availability of resources and ministry activities. All respondents acknowledged that there was need for complete transformation in the way ministry is facilitated and implemented. Youth workers need to take note that to meaningfully serve the youth, they ought to answer Osmer's practical theological question "what ought to be going on?" (Osmer 2008:4).

Both youth and church leaders expressed knowledge of contextual realities surrounding the youth. The participants, therefore, affirmed the following critical realities (themes) prevalent in Machinga, among others.

Tribalism and ethnic diversity

All respondents affirmed that Yao and Lomwe are predominant cultures in the district. They further noted that Machinga is a multicultural society. Both youth and church leaders also demonstrated deep knowledge of beliefs, customs and practices of these cultures. For youth ministry to be effective, youth workers ought to be fully aware of the multicultural context of ministry – these are further elaborated under the recommendations.

Religious diversity

All respondents demonstrated their awareness of religious diversity in the district. They mentioned Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religions. When they were asked to outline key beliefs and teachings of one non-Christian religion, they all mentioned 16 different beliefs of Islam. Their vast knowledge of the beliefs of Islam demonstrates the strong influence Islam has in the district.

Poverty

All respondents demonstrated awareness of economic livelihood of people in Machinga. They mentioned informal jobs and businesses as key to people's economic well-being. Unemployment was however mentioned as a challenge to the youth. "The 2015 United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) ranked Malawi 173 of 188 countries. According to the World Development Indicators (WDI) in 2012, the country had a GNI per capita of $320" (WBG 2016:1). Economically, therefore, youth are reeling in poverty. Poverty influences the youth negatively.

Climate Change

Respondents affirmed that Machinga is currently experiencing climate change caused largely by a mix of human and natural factors. They mentioned deforestation, soil erosion, flooding, poaching and famine as issues facing the environment in Machinga.

MTV culture

All respondents indicated an awareness of the existence of MTV culture among the youth. All respondents are aware of the local and international TV stations youth view. Super sport, Zee world, African magic and BBC topped the list of stations. They are also aware of the type of programs and music artists they frequently patronize. Sports and music programs topped the list of programs youth watch. Whereas romantic music was mentioned by most respondents as the preferred type of music. When the respondents were asked to state the reasons why youth love music, they mentioned healing from stress and anxiety, love and entertainment. Certainly, there should be a connection between music, movies, TV programmes etc. with youth behaviour or lifestyle. In order for youth workers and church leaders to understand the world of the youth, they ought to engage the youth in their own world and allow them to become teachers and instructors.

Diseases and Pandemics

All respondents demonstrated a strong awareness of health challenges people face in the district. The challenges include Diarrhoea/Dysentery, Malaria, TB, HIV/AIDS, Flu and High Blood Pressure. Machinga SEP (2017:2022:128) reported that the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate in Machinga is at 6.2%. In many ways, pandemics and diseases affect youth; as such, youth ministry ought to be responding to this challenge if it is to be meaningful and effective.

Other realities that were mentioned but were not fully explained included politics, modernity and urbanization. As attested by Beaton (2015:157-174), Mawerenga (2018) and Gama (2016), Malawi has by all standards been affected by global socio-cultural trends as such youth workers ought to have a practical knowledge of the ever changing context of ministry. They ought always to ask themselves "what's going on?" if they are to influence authentic contextualization in youth ministry.

Recommendations

This study was purposefully designed for evangelical churches of southern Malawi. It is however possible that the results of the research can also have value for other churches beyond southern Malawi. Further research will be required to collaborate the findings. The following are recommendations, which are based on the data and findings of the research.

Intentional curriculum review in theological institutions

The research notes that theological education among others, qualifies a person to serve as a youth coordinator/ pastor in evangelical churches in southern Malawi. As such, theological institutions should play a critical role in the development of contextual youth ministry philosophy. A lack of a contextual youth ministry philosophy in evangelical churches in southern Malawi, therefore, reflects gaps in theological training. It is likely that challenges in youth ministry regarding theory and practice stem from curricular gaps that exist in theological training. There is, therefore, need for review of theological education curriculums to address the pitfalls the research has uncovered.

Intentional emphasis on studies in contextualization

Studies in contextualization in most theological institutions in Malawi are included in systematic theology and missions. Intentionality is therefore required to ensure a robust development of contextual ministry approaches in the academy. The failure of church and youth leaders to understand the relationship between context and ministry practice point to gaps in their understanding of the dynamics of contextualization.

An intentional increase in literature focusing on youth ministry contextualization

In order to expand knowledge of the theoretical and empirical nature of youth ministry, there is need for deliberate research projects in youth ministry contextualization and other equally important aspects of ministry in theological institutions. An increase in literature will eventually generate constructive discussion on the theoretical and empirical nature of youth ministry.

Recruitment of specialized or career youth workers

The business world values specialization in order to maximize profits. The church can learn from this practice. Youth ministry is a specialized ministry as such requires specialized skills. There is an urgent need for the youth ministry workers to be trained in youth ministry related skills. This will guarantee what Aziz (2016:24) called, the re-conceptualization of the office of the youth worker which guarantees grassroots approach to ministry.

Youth ministry orientation education for pastors and church leaders

Pastors and church leaders influence theology and practice of the church and therefore has a direct influence on the youth ministry within the church. Their robust orientation toward education on youth ministry theory and practice should be encouraged. Through the orientation, there would exist the realisation of the need for professional youth workers, mobilization of youth ministry resources and development of intentional partnerships with other stakeholders in youth work.

Conclusion

The aim of the article was to identify contextual realities that inform a relevant and effective youth ministry philosophy by reflecting on the social-political and religious context of the evangelical churches in southern Malawi as a case study. The problem raised has been adequately addressed through the empirical research. The research has indeed shown that although church and youth leaders know and understand contextual realities surrounding the youth, they do not understand how these concrete realities inform the theory and practice of youth ministry. The development of a youth ministry philosophy that speaks to the needs of the youth in their context is critical for the church together with all its stakeholders. This task however requires commitment, skills and resources from all concerned parties. Critical in all this is practical involvement of youth themselves. This philosophy has to focus on the whole person of the youth for "youth ministry cannot remain a ministry that only focuses on the spiritual well-being of the young person, as one cannot separate the spiritual from all other developmental processes" (Aziz 2016:244).

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