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Pastoral response to unemployment: Hermeneutics of hope and work

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Abstract

Pastoral work is about assisting people to live their lives to the full. A great deal of scholarship has accumulated around the employment challenges precipitated by a variety of socio-political and economic factors. The all-encompassing challenge with which we are presented is to create and sustain a community of care, promoting hope, personal agency and self-determination to earn a living, in a life-giving environment This paper rests on the concept of "Hope in Action" as the mission of the church and examines the hermeneutics of hope and work, as mandatory for a meaningful life. The paper suggests a structure for an intervention that could be useful for those who work with young people to awaken hope, as a unique foundation, and make plans to find work so that they can earn a sustainable livelihood and live life to the full.

Keywords

Work; hope; unemployment; sustainable livelihood

Introduction

The question posed as a background to this paper is: Can the church make a difference to the ubiquitous feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, especially amongst our young people who are struggling with unemployment? In the South African context, it is well known that young people are finding it increasingly difficult to bridge the gap between education and the world of work. Jobs are scarce and with the advent of the 4th Industrial Revolution, life is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

Scripture contains a lot of examples of despair and crises. Hope emerges from Scripture in social crises and change. To give just one example from Jeremiah 29:11, *I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for.* I use this quote from scripture to underline the sentiment of this paper, which responds to a call to awaken, instil and nurture hope, as one of the great theological virtues, especially for the young people who feel helpless and hopeless about their futures. In 2002, the World Council of Churches met in South Africa to discuss "The Journey of Hope in Africa". Steve de Gruchy contributed many papers and keynote addresses at several conferences discussing doing theology, and awakening hope in Africa (Haddad 2015). Pobee (2017) gives account of faith and hope in Africa. He explains how the African context has become synonymous with poverty and makes the point that hope may be identified as a measure and test of relevant theology. Furthermore, Pobee proposes Christian theology as an agent of hope, and claims that hope may be located in the ability of Africans to mobilize political and social movements to overcome situations of injustice and exclusion, and that religious institutions are part of the social movements. Moltmann (2019: viii) states that Christian hope draws the promised future of God into the present day and prepares the present day for the future. Moltmann urges Christians to honestly assess and face the full force of humanity's contemporary challenges and instil a realistic hope of transcending them.

The focus of my work has been working with people who are feeling helpless and hopeless about their futures, especially those who have been marginalized for a variety of reasons. This paper relies heavily on the significance of the human context, and the realities of lived experience. The purpose of this paper is to provide a platform for discussion around how hope can become active. Macy and Johnstone (2012:3) propose that Active Hope is a practice. It is something we do, rather than something we have.

The practical approach discussed in this paper has been tested in several pilot studies and found to be worthy of further discussion. Hope can be instilled and nurtured in our young people so that they can make responsible choices and be empowered to make realistic plans to circumvent the adversities they are bound to face in this Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab 2012). The trajectory of this paper is structured using Osmer's

four tasks namely, the descriptive-empirical task; the interpretive task; the normative task, and the pragmatic task, as a framework (Osmer 2008;2011).

The descriptive-empirical task asks, "What is going on?"

In this first task that Osmer suggests, attention is given to what is going on in the lives of people. Information is gathered to recognize and understand social trends and patterns that are impacting on people's lives. Prevailing difficulties within the economy advance feelings of hopelessness and helplessness regarding prospects of work and earning a sustainable livelihood. In an interview with Scalfari (2013), Pope Francis states:

> The most serious of the evils that afflict the world these days are youth unemployment and the loneliness of the old. The old need care and companionship; the young need work and hope but have neither one nor the other, and the problem is they don't even look for them anymore.

This worldwide problem is evident in the South African context. Haddad (2015) in her book *Keeping Body and Soul Together,* has collected many of the seminal works of de Gruchy whose lifework addressed poverty in Africa. The draft paper for discussion promulgated by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET 2016) identifies a triad of challenges which confront South Africans, namely poverty, inequality and unemployment. These three disempowering challenges are ubiquitous and can no longer be defined in terms of race. Presently, South Africa has the highest Gini coefficient in the world. The gap between rich and poor has increased substantially within each population group (Bond 2016; Mouton 2014; Mashua 2012; Bhorat & Kanbur 2005; HSRC 2004). Gross Domestic Product has slowed from a positive 4.5% during the period 2003–2008 to 0,8% during the last year (2018) resulting in one of the highest unemployment rates in the world. According to Statistics South Africa (Statistics SA, 2019), the percentage of young people, aged 15–34 years, who were not in employment, education or training (NEET) increased by 1,4 percentage point from 39,0% in the third quarter of 2018, to 40,4% in the third quarter of 2019. Therefore, young people's hope for a successful future is diminished. In the South African context, De Lannoy, Graham,

Patel and Leibbrandt (2018) describe a continued disconnect between skills development policies, economic policies and social protection policies. The economy of the 4th Industrial Revolution demands higher levels of skills (Schwab 2016). Disenfranchised youth, faced with adversities, struggle to bridge the gap between education and work, because they lack appropriate skills and adequate guidance. Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are common among both privileged and disenfranchised people. Thus, there is a desperate need to find out why these problems are occurring, so that steps can be taken to ameliorate them.

The interpretive task asks, "Why is it going on?"

Osmer suggests that we make use of texts to understand and explain why these patterns of lived experience are occurring. Hence, let us examine some of the theories behind the conditions that lead to unemployment, poverty and inequality which are inexorably intertwined.

Economic factors are not the only factors that contribute to poverty. Bate (2012) argues that poverty can exist at any level of human life, and links poverty to social injustice. Bate states that the absence of participation in human life, whether at the economic, social, physical, psychological, relational, cultural, political or spiritual level, creates human situations of yearning and need for fulfilment, which causes people to sink into lassitude and hopelessness. Social justice needs to be understood contextually, because views develop and change temporally, culturally and geographically, and because Inequality, social injustice, lack of skills and poverty are interrelated. The reality of social injustice and exclusion prevails. A prominent South African social activist, Kevin Dowling, suggests that:

> Social justice can only truly exist when the quality of life of all individuals, families and communities in South Africa, but particularly those who are excluded from a place in the sun, has improved to a point where they can experience a life with adequate dignity and hope for their future, and whereby the potential of each person and their family, and community, is unlocked (Dowling 2015).

Social injustice, lack of skills, unemployment and poverty could be attributed to the quality of education in South Africa which is ranked by the World Economic Forum (WEF) as one of the worst in the world (Dutta, Geiger, & Lanvin, 2015). Institutions of Education and Training in South Africa in crisis, perpetuate the cycle of poor-quality education and inadequate guidance for young people. If future work possibilities are based on academic education, then the vast majority of South Africans are excluded from the privilege of a position in the world of work. However, they need, and want to earn a sustainable livelihood to support self and family. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) explained by Chambers and Conway (1992) embraces what people do with what they have, taking assets and vulnerability into account. A livelihood is deemed sustainable when it can cope with, and recover from, stresses and shocks, and when it can maintain or enhance its capabilities, assets and activities both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base (Chambers & Conway 1992; de Gruchy 2005). Findings of the impact study done by South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) revealed that the targeted areas of access, redress, equity, quality and efficiency set by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) have not yet been attained (SAQA, 2016). While there are pockets of excellence, which offer excellent support and guidance, the reality of problems in the education system prevails. Despite good policy, intentions have yet to be transformed into effective practices. Hence, South Africa, as a nation, is still struggling to fully realise proclaimed democratic ideals. Most South Africans have yet to attain a decent standard of living (Graham & de Lannoy 2017; Mashua 2012; SAQA 2016;).

Families have become fragmented and the responsibility for raising children is often shared by the extended family and the wider community. Lack of appropriate role models and guidance from parents is problematic (Dass-Brailsford 2005; Gobodo-Madikizela 2014; Jansen 2013; Krige & Silber 2016; Author, Scioli & Omar 2018; Ramphele 2002, 2012). Hence, the roles of all people who work with young people become important agents for social change. Many scholars and theologians in recent times have turned their attention to this discourse of despair within communities. Dik, Duffy and Steger (2012) argue that social injustice can be interrupted by helping people who are disenfranchised to navigate their way around obstacles

of injustice. They suggest inviting people to serve as agents of change by introducing and incorporating prosocial values into interventions.

Jesus said "tend my lambs and feed my sheep" (Jn. 21:15-17). Could we interpret this as a mandate to assist the disenfranchised people and to nurture them so that they are enabled to sustain themselves both spiritually and physically? Jesus said, "bring good news to the poor" (Lk. 4:18; Isaiah 61:1). Can this be interpreted as a mandate to awaken hope in those who are overwhelmed by despair? Can this be the pastoral role of faith-based organisations in South Africa in this time of despair?

Resting on these facts as background, the intention of this paper is to examine the need for hope, to discuss the value of meaningful work, and to describe an intervention that instils hope in the young people of South Africa. Hence, we now turn our attention to the works of learned scholars to guide our responses. Using this background, hope may be seen as an *anchor* in God's promise and also a *steering wheel* for motivating personal agency towards acting to finding ways of doing meaningful and purposeful work, and at the same time earning a living.

The normative task asks, "What ought to be going on?"

Clinebell (1984) argues that the church, aware of its changing societal context, can become a centre of transformation where people can learn how to live the abundant life in this turbulent dynamic moment in history. This argument has become even more relevant in the uncertainty created by the 4th Industrial Revolution (Schwab 2016).

Bate (2012) proposes that a pastoral response is based on Jesus' mission to bring "good news to the poor and life to the full". The poor need faith and hope, in the spiritual sense, and they need to be empowered to develop and use their skills to earn a sustainable livelihood so that they can live life abundantly. De Gruchy (1997:58-62) posed the question How do we do theology in rural Africa? And he proposed that theology in and for Africa needs to be largely a theology for and by lay people. It may be useful therefore, for all those who work with people in communities to examine the need in their own temporal and geographical context, and to find ways to assist individuals within the community to regain hope and find ways of

earning a sustainable livelihood. As part of this normative task, we unpack the perception of work, and examine the theology and psychology of hope.

Work is an essential component to fulfil the promise of abundant life. Which brings our attention now to the question of what is work? The notion of work may be understood by exploring the works of recognised authorities, who agree that engaging in meaningful work enables the individual to contribute to the good of the community, while at the same time providing the individual with a sense of meaning and purpose, as well as a sustainable livelihood. In his writings, Pope John Paul ll (Laborem Exercens 1981) in an encyclical dedicated to the dignity of human work states that:

> Through work man must earn his daily bread and contribute to the continual advance of science and technology and, above all, to elevating unceasingly the cultural and moral level of the society within which he lives in community with those who belong to the same family.

Pope John Paul II expressed his concern for the welfare of the individual. He has criticized the dehumanizing aspects of modern technology and has affirmed the message that man *has intrinsic worth and dignity which can be manifested in meaningful work.*

Dalai Lama points out that to survive in a modern industrial society, everyone needs to find their own way of making a living. He states that work as a primary source of one's livelihood is realistic especially if the individual has a family to support. There is a dimension to work that is noble (Dalai Lama & Cutler 2003). Dik, Duffy and Eldridge (2009) discuss how important it is for people to establish meaning in their lives, and how people gain satisfaction from using skills they have acquired with purpose. According to Forster (2014), the analysis of the Call 42 data showed that Christians in South Africa are struggling to find significant meaning and purpose in their work. The findings of Forster's research (Forster 2015) has implications for the church and its officers, and he concludes that Christians and the church have a contribution to make, as bearers and vessels of hope in South Africa. Forster (2014;2015) advocates that all forms of church must engage with the reality of the current social and demographic context in order to effectively act as bearers of hope.

Graham (2017) describes how practical theology has moved from regarding itself as the application of theory into practice, into a more performative and inductive epistemology. She makes the point that practical theology includes community engagement and outreach and asserts that the authentic mission of the church is to be found in its practices of service and justice. Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014) claim that the notion of practice is used to refer to the everyday, lived religion of ordinary people. Aziz, Nel and Davis (2017) suggest that youth ministry as a practical theological discipline requires adequate reflection upon its praxis which requires skill and knowledge because youth in the South African context are facing struggles that undermine not only their economic futures but also their identities. Pillay (2017) asserts that it is not so much what the church believes, but in what the church does that matters most in this day and age. De Gruchy (2005) promotes the idea that to be a Christian means to participate in *missio Dei,* God's work in the world.

I concur with these scholars and argue that in the age of the 4th Industrial Revolution, when life and the world of work is so unpredictable, youth can no longer be guided by their families. Hence, the transformation of communities overwhelmed by ubiquitous feelings of helplessness and hopelessness should be an integral part of the pastoral work of the church today. Could we assume then that by instilling and nurturing hope, people may have the courage to live meaningful lives, using their work to contribute, not only to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities, but also to contribute to making the world a better place in doing God's work. Our challenge, as church, is to contribute to social and economic change by awakening, instilling and nurturing hope in our young people.

Recently, there has been a rekindling of discussions around hope in South African literature (Boesak 2014; Botman 2007; Dowling 2015; Dreyer 2011; Forster 2014, 2015; Gobodo-Madikisela 2014; Le Grange 2011; Author 2016b, 2018, 2020; Author, Scioli & Omar 2018; Mashua 2012; van Louw & Beets 2011; Waghid 2008). What is hope? What makes some people able to hold onto hope more than others? Work and Hope dance together to form the foundation on which a life of abundance is experienced. Hope has been identified in research studies, as a key element to success in planning one's future. A positive correlation between high levels of hope and success

in the world of work is reported in research studies (Cheavens, Feldman, Gum, Michael & Snyder 2006; Ginevra, Sgaramella, Ferrari, Nota, Santilli & Soresi 2016; Smith, Mills, Admunsen & Niles 2014). By turning attention to hope, there is likely to be movement toward enhancing the ability to have meaning and purpose in life through the work we do. In essence, being hopeful about one's ability and one's future is essential to success.

Hope is an intersubjective concept that is difficult to define objectively. The theory of hope can be drawn from a multitude of disciplines. Hope has been used to understand and ameliorate global crises in the past. The concept of "Hope in Action" as mission of the church is not new. Scholars have persistently advocated that one of the most important missions of the church is to contribute towards social transformation. David Bosch (1991:510) draws our attention to two perspectives of mission expressed as "hope in action" and "action in hope".

Macy and Johnstone (2012) explain the difference between passive hope and active hope. They declare passive hope as waiting for external agencies to bring about what is desired, while active hope is about becoming active participants in bringing about what is hoped for. They extol active hope as a practice, something that we do, rather than something that we have. They describe the process as involving three steps. First to have a clear view of reality, second to identify what is hoped for in terms of direction and values which we would like to see expressed, and third, to take steps to move in a chosen direction. So indeed, hope can be operationalized as used as a strategy to improve the lives people and communities within context.

Different theories examining hope are postulated by scholars who are regarded as experts on the constructs of hope (Snyder 2000, 2002; Scioli & Biller 2009, 2010; Weingarten 2010). This paper chooses to use the constructs of hope described by Scioli and Biller (2009, 2010) who explain fundamental hope as a future-directed network, constructed from biological, psychological, and social resources. Scioli and Biller argue that hope, in its fullest sense, encompasses the four greatest needs of a human being, namely, Attachment (trust, openness, and connection), Survival (self-regulation and feelings of liberation), Mastery (empowerment, ambition, and ideals), and Spirituality (faith and meaning). Spirituality is an important component of hope and an important component of

meaningful work. Hope enables a person to have a more optimistic attitude towards the future, which in turn enhances one's personal agency and self determination.

There is a growing body of empirical evidence worldwide showing that when people are hopeful, they tend to be able to overcome adversity more easily (Freire 1992; Hooks 2003; Palmer 2014; Scioli & Biller 2009;2010; Snyder 2000, 2002). In a study conducted in South Africa to understand what contributed to success of disenfranchised people in the world of work, *self-determination* was found to be an essential personality trait in circumventing adversity (Author 2014). Specifically: successful people were able to benefit from acquiring personal competencies and marketable skills (mastery); they had the ability to use creative ways to circumvent and overcome adverse conditions (survival); they made good use of social support structures (attachment); and they had a sense of purpose and mission for their lives (spirituality). In summary, those who were successful in the world of work showed evidence of making effective use of the four constructs of hope as explained by Scioli and Biller (2009, 2010).

Self-determination, based on fundamental hope, enables people to create a realistic plan that will help them towards earning a sustainable livelihood so that they can provide for themselves and their families with hope, thus turning passive hope into active hope. The practical intervention discussed in the pragmatic task provides a platform for putting hope into action and acting with hope. The fact that Scioli and Biller (2009, 2010) assert that hope is a skill that can be learned is very liberating, and provides the structure for the practical intervention discussed in the pragmatic task.

The pragmatic task asks, "How might we respond?"

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET 2016) suggests that all stakeholders in the community, including teachers, school boards, community and faith based organisations, should become involved in assisting young people through the transition from education to finding work and earning a sustainable livelihood. De Gruchy (2005) encourages Christians who are seeking to accompany the poor to make use of and build on the insights of the sustainable livelihoods approach.

Perseverance and support from others, particularly significant people in the community, can make a difference. If community and faith-based organisations can become part of the solution to the challenges, and take the responsibility of instilling and restoring a hopeful attitude towards the future, perhaps this will contribute to alleviating unemployment, inequality and poverty. Having reflected on the problems faced by people seeking to earn a living in South Africa, this paper proposes a practical intervention.

The intervention maps out an empowering approach that makes use of four constructs of hope described by Scioli and Biller (2009, 2010) namely, Attachment, Mastery, Survival and Spirituality. The intervention is a dynamic process offering a transformational journey that deepens our capacity to withstand adversity and to adapt to change. It takes the form of a spiral rather than a cycle, since the process unfolds moving forward and upward. Each construct is interrelated and unfolds into the next, allowing all four constructs to work together to form a whole, which is greater than the sum of the parts. When all four channels of hope (attachment, survival, mastery, spirituality) are developed individuals are better equipped to pursue long term goals, garner support from significant others, build and sustain relationships, and self-regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours (Scioli & Biller 2009, 2010). The importance of the attachment and spirituality channels cannot be underestimated since not only do they establish meaning and purpose of work, they also form a strong foundation for a good work ethic (Kretzschmar 2012).

The dynamic spiral of the intervention has four stages which are interrelated. First, awaken an understanding of the concept of hope, with the premise that a hopeful attitude is fundamental to motivate successful engagement. Second, engage in conversations, based on the four constructs of hope, which give rise to self-knowledge in terms of values, interests and skills, while at the same time becoming aware and paying attention to the needs in the marketplace and the environment. Questions to stimulate conversation are suggested below. Third, explore possibilities for ways to develop and acquire further skills by examining the resources available in terms of finance, supportive people and possibilities, based on reasonable hope and realistic goals. Finally, reflect on these possibilities and then return to the spiral of this process.

The efficacy of using this flexible framework for an intervention, which can be contextualized, has been shown in several independent published studies (Author 2016a; Author, Scioli & Omar 2018; Author 2020). The research approach in all these studies took the stance of action research, so that the voices of those who experienced the intervention are given a platform to be heard. This approach is congruent with the concept of "active hope" or "hope is action". The following questions illustrate how the process may proceed. This is not a template of questions that should be used. Each question will follow on from the answer of the previous question. Thus questions are governed by the context, using the four constructs of hope as a basis, and are interrelated.

Attachment questions

1. Who are the significant people in your life?
2. Who do you care for (look after)?
3. Who cares for you?
4. How do you help each other?
5. From whom can you learn? What can you learn from them?

Mastery questions

1. What do you enjoy doing?
2. What skills do you have that others need?
3. What other skills could you learn that will be useful for you?
4. What skills do you have that would benefit your community?
5. What can you do well, that someone will pay you to do, or buy from you?

Survival questions

1. What skills do you have that you can you use to earn a living?
2. Where can you use these skills?
3. Can you make a plan of how you can use the skills you have?

4. What may be a problem?
5. What can you do to avoid or overcome the problem?
6. What resources do you have? Financial, people, etc.
7. What resources do you need?
8. How can you find and make use of the resources?
9. Who do you know that can help you to find work?
10. Are there some things you need to change in your life?
11. How can the people you know assist you in achieving your plan of action?

Spirituality questions

1. On whom can you rely?
2. Where do you gain your strength from?
3. What are the things in life that are most important to you?
4. From whom do you draw inspiration?
5. What can you do that will be useful to others?
6. What can you do that will give meaning and purpose to your life?

Conclusion

One of the major challenges facing South Africa presently is to bolster fundamental hope for many people who, without appropriate interventions, are predestined to a life of continued exclusion, social injustice, unemployment and abject poverty. Many scholars whose work has been discussed in this paper, have suggested that practical theology needs to address contemporary issues, and be of service to people struggling with the realities of lived experience.

This paper puts forward the structure of an intervention (Hope for a Sustainable Livelihood© which could be used by those who work with young people, as a practical way to awaken, instil and nurture active hope in our young people so that they are empowered to take personal agency

and make realistic informed decisions about their future in a world where jobs are scarce. Then, they may have a "place in the sun", as Dowling (2015) suggests, and "experience abundant life".

Macy and Johnstone (2012: 4) propose that the contribution that each of us makes to the healing of our world is our gift of Active Hope. Maybe, the intervention discussed in this paper could provide stimulus for finding active ways to spread hope for a sustainable livelihood in the future, and thus, interrupt the cycle of inequality, unemployment and poverty? I am hopeful that conversations around hope as an active practice will continue.

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