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# Narrative and personhood: The quest for triad community development

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**Abstract**

This article sets out a Christian theological anthropology for community development. This critical engagement with traditional and doctrinal forms of Christian theological anthropology will analyse two contrasting perspectives of theological anthropology to construct a contemporary community development model that considers the responsibility of communities for community development. The theological model of community development considers narrative as an interlocutor of personhood and community development. This article further investigates conceptual linkages between personhood and community development through classification or categorisation of Catholic and Eastern Orthodox views of personhood. I will use the narrative as a lens to interpret the two perspectives and identify foundations for a triad community development model of personhood, narrative, and community development.

**Keywords**

*Anthropology; personhood; community development; Eastern Orthodox; whole-making; relationship; narrative; history; agency*

## Introduction

Who we are is essential for community development. But who we are is also not as simple as it may seem. Different disciplines have different theories and models about anthropology. This research will consider Christian theological anthropology and will attempt to contribute to the understanding of humans from a particular perspective and how Christian theological anthropology contributes to community development. The

author acknowledges that Christian theological anthropology is not homogeneous on the issue of anthropology. Despite the heterogeneity of the ontology of humans within creation, the Christian tradition is marked by many controversies, such as Arianism and Eunomianism, to mention a few. Responses such as the creeds of Nicaea (381) and Chalcedon (451) to counter heresies, and the Cappadocian Fathers' attempts to account for Trinity, laid the foundation for theological anthropology for centuries to come. As much as these foundations provided theological substantiations for the identity of humans, it also provided humans with a position in creation that separated humans from nonhuman parts of creation. The separation of humans from the rest of creation has consequentially resulted in domination and alienation.

This research seeks to construct a theological model of community development with narrative as an interlocutor of personhood and community development. The theoretical framework is situated within the intersection of personhood and narrative. The article will investigate conceptual linkages between personhood and community development through classification or categorisation of Catholic and Eastern Orthodox views of personhood. Who we are is inextricably linked with our story and Christian narrative. This article will also engage critically with two juxtaposed perspectives of Christian theological anthropology which are represented by Daniel P. Horan and John Zizioulas. Finally, the article will use the narrative as a lens to interpret the two perspectives and identify foundations for a triad community development model of personhood, narrative, and community development.

## Horan, narrative, and whole-making as personhood

Horan is critical of the classical or traditional use of the concepts of creation, image of God, and in the likeness of God. These concepts are the foundation of the nature of God and God's relationship with humanity. They have also become the theological assumptions of Christian anthropology throughout Christian history. Horan considers the theological feminist theories and poststructuralist philosophies' critique of static and doctrinal theological anthropology to revisit the Christian foundations of human nature and the place of humans within creation. He further claims that

Christians appropriated Hellenistic philosophical traditions in the use of human nature. This essentialist use of human nature has dominated Christian theological anthropology over the value of the particular individual human person. "The primacy of substance from a hylomorphic metaphysical standpoint within the Christian anthropological tradition has re-inscribed an implicit androcentrism and the privileging of a certain male normativity, which feminist theologians have raised to greater consciousness" (2014:94–95).

One of the classical views of the use of concepts such as created in God's image and the likeness of God is found in the complementary notion of Augustine. With regard to complementarity, Augustine, under the influence of Neo-Platonism, divides the soul into deliberative and obedient functions which represent male dominance over female and the female's subordination to the male. This view espoused by Augustinian was further developed by Thomas Aquinas who assumes that women are inferior to men – both physically and biologically. Only men could represent Christ in the sacraments and in presiding over worship. This hierarchical nature of man and woman also found normativity in Luther's teachings of sex, lust (concupiscence) and sin in the marriage sacrament (Klaasen 2016:6–7). This kind of binary gender-classification results in power imbalance, isolation, unequal division and, more seriously, domination on the basis of discrimination.

The difficulty with complementarity and essentialism as foundations for Christian theological anthropology is that humanity has been regarded as separate from the rest of creation and in a hierarchical order that subjugates one under the other. The categorisations and essence have also not taken particularity and individuality into consideration. Those who seem of the same substance by law, biology, and sex are defined in opposition to the other.

Horan challenges the universalist and essentialist notion of humanity by pointing out that particularity and individuation is a much more plausible and progressive foundation for Christian theological anthropology in the twenty first eco-centred created order. His model for a Christian theological anthropology is built on a contemporary theological anthropology that reinterprets personhood through catholicity (whole-making) and calls

for a historical (narrative) form of interaction. With regard to the latter, Horan provides three indispensable components to be considered when addressing the limitations of the Christian doctrinal use of Hellenistic philosophical methods of Christian theological anthropology which has dominated the Christian tradition.

Firstly, Horan counters the static, complete, unmediated, and absolute notions of subjectivity by introducing the use of language to that of humans by poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida. Derrida's use of "différance" instead of "difference" derives from the French word *differer,* which can be translated "differing" or "deferring." According to Horan, "Derrida clams that language finds its meaning through a series of other referents (anterior, concurrent, and posterior elements in relationship) and that an expression of language, a sign, or phenomenon also never derives at its complete or absolute meaning, but is instead perpetually deferred or postponed." Speaking about the subject in these terms means that the essence or nature cannot be taken as absolute or eternal. *Différance* also finds a collaborator in Karl Rahner's transcendental theology. Because of the reliance on other referents there exists congenital resistance to expose one's complete meaning at any one moment in the present. "In other words, deconstruction challenges theological anthropology to a sense of presence in the moment when in women and men become attuned to both the foundationally relational dimension of their existence and the historical grounding of reality …" (Horan 2014:103–104). According to Klaasen (2018:6), "*Différance* refers to the distinction, inequality and discernment between two or more phenomena, on the one hand, and the delay or space that hides until later what is possible."

Secondly, postmodern approaches to anthropology have challenged the type of relationships evident in modern and pre-modern Christian theological anthropology. Horan uses relationships with alterity which causes a greater distance amongst humans and between humans and the rest of creation. The combination of relationships and alterity is an attempt to engage with the inherent subjectivity of the Christian tradition's passing on of the "self-enclosed and contained human 'nature' and 'essence.'" Horan attempts to keep in tension the distance between humanity and the rest of creation and the reciprocal interaction between and amongst humanity and creation. Acknowledging that social institutions and social practices construct, or

at least contributes to, the construction of humanity, Horan asserts that poststructuralists' deconstruction of common experience and common human nature unmasks distorted history (Horan 2014:105–106). Feminists theologians such as Radford Ruether uses dialectics to uncover the hidden truths that male dominance failed to pass down. "Dialectics is far more inclusive than the dualisms, like man/woman, are divided for the purpose of either/or, dialectics move beyond both poles to a synthesis … dialectical thinking explores the 'other' and brings both poles into a new relationship" (Klaasen 2018:13). This kind of relationship that poststructuralists promote also raises questions about the identity of humanity in relation with the rest of creation. What is the difference between humanity and the rest of creation and how does the difference influence the kind of relationship? Is it a relationship of reciprocity or hierarchy? Christian theological anthropology is challenged by poststructuralists to rethink alterity in view of the devastating effects that Christian theological anthropological essentialism and complementarity has caused creation. A different interpretation of alterity also challenges the position of God as the source of otherness (Horan 2014:106).

The third foundation for a Christian theological anthropology, according to Horan, is the historical context of human persons. The historical context includes the past as meaning making for the present. Human persons cannot be viewed from an abstract ahistorical context as social, political, and cultural phenomena impact the person, in both their relationships with the other and their sense of identity. Horan (2014:107) quotes Rahner's anthropological intuition presented in his *Hearer of the Word* (Rahner 1994:94), "To be human is to be spirit as a historical being. The place of the transcendence is always also a historical place. Thus, the place of a possible revelation is always and necessarily also our history."

History is existential and ontological in the human person's reality. Helmut Richard Niebuhr reminds us that history, as real as it is for the reality of the human person, has limits and can be exploited. Niebuhr asserts that two histories exist. The one is external history, which deals with facts that can be evaluated through analytical means, and the other is inner history, which uses metaphor as the means for sense making. The former includes the history of natural science, human sciences, and metaphysics, which observes and discovers reality from a distance. It is limited by scepticism

of true knowledge and current paradigms. The latter, inner history, can fall prey to ideology or illusion because of the personal power over reality (Meylahn 2003:114).

Horan asserts that "this forgotten memory of our origins and interrelatedness" started off with a forgetfulness of the place of humans in the creaturely order. He further suggests that we do not look to a sustainability which seeks to keep the status quo, but to look back as "… the members of the human species," to "an increased awareness of who God created us to be and an honest reckoning with our creaturely origins in the ecological consciousness of the early Christian apologists such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons" defence of the doctrine of God's creation ex nihilo and God as the only divine source to oppose the repetitive claims of Platonic Gnosticism (2019:25). Glimpses of this lost memory are also found in the Patristic thinkers such as Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus, the battles that Augustine had with the threats of Manichaeism, the mystical writings of Hildegard of Bingen, and later scholastics such as Francis of Assisi and Angela da Foligno (Horan 2019:25–26).

Human persons as part of the created order can be retrieved as a plausible anthropology within the postmodern scholarship through narrative. The narrative of sustainability seeks to maintain the current status and fails to remember the true position of the human person within God's created order. Although Horan draws from Uhl's ecological consciousness, he criticises the "stewardship model of humanity's relationship to the rest of creation." His model sustains the universalist and essentialist nature of human persons that keeps the status quo. Uhl came to reject this model because "it is founded on a false narrative of reality – a story about our absolute uniqueness and separatism from the rest of creation, a story that perpetuates anthropocentrism and speciesism" (Horan 2019:27–28).

Moving from a scientific story of anthropology (Uhl) to an indigenous story, Horan contends that indigenous stories, such as that of the Native Americans, is another form to renew the skewed story of the relationship between humanity and creation of the last five hundred years (2019:30).

## Haecceitas

Horan calls for a story that is not necessarily new but renewed. A story that connects with the origins of human persons in relation with creation, different from that of the dominant Christian theological anthropology of the last five hundred years. This story is about human persons. Horan draws on Scotus' *haecceitas* which is individuation above the community or singularity above the universal. Even though common nature is possible, the principle of individuation decreases it into singularity. The two principles of *haecceitas* are, firstly, its distinction from the specific nature, yet it forms a unity with the specific nature. Secondly, individuals with the same nature differ. "According to Scotus's principle of individuation (*entitas individualis* or *haecceitas*), what makes an individual an individual is identical with the thing's very existence or being. It is not an external, accidental, or material modification of an eternal idea or of a *universal substantia*, but a real, positive, unique, unalienable, and unrepeatable principle. This principle *haecceitas*, is absolutely intrinsic to that which it individuates within creation – including both material and nonmaterial things – and *really* identical with such an individual thing's very *being*" (Horan 2014:111–112).

According to Horan, the *haecceitas* principle which Scotus used for the human person provides theological anthropology that is not universalistic but particularistic. The individual is primary over the community although community and relationality are not excluded. The notion of the human person is not negative as formulated by mediaeval scholars such as Thomas Aquinas, but it is positive. The human person is about "a this" instead of a "not-that" (Horan 2019:137). Another significance of *haecceitas* for theological anthropology is the innate "relationality, dignity and value of *each* person over against the depersonalizing elevation of humanity in a general and essentialist sense" (Horan 2019:138). Horan's notion of individuating also goes beyond the human person and every part of the created order has value "according to the divine act" (Horan 2019:138).

*Haecceitas* also challenges the traditional notion of the *imago Dei* that passed on the idea that human persons are the culmination of creation, that human persons alone possess *imago Dei*, and that human persons have absolute uniqueness in a hierarchical created order (Horan 2019:238).

On the other hand, different notions of human persons are found when we view the creation narrative in spatial rather than linear terms. Horan (2019:40–41) asserts that "a renewed sense of the text actually provides an unexpected resource for recalling our origins and recognizing the kingship of creation. For example, there are numerous parallels presented and continuity seen between human beings and nonhuman creation within the narrative."

## Zizioulas and personhood

Horan's notion of the human person through catholicity or whole-making challenges the dominant Christian theological anthropology of the last five hundred years. The theological anthropology is rooted in essentialist and complementarity that leaves a static, absolute unique and alienated human person that is at the top of the created order. This has serious consequences for the ecology and human persons. It leads to exploitation, domination, alienation, and distinction. Horan's *haecceitas* or individualisation ontology of the human person has particularity and individuality as its core principles.

Like Horan, Zizioulas has also been critical of the traditional foundations of the Christian theological anthropology. Like Horan, Zizioulas seeks the relevance of Christian theological anthropology for the postmodern period that is marked by a retelling of the story of modernity, which include the identity of the human person and what constructs such an identity. These include language (Ludwig Wittgenstein), relationships (Habermas), and history (Gadamer).

Departing from the strict formulation of personhood by the Cappadocian Fathers, Zizioulas starts with the ecclesiological context, or the communion context, as the ontological basis for personhood. Where the church is the body of Christ, there is the personhood that God bestowed on the people (*imago Dei*). His second most important diversion from the traditional theological anthropology is that divine personhood and not *ousia* is the basis for the Trinitarian God (Micallef 2019:224). In congruence with the Greek Fathers, Zizioulas contends for the oneness of God, but God as Trinity is divine personhood and therefore communion and relationship

is ontological in the Trinitarian God (Micallef 2019:224–225). The Cappadocian Fathers (Basil the Great, bishop of Caesarea 329–379, Gregory of Nyssa 335–394, and Gregory of Nazianzus 329–390) in particular formulated the Trinity as three hypostases that relate in an inseparable relationship instead of a mathematical or power-relational way. A person is different from an individual in such a way that the latter is measured by the degree of independence, while personhood is characterised by relation with each other (Klaasen 2013:186–187).

For Zizioulas, the following can be derived from divine personhood. Firstly, the person develops identity through relationship in terms of Trinitarian theology. Secondly, freedom is freedom *with* the other and not *from* the other. This implies that the person's uniqueness is absolute, and thirdly, personhood is creative when it comes to creating an "Other" (Micallef 2019:229–230).

Persons relate to creation not in a hierarchical top-down way as found in the fourth century formulations of Trinitarian theology, but in a ritual sense of uniting creation with God. Personhood implies that persons are priests of creation insofar as their role in terms of "its hypostatic aspect, through which the world is integrated and embodied in a unified reality" and "its *ecstatic* aspect by virtue of which the world by being referred to God and offered to Him as 'His own' reaches itself to infinite possibilities" (Otu 2012:61). Otu asserts that this relationality of personhood and creation is different from the stewardship model of human persons' relationship with creation. The relationship is not one of functionality, but it is ontological (2012:61).

When persons dominate, alienate, or exploit creation, it is much more than a moral or ethical transgression. To be in relationship with creation is not just for the sake of stewardship or even for the sake of vocation. In other words, it is not the neglect of a duty, or an inaction, but it is an existential transgression. It affects the existence of personhood. Like Horan's whole-making or catholicity's approach to theological anthropology, personhood is ontologically related to creation. Both approaches engage critically with the hierarchical-dominated relationship of the fourth century approach that has become doctrinal for the church. There is a closer historical link between Zizioulas and the Greek Fathers with regard to the assertion that

the unity of God, the one God, and the ontological "principle" or "cause" of the being and life of God, does not consist in the one substance of God but in the "hypostasis," that is, "the person of the Father" (Zizioulas). The difference between Zizioulas' emphasis of the Father and that of the Greek Fathers is that unity lies in the person and not the *ousia* of the Father. Notwithstanding this difference between Zizioulas and the Greek Fathers, the approaches of Horan and Zizioulas brings the relationship between persons and creation closer to each other through particularity (Horan) and relationality (Zizioulas).

Where is the relationship embedded if community is existential to personhood? Zizioulas regards the *ecclesia* as the community of personhood. It is within the church that the interrelatedness of humans as personhood is situated. According to Zizioulas, personhood entails a relationship between God, humans, and the rest of creation. "Personhood implies the freedom to be oneself, it means the freedom of being the 'other' and the freedom to live with the 'other'" (Otu 2012:58). "This freedom is not freedom from the other but freedom for the other. Freedom in this case becomes identical with love. God is love because he is Trinity. We can love if we are persons, that is if we allow the other to be truly other, and yet in communion with us" (Zizioulas 1994a:17).

Referring to the ecological problem, Zizioulas applies the same principle as the relationship between humans and the other to the relationship between humans and the rest of creation. Creation is not just for personal consumption but to bring creation in the right relationship with humanity. Using the bread and wine in the context of the Eucharist, Zizioulas demonstrates how material elements take on personal traits (1994b:8). Ecological deprivation and exploitation are two common themes that both Horan and Zizioulas take up in their Christian theological anthropology. For Horan, the ecological exploitation by humans is the issue that demands a relooking at what it means to be human. In order to construct a relevant theological anthropology that will relate to the ecology in a way that will run around the serious degradation of the world, humans must be freed from the misconceptions that they are absolutely unique and therefore near the top of the hierarchy of creation. It is for this reason that Horan reverts to the individuation of human persons. Individuating denies the absolute uniqueness of humanity, although it affirms that humanity is a different

kind of species. Human persons are the same as the rest of creation based on their same origins and dependence. Zizioulas, on the other hand, affirms the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation through the community that is formed in rituals such as the Eucharist. The non-human part of creation takes on personal traits within the context of the ecclesial community. By virtue of one community, the non-human community is part of the community and the communion with God forms personhood and a right relationship that affirms the divineness of the personhood of creation.

## Community development and Christian theological anthropology

Christian theological anthropology, when looked at through the lens of narrative provides a transforming community. In the two contemporary Christian theological anthropologies of Horan and Zizioulas discussed above, there is both divergence and convergence with traditional doctrinal formulations of what it means to be human. It is from the perspective of convergences that I draw agency for community development. Firstly, I define community development as that which "is about cultivating and nurturing the potentially transforming agency. It is a process of movement towards transformation of form, forming and formation. It is a process of mutual and reciprocal growth towards our God-given humanity. It is about transcending the solid boundaries that divide by domination and separation. Community development starts with the acceptance that every person and community deserve the symbolic taking off of our shoes when entering the holy ground of the constructive-other" (Klaasen 2019:3).

## Personhood and community development

### Community development is not experiential but ontological for personhood

Within Christian theological anthropology in both of the influential notions above, the identity of a person is not in individualism or absolute autonomy. Both notions challenge the modern abstract autonomous individual as one who can discover objective truth by personal effort independent

from tradition, history, or others. Being is in person(hood) rather than substance. The person is not complete, static, or alienated, but interacts, transforms, and discovers through looking back and making sense of the presence through the past and future. While Zizioulas gives an ontological position to community for personhood, Horan's use of *haecceitas* is not a community. *Haecceitas* distinguishes individuals from each other and from the rest of creation in order to preserve the deeper meaning of the divinity of the human person and non-human person. Horan's perspective points out the position that traditional Christian theological anthropology ascribes to the human person in relation to the non-human creation. Zizioulas' notion of personhood is captured in two terms, that of priests and *koinonia*. With regard to the former, the persons role is viewed in terms of its *hypostatic* aspect and its *ecstatic* aspect. The function does not relegate the relationship to functionality, but it is ontological. With regard to the latter, the ecclesial community is the space – the interdependence of humans – where God and the rest of creation is found. It is in this space of ritual and sacrament that non-human elements, like bread, water, and wine, are transformed with human traits. To be a person involves a relationship between God, humans, and the rest of creation.

Any kind of growth, development, or prosperity includes the other human and non-human parts of creation, not because of the individual's ability, functionality, or work, but because the Other (whether human or non-human) is inextricably part of the person. Personhood implies growing, maturing, and developing (Horan's catholicity/whole-making and Eastern Orthodoxy's use of likeness in God) in relation with the rest of the creation. Personhood is not so much about the static and unimaginative union (*universalis*) of the earth, but the expansion of potential and possibilities of the human person and non-human parts of creation (*catholicity*). Poststructuralists such as Derrida connect language with identity when inferring that the full meaning of words is not easily observable by what is visible. The meaning of words lies as much between the lines as within the visible concrete letters. In the same way, a person's identity is not fully disclosed at any given moment but there is always the delayed fullness of the person. These potentialities are somewhat connected to different referents that unlock the fullness of the person. Notwithstanding the criticisms of poststructuralists that language can be used in such a way that

only language exists or that language is the only reality, Derrida's point about language's ability to represent reality as beyond is so that persons are developing within communities that unlock mutual growth through personhood.

**Personhood implies the ability to respond to de-personhood**

Personhood is not a matter of functionality, but theologically, persons have the agency to respond to community underdevelopment. Both Horan and Zizioulas assert that action or doing is part of what it means to be a person. Both agree that the alienation of human persons from the ecology and persons from each other is tantamount to alienation from God. Horan uses Rahner's notion of mysticism "as the primordial experience of God in everyday life" and Zizioulas uses the "priest" as priests of creation. Both mystics and priests imply the connection of God's indwelling and doing in creation.

Meylahn asserts that "For an action to be intelligible there needs to be this close relation between action and narrative. This close connection is not a new invention but was already present in Aristotle's thinking. Aristotle defined tragedy as the imitation of action and understands action as a connection of incidents, of facts, of a sort susceptible to forming to narrative configuration" (2003: 91). Christian theological anthropology includes the actions of persons. Actions or narrated actions take cognisance of the historicity of the person and the reality within which the action takes place. Within the context of personhood, actions are closely connected to God and the church. With regards to mysticism, Horan (2019:234) quotes Eagan who asserts that "Rahner seemingly identifies mysticism as the primordial experience of God in everyday life." On the other hand, Zizioulas' notion of priest has the role of "hypostatic," which keeps the world in unity, and "ecstatic," which implies the world returning to God.

The late Steve de Gruchy contended that *doing* is integrated with *being* for identity. He pointed out that both creation stories (Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 2:7) are part of the vocation of persons. He applied this Christian theological anthropology to the agency of the poor. "This is the message of the Gospel for the poor, that they are both in the image of God and called to be actors in the drama of creation and salvation itself. They are not,

and cannot be, simply passive objects of history, but are invited to be the subjects of their own history" (2015:70-71).

Personhood through the lens of narrative addresses the agency of persons within community. Agency can take different forms such as specialized skills, material resources, emotional resources, and human resources. These kinds of agency are combined into whole-making by the community for the development of the community. Persons take responsibility for their own development. Dietrich *et al* (2014:30) draws from the "theology of creation" when they contends that "When God calls humankind into being and into community and relationship with God himself and one another, God at the same time calls us into responsibility for each other, and care for one another."

## Particularity and universality

When we use the lens of narrative for personhood, we discover two interrelated phenomena. Firstly, the person does not disappear as part of what the community has in common but remains unique. This uniqueness is questioned by Horan if it is absolute and causes alienation and domination. Drawing from the Trinitarian formulations of the Greek Fathers, Zizioulas argues for the uniqueness of the person, which is less particular than Horan. However, Zizioulas follows the Cappadocians' distinction between Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three hypostases. "Analogically, one can speak of the universal and its particulars. The Father is that from which the Spirit and the Son derives" (Klaasen 2013:187).

Community development is effective when the contextuality or particularity is taken seriously by agents. Every community and every person have unique circumstances that determine the need for development. A universalised approach to community development might miss the effectiveness of agency and minimise the development of communities. Universalism of development dominates cultures, traditions, and patterns of life that diverts from essentialism. On the other hand, when particularity is applied then existing patterns of life, traditions, and cultures become living human traits (to use Zizioulas' analogy of bread and wine within the ecclesial community) that assist sustainable community development.

Particularity also guards against abstract and generalised development. Particularity addresses specific needs of specific persons in community. Time as well as tradition are not limited to the empirical, observable, and measured linear phenomena. When community development considers the particular, the past and future becomes the concrete in the present.

Particularity does not mean separation between different communities or persons. There is still a place for difference but not in such a way that barriers are fixed, permanent, or alienable. To draw on Derrida's *différance*, persons and communities differ with the potential for convergence, or even emergence. Difference is not static, but fluid, and leads to freedom and whole-making. The barriers between persons and communities interlock or overlap where the potential of *différance* signifies development.

## Conclusion

Christian theological anthropology contributes to community development through ontological and not experiential means. Personhood, as espoused by both contemporary catholic and Eastern Orthodox formulations, as a response to the ecological crises assumes community development as concern and calling of persons. Community development is not a function but an inherent part of what is means to be human. Personhood also assumes that persons have the ability to do community development. The poor are called to take responsibility for community development as much as the rich have a vocation to exercise community development agency. Agency is not restricted to universal principles or essentialism but particularity and contextuality is tantamount to taking responsibility for community development. These three pillars form the basis of a theological community development paradigm to enhance effective, sustainable, and people-centred community development.

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