

Reimagining theological education: Identity, curriculum and pedagogy in African urban theology

**Authors:**

Emmanuel Akatukunda^{1,2} 
Stephan de Beer¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

²Department of Christian Ministry, Faculty of Theology, Kampala Evangelical School of Theology, Kampala, Uganda

Corresponding author:

Emmanuel Akatukunda,
eakatukunda@kest.ac.ug

Dates:

Received: 23 May 2025

Accepted: 03 Aug. 2025

Published: 12 Jan. 2026

How to cite this article:

Akatukunda, E. & De Beer, S., 2026, 'Reimagining theological education: Identity, curriculum and pedagogy in African urban theology', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 82(1), a10825. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v82i1.10825>

Copyright:

© 2026. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article explored the urgent need to reimagine theological education in Africa by contextualising identity, curriculum and pedagogy for urban ministry, with particular emphasis on Kampala, Uganda. By situating theological education within the historical trajectories of both the city and the church, it demonstrates that theological education in Uganda – especially in Kampala – has not evolved in isolation, but has been continually shaped by wider political, ecclesial and social dynamics. Drawing on research conducted across eight theological institutions in the Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area, the article examines the current state of theological education. The study identified three critical thematic gaps: urban detachment, epistemological dependency and pedagogical rigidity. Nevertheless, it also highlights several notable innovations that reflect the adaptive capacity of theological institutions within Kampala's urban context. In response to the identified challenges, the article proposes a roadmap for reimagining theological education at the Kampala Evangelical School of Theology.

Contribution: This roadmap advocates for a repositioned institutional identity, the development of urban-oriented curricula, the adoption of problem-posing pedagogy and the establishment of an engaged research hub – each contributing to the formation, transformation and sustainability of innovative urban ministry praxes.

Keywords: theological education; African urban ministry; decolonisation; curriculum innovation; pedagogical renewal; praxis-based formation; Kampala.

Introduction

Theological education in Africa must transcend inherited frameworks to meaningfully engage with the continent's socio-cultural and urban realities. In Uganda, theological institutions and churches have matured since independence in 1962, undergoing significant indigenisation, particularly in mainline denominations. Pentecostal and charismatic traditions have further shaped a contextual form of Christianity, addressing the lived realities of people on the margins. Despite these developments, theological education in Uganda remains dominated by Western paradigms, limiting its effectiveness in responding to urban challenges.

Urbanisation is rapidly transforming Africa. Eastern Africa, while least urbanised globally, is urbanising the fastest. Recent projections show that Uganda's annual urban growth rate is 5.61%, with Kampala at the epicentre (UN-Habitat 2014; cf. Kampala Capital City Authority [KCCA] 2020:2). Yet, infrastructure and planning have not kept pace. About 80% of Kampala's population lives in informal settlements (KCCA 2020:4), facing exclusion despite the opportunities urban life promises. This article explores how theological education in Kampala can be reimagined to better engage urban complexities. Empirical research reveals that many institutions remain constrained by outdated curricula and pedagogical models, failing to prepare students for urban ministry.

Methodology and research process

This article draws on both the Urban Africa 2050 initiative and doctoral research in Practical Theology. The research journey began in 2018 under the auspices of the Urban Africa 2050 process (see De Beer 2020). Although the primary author has been engaged with urban ministry since 1992, it was the Urban Africa 2050 initiative that catalysed a more focused contextual theological inquiry in Banda – a marginalised neighbourhood in Kampala where the author resides and serves as a Pentecostal pastor-scholar. Coordinated by the Centre for Faith and Community at the

University of Pretoria, the initiative brought together theological scholars from 15 African cities to explore projected urban futures by 2030 and 2050. Its overarching aim was to reimagine theological education in response to emerging urban realities across the continent. A key emphasis of the initiative was the imagination of theological education and formation to equip African Christian leaders more effectively for the complexities and possibilities associated with urbanisation.

Within this broader continental framework, the Kampala-based study concentrated specifically on urban theological education. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study incorporated the primary researcher's immersive presence in the Banda community, focus group discussions conducted in three of Kampala's slums of Banda, Kalerwe and Katanga, and structured interviews with a wide range of stakeholders – including urban planners, Christian ministry practitioners, theological educators, theology students and university academics.

This article focuses on findings derived from interviews with leaders of eight theological institutions operating within the Greater Kampala Metropolitan Area (GKMA). Data analysis involved transcription of the interviews, coding and thematic analysis. Audio recordings of interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed using a voice-to-text application, with transcripts verified through a concurrent review of both the text and the audio recordings. Notes taken during the interviews were compared with the full transcripts to identify key themes and ensure that the final analysis accurately reflected the participants' views.

The historical trajectory of the city, the Church and theological education in Kampala

Kampala's emergence as Uganda's capital city is deeply interwoven with the expansion of Christianity and the development of theological education. The overlapping trajectories of urbanisation, ecclesial power and theological formation have historically shaped – and been shaped by – colonial, postcolonial and neoliberal dynamics. This section traces how urban space, church structures and theological institutions have co-produced one another, revealing both the constraints of inherited models and the possibilities for contextual renewal.

Kampala's urban development

Kampala has evolved from a colonial administrative post into one of Eastern Africa's fastest-growing and most spatially fragmented cities. As of 2024, the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) estimates the city hosts 1.8 million night-time residents and over 4.5 million daytime commuters – amounting to over 31% of Uganda's urban population (UBOS 2024). This number grows substantially when the GKMA, including Wakiso, Mukono and Mpigi

districts, is considered. Founded in 1890 with the construction of a British fort by Captain Frederick Lugard, Kampala's early spatial organisation prioritised European settlers through well-serviced neighbourhoods, while relegating Africans to informal, underserved peripheries (Bryceson 2006:3–17; Nnaggenda-Musana 2008:27). This colonial urban planning structure persisted after independence in 1962, entrenching socio-spatial inequalities.

Under Idi Amin's regime (1971–1979), economic collapse and the 1972 expulsion of the Asian business community intensified informality, which became the dominant mode of urban survival (Goodfellow & Titeca 2012). Although the National Resistance Movement introduced reforms after 1986, systematic urban governance gained traction only with the creation of the KCCA in 2011. The *KCCA Act* (The Government of Uganda 2010) recentralised urban planning, aiming to modernise infrastructure and improve service delivery. However, critics argue these interventions have favoured elite interests, resulting in the eviction of informal traders and militarised urban management (Lindell, Ampaire & Byerley 2019).

Today, Kampala remains starkly divided. Affluent hilltop communities contrast with congested lowlands, where up to 80% of the population lives in informal settlements (KCCA 2020). The city contributes nearly one-third of Uganda's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and accounts for over 46% of formal employment (World Bank 2017:4), yet more than 57% of its workforce operates informally. A housing deficit exceeding 500 000 units has resulted in overcrowded, substandard dwellings (Haas & Ngoga 2018:2; KCCA 2012:100), and transport remains largely informal, with boda-bodas and shared taxis filling the gap (Oketch 2021).

Christianity and ecclesial power in Uganda

Christianity was introduced in Uganda in the late 19th century, closely tied to colonial expansion. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) arrived in 1877, followed by Roman Catholic missionaries in 1879. Intense rivalry between Protestants and Catholics shaped ecclesiastical politics and influenced relationships with the Kabaka of Buganda, leaving a legacy of denominationalism (Ward n.d.). The Buganda Agreement of 1900, which formalised British colonial rule, elevated the Anglican Church's influence. While not the official state religion, the Church of Uganda became deeply embedded in the colonial hierarchy. For instance, the Anglican bishop was often regarded as the third most powerful figure after the Governor and Kabaka (Lubega 2017). Non-mainline Christian groups, including Pentecostals and Baptists, were often denied entry during the colonial era, limiting the space for African-initiated churches to emerge (Gifford 1998:117).

In the lead-up to independence, the ecclesial landscape diversified. New denominations such as the Baptist Church, Full Gospel Church and Elim Pentecostal Church began to establish roots. A pivotal moment came with the founding of

Deliverance Church Uganda in 1967, widely regarded as one of the first indigenous Pentecostal movements (Musana 2010:49–54). Despite these developments, the dominance of Anglican and Catholic structures persisted. During the 1970s, Idi Amin's regime intensified religious repression, expelling missionaries and forcing many churches to go underground. In contrast, the post-1986 liberalisation created fertile ground for Pentecostal and charismatic movements, especially in urban areas like Kampala. Often referred to as *biwempe* churches because of their makeshift structures, these congregations resonated with the urban poor by emphasising themes of empowerment, prosperity and deliverance (Bremmer 2013:9–11; Musana 2010:56–60). Over the last two decades, Pentecostal churches have moved from the margins to influential roles in public life – engaging in policy dialogue, running media networks and initiating community development. However, their relationship with the state remains fluid, oscillating between alignment and autonomy (Musana 2017:99–118; UBOS 2024).

Theological education in Uganda

Theological education in Uganda has developed in tandem with broader socio-political and ecclesial shifts. In the early 20th century, dominant denominations established formal institutions to train clergy. The Roman Catholic Church opened Katigondo National Major Seminary in 1911, followed by the Anglican Church's Bishop Tucker Theological College (BTTC) in 1913. As denominational diversity increased, new theological institutions were founded to serve particular traditions. These included the Pentecostal Theological College in Mbale, the Baptist Theological College in Jinja and Glad Tidings Bible College in Kampala. Each functioned as a formation centre for its respective network.

The post-1980s liberalisation enabled a wave of new institutions, many founded by Western missionary organisations. These included Mbuya Bible College (Finnish missionaries), Reformed Theological College and All Nations Theological Seminary (Korean missionaries) and Westminster Theological Seminary (American Presbyterians). Africa Bible University also emerged during this time. Locally initiated institutions also gained traction. Notably, the Kampala Evangelical School of Theology (KEST), founded in 1989, was established to respond to local pastoral and theological needs. As a non-denominational initiative, it sought to provide accessible, contextually grounded theological education – marking a shift towards indigenised formation.

A major turning point came with the *Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act (2001)*, which established the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE). This brought theological institutions into the mainstream higher education system, requiring them to meet national accreditation standards, improve governance and demonstrate curricular quality. This formalisation helped enhance the credibility and consistency of theological education across Uganda. Overall, the historical development of theological education

in Kampala reflects an ongoing negotiation between inherited mission models and evolving local needs. The movement from externally driven Bible colleges to locally accredited institutions signifies both a theological and institutional maturation.

The current state of theological education in Kampala

Building on the historical context outlined in the preceding section, this section examines the current state of theological education in Kampala. The analysis is informed by empirical findings from a study that assessed theological education across eight institutions within the GKMA. Of these, six are accredited by the NCHE, while the remaining two offer non-accredited programmes. The study identified three key thematic gaps in theological engagement with the urban context. At the same time, it also highlighted innovative practices within these institutions which, if intentionally aligned with the realities of urban life, hold significant potential for meaningful and transformative urban theological engagement.

The paradox of proximity and detachment

The study uncovered a striking paradox that, although all eight theological institutions are situated within the GKMA, there is a marked detachment from the city as a living context and theological interlocutor. Despite their physical proximity to diverse urban realities, these institutions demonstrated limited engagement with the socio-political and spatial imaginaries that shape the life of the city. Urban ministry courses are rare, practicum placements often lack a deliberate urban orientation, and contextually immersive pedagogies – such as community exegesis – are virtually non-existent. As a result, urban marginality remains largely under-theologised, thereby diminishing the capacity of churches to respond meaningfully within urban spaces.

Notably, institutions such as the KEST, Watoto School of Leadership and Discipleship and Glad Tidings Bible College benefit from central and strategically located campuses. Yet, they largely fail to integrate urban contextual realities into their core curricula. Others – such as Africa Bible University (ABU), Reformed Theological College and Westminster Christian Institute – are located in suburban or affluent enclaves, rendering them even more disconnected from the everyday experiences of marginalised urban communities.

This detachment is not only spatial, but also pedagogical and missional. For instance, several leaders noted that curricula and institutional vision remain oriented towards a rural setting, leaving city realities under-addressed. One interviewee explained that although the college is located within the city, its curriculum is oriented towards equipping pastors for rural ministry in their denomination:

[Our] Churches are mostly based in rural parts of the country. There has been an emphasis on teaching the pastors in [our denomination] about development, emphasizing that one can

have enough even though they live in villages.’ (Kyeswa pers. comm., 01 December 2020)

Another institutional leader offered a similar reflection:

If you look at the sociological orientation [*of our institution*], I must be sincere – it is more rural than urban. And even though we might have a programme like the current attempt at online courses, the calibre of students is more village-oriented than city-based. And you cannot train people for the city if you are, more or less, rural (Ouma pers. comm., 07 May 2021)

Despite being located in one of Africa’s fastest-growing cities, most theological institutions in Kampala have not yet developed programmes that intentionally address the urban context. Eighty percent of the institutional leaders who participated in the study acknowledged that their programmes did not specifically target urban contexts. While some expressed hope that their students would be able to apply general theological principles to city-based ministry, there was little evidence of intentional urban formation. One leader remarked:

‘There is no programme that addresses the urban issues per se. But all programmes focus on the transformation of the hearts of leaders. The leaders can then hopefully apply the principles to all spheres of life, including the urban.’ (Kyeswa pers. comm., 01 December 2020)

Another noted:

‘Response to urban issues is motivated by the view on the sovereignty of God in all spheres of life. The curriculum development process anticipates the kind of competences the graduate will have after completing study at the institution.’ (Happy pers. comm., 15 May 2021)

This generalised approach to theological education reflects a significant gap in contextual responsiveness. By assuming that heart transformation alone will equip graduates for complex urban realities, institutions risk producing leaders who are theologically sound, yet practically unprepared for the social, economic and political dynamics of city life.

Urban ministry demands more than abstract theological competence; it requires fluency in navigating informal economies, informal transportation dynamics, marginalised populations, multi-ethnic communities, youth cultures and fragile governance systems – none of which are adequately addressed through generic curricular models. The absence of urban-specific content, praxis, and partnerships thus undermines the church’s ability to engage meaningfully with the lived realities of Kampala’s rapidly growing and diversifying urban population. This lack of intentionality in leveraging locational advantage reinforces a model of theological education that is abstract, disengaged and misaligned with the complexities of urban life (cf. De Beer 2023:95). By failing to position the city as a critical site of theological reflection and ministerial formation, many institutions risk perpetuating a form of theological education that is distant from the lived realities of the communities they are called to serve.

Epistemological dependency and institutional power dynamics

A second key finding concerns the influence of Western missionary models on theological institutions in Kampala. Many of these institutions continue to operate within epistemological frameworks and governance structures inherited from their missionary foundations. Curricula remain heavily reliant on theological paradigms from the Global North, with minimal incorporation of African theological resources or contextually grounded pedagogical methodologies. As one interviewee noted, this dynamic often results in a ‘conflict of visions’ and a lack of appreciation by missionary partners for local contexts and ministerial needs. This not only limits the contextual richness of theological engagement, but also perpetuates epistemic dependency, stifling the emergence of authentically African theological voices. Another interviewee observed:

‘The partners from the West have the funds; we have the other resources. There is need for respect and understanding our context.’ (Happy, pers. comm., 15 May 2021)

Resistance to curricular reform is frequently tied to the enduring authority of Western funders and founding bodies. For instance, in institutions such as the ABU, stakeholders reported ongoing tensions between local accreditation bodies, Ugandan faculty and externally imposed programme structures. Such tensions reflect broader critiques within postcolonial theological discourse regarding asymmetrical power relations between institutions in the Global North and their African counterparts (see Byaruhanga 2013). One illustrative case involves the length of humanities degree programmes: while Uganda’s national standard is three years, ABU extends its programmes to four, reflecting an imported academic model that overlooks local regulatory frameworks. Such dynamics hinder theological institutions from responding meaningfully to Kampala’s socio-political history and contemporary urban realities.

Another gap in theological formation was the overwhelming reliance on course materials authored in the Global North, with minimal inclusion of African theological voices. Leaders interviewed revealed that over 90% of textbooks and required readings are produced in Western contexts, often with little relevance to local realities. As one interviewee noted:

‘Most of the theological textbooks used in our institutions have been written by Western authors. Students need to be taught how to critique the information passed on to them.’ (Happy pers. comm., 15 May 2021)

Another leader lamented the absence of home-grown scholarship: ‘There are very few – or almost no – resources on the history of theological education in Uganda and in Kampala’ (Byaruhanga pers. comm., 22 January 2024).

This scarcity of locally authored materials not only limits students’ ability to engage critically with their own context, but also reinforces a dependency on foreign

epistemologies that may marginalise African worldviews, cultures and theological traditions. Without deliberate efforts to include Ugandan and broader African scholarship, students are formed primarily through borrowed lenses – disconnected from the social, political and religious realities they are called to serve. This undermines their confidence in local wisdom and stifles the development of an authentic, contextualised theology that speaks with integrity to the complexities of urban Uganda.

Dis-located and a-contextual pedagogies

The study revealed that pedagogical approaches across Kampala's theological institutions remain predominantly didactic, characterised by a heavy reliance on lecture-based delivery models. While lectures play a role in theological education, their dominance limits opportunities for experiential, participatory and context-driven learning. One institutional leader candidly observed, 'We spend too much time in class. I feel like there are moments when we need to go outside and there we learn' (Ouma pers. comm., 07 May 2021). Such observations highlight a disconnect between classroom instruction and the practical demands of urban ministry. Theological formation that remains confined to theoretical exposition fails to equip students with the critical, adaptive and relational skills required to engage effectively with the dynamic realities of urban life. Moreover, the lack of integrated fieldwork, peer learning and interdisciplinary exposure constrains students' ability to reflect theologically on lived experience. Without these elements, theological education risks becoming abstract and disconnected – offering knowledge, but not necessarily wisdom for contextually relevant ministry.

The second pedagogical gap had to do with limited field experience by the students. Although each institution acknowledged having practicum components within their curricula, these were often peripheral and insufficiently aligned with the complexities of urban ministry or grassroots theological reflection. Fieldwork tended to be introduced late in the programme, and its implementation lacked the depth and continuity needed to cultivate practical competence. Crucially, practical integration was delayed and disconnected from core learning. Mentoring and field-based experiences were often treated as supplementary rather than central to the formation process. One institutional leader stressed the need for deeper curricular integration, stating, 'Course descriptions must embrace an integrative approach ... so that instead of just giving people knowledge, mentors and mentees bring theory and practice together' (Kyeswa pers. comm., 01 December 2020). Also, all six accredited institutions included in the study reported assessment frameworks that prioritise summative evaluation, typically through final examinations, rather than formative, participatory or experiential assessment methods. This pedagogical gap reflects a broader rigidity within the

formation models, where knowledge transmission is privileged over critical engagement and contextual application. As a result, students may graduate with theological insight, but without the skills, habits and embodied wisdom necessary for navigating the socio-spiritual complexities of Kampala's urban spaces.

Moreover, training models are largely residential, and in some cases, resemble what one interviewee referred to as a 'monastic' approach – characterised by physical and conceptual insulation from the complexities of everyday life. He critically observed:

'You want everyone to be in the monastic setting. Everyone should come, be trained and then go out. What about if you did theological education by extension ... people are where they are and then you train them from there?' (Byaruhanga pers. comm., 22 January 2024)

Although residential models of theological training may offer valuable spiritual formation, they frequently risk detaching students from the socio-political and economic complexities that characterise contemporary urban ministry. Furthermore, such models tend to neglect the practical realities of many theology students in Kampala, who are often middle-aged, bi-vocational practitioners navigating the demands of ministry, employment and family life.

Another notable pedagogical gap identified in the study was the minimal integration of interdisciplinary and professional input within theological education. Key urban ministry competencies – such as engaging with local government authorities, informal sector workers, social workers or urban planners – are rarely embedded in the curriculum. This limits students' capacity to navigate the complex intersections between faith, policy, economy and everyday urban life. One interviewee suggested: 'We need to integrate other disciplines into our theological curriculum. There is need to go beyond training to meet ministerial needs' (Kyeswa pers. comm., 01 December 2020). Another interviewee remarked, 'It would enrich our understanding if we ... bring in a person working in KCCA or even a street vendor ... to share what they have observed' (Ouma pers. comm., 07 May 2021). The absence of such voices reflects a broader issue: the urban majority is rarely recognised as a legitimate theological interlocutor. Instead of being seen as bearers of wisdom and contextual insight, urban dwellers – especially those in informal or marginalised spaces – are often excluded from shaping theological reflection and institutional practice. This exclusion not only impoverishes the learning experience for students, but also insulates teachers from the very realities their graduates will face in ministry. By failing to engage Kampala's social actors as co-educators – whether boda-boda drivers, market vendors, slum leaders or city officials – institutions miss critical opportunities for grounded, participatory learning.

Emerging innovations and the future of urban theology

Despite the gaps discussed earlier in the text, the study revealed several noteworthy innovations that demonstrate the adaptive potential of theological institutions in Kampala. For example, Uganda Christian University's Master of Theological Studies with a major in Transformational Urban Leadership marks a significant step towards context-specific formation. Kampala Evangelical School of Theology's engagement with the Urban Africa 2050 research project and its initiative to position itself as a hub for urban theological engagement represent a pioneering model.

Other innovations include hybrid learning models, cohort-based delivery systems, internship and placement programmes and the integration of local languages in resource distribution. Initiatives like Pastors Development Network's 'doorstep library', where study materials are delivered to the learners, and ABU's radio-based communications training reflect a creative utilisation of technology to democratise theological education. These practices – while not always explicitly urban-focused – hold promise for cultivating an urban theological imagination.

Towards a roadmap for reimagining theological education in Ugandan urban contexts

This section offers a brief overview of a threefold roadmap for reimagining theological education in Africa's urban contexts. While not a comprehensive treatment – which would require a full-length article – it presents a framework grounded in the empirical findings discussed earlier. The roadmap responds directly to three critical gaps identified in the study: urban detachment, epistemological dependency and pedagogical rigidity. It then explores how KEST can animate this vision by positioning itself as a hub for engaged research for urban ministry. It calls for a more contextual, liberative and African-centred theological praxis that is responsive to the realities of contemporary urban life.

Repositioning institutional identity (addressing urban detachment)

As we discussed in the previous section, many theological institutions in Kampala still operate within inherited frameworks shaped by rural mission models and Eurocentric ecclesiologies. This disconnect from the lived realities of the city results in institutional cultures and curricula that remain largely abstract and detached from urban complexity (see De Beer 2022; Katongole 2011; Mugambi 2013:117–118). As the study revealed, 80% of theological leaders acknowledged their institutions lacked programmes specifically designed for urban ministry.

Repositioning institutional identity involves affirming the city as a legitimate locus of theological reflection. This requires more than simply adding urban modules – it

demands rethinking governance structures, recruitment practices and institutional partnerships to prioritise engagement with urban churches, grassroots movements and city-based communities. It also includes creating spaces where urban realities are not marginal, but central to institutional life. As De Beer (2023:95) argues, a truly contextual institution must not only include African voices, but also actively listen to and learn from the margins.

Urbanising and contextualising the curriculum (addressing epistemological dependency)

Theological curricula continue to be dominated by Western texts and frameworks, often sidelining African theologies, local histories and lived realities. Urbanising the curriculum entails more than revising reading lists. It involves recognising the city as a site of theological production and designing content that responds to the challenges and opportunities of urban life (see Pitts, Miller & D'Souza 2014:245; Land, Hannafin & Oliver 2012:8–14). Contextualising theological education also requires accessible learning pathways for bi-vocational leaders and urban Christians without traditional academic qualifications. Following Freire's (1993) concept of *conscientisation*, curriculum reform must foster critical awareness, local theological imagination, and engagement with the socio-political conditions that shape city life.

Crucially, the urban poor must be repositioned not just as recipients of ministry but as theological interlocutors – contributors of knowledge and insight. This shift challenges dominant epistemologies and opens space for co-constructing theology with those most impacted by urban poverty and exclusion.

Pedagogical renewal (addressing pedagogical rigidity)

The study revealed that theological education in Kampala remains largely didactic, with a strong reliance on lectures and final exams. Although most institutions include practicum components, these are often delayed, disconnected or treated as add-ons rather than integral to formation. Pedagogical renewal demands a shift from passive knowledge transmission to active, praxis-oriented learning. Moreover, engaged pedagogies extend beyond the mere transmission of knowledge to the transformation of the whole person, while actively challenging marginalising narratives (cf. Knoetze 2020:1–8; Love 2022:5–7; Nadar 2010:129–135). This includes immersive experiences such as fieldwork in slum communities, theological reflection on-site and exposure to urban actors like vendors, police officers and city planners.

These engagements not only humanise theological education but also cultivate empathy, critical reflection and public theological imagination. In this renewed model, the city becomes not just a backdrop for ministry but a source of theological meaning. Institutions must therefore move

beyond simply teaching about the urban poor to learning from them, embracing grassroots theology as a vital dimension of academic formation.

Kampala Evangelical School of Theology as an engaged research hub for urban ministry praxes

The evolving vision of the KEST as a hub for engaged research for urban ministry praxes presents a compelling paradigm for theological institutions seeking to engage constructively with the socio-spatial dynamics of African cities. Engaged research arises from engaged scholarship – where scholars are deeply immersed in the realities of society, actively engaging with its challenges and critically reflecting on those experiences. This stands in contrast to purely theoretical, armchair scholarship that lacks direct interaction or solidarity with concrete local communities. This model foregrounds transdisciplinary collaboration, drawing together theologians, urban planners, policymakers and residents of informal settlements to co-create contextually grounded solutions to urban challenges (see Akatukunda 2023:36–37; Boyer 1996:23–28; Swart 2012:309–323; Van De Ven 2007:2–14). Kampala Evangelical School of Theology is strategically situated within Kampala's urban core, in close proximity to key institutions of social, academic and political influence – such as Makerere University, the KCCA and several major ecclesial bodies – while also bordering informal settlements like Katanga, Kivulu and Kikoni. This geographic positioning uniquely situates KEST at the intersection of formal and informal urban spaces, enabling it to serve as a liminal site where traditional hierarchies of knowledge can be disrupted and reimaged.

As an engaged research hub, KEST is thus envisioned not merely as a centre for theological instruction, but as a dynamic convenor of public theology, urban advocacy and socio-theological innovation (cf. Nyamnjoh 2024:198–232). By cultivating spaces for interdisciplinary dialogue and praxis, KEST can serve as a catalyst for theological engagement with pressing urban issues – such as housing justice, environmental degradation, youth unemployment, and spiritual formation in contexts of precarity. Moreover, this model encourages both faculty and students to engage in sustained, reciprocal dialogue with the city. It invites theological formation that is deeply embedded in the rhythms and ruptures of urban life, thereby enabling the institution to contribute meaningfully to public discourse, policy development, and transformative community engagement. In this way, KEST's hub model represents a movement towards an incarnational theology – one that not only speaks *about* the city, but speaks *with* and *from within* the city, offering prophetic witness rooted in solidarity, justice and hope.

Reimagining theological education in Africa is both a challenge and an invitation. It calls for a bold reimagining of theology, education and institutional identity. Through its commitment to urban engagement, curriculum innovation and pedagogical renewal, KEST is taking significant steps towards a reimagined theological praxis. However, the

journey requires continued reflection on whose voices are centred, whose knowledge is privileged and whose realities are engaged. A truly reimagined theological education will not only prepare pastors for pulpits, but also form prophets for the city – leaders who can speak truth, live compassion and act justly in the contested spaces of African urban life. As Kampala continues to grow amid inequality and hope, institutions like KEST have the opportunity to lead the way – offering a model of theological education that is liberative, contextual, and deeply African.

Conclusion

The rapid urbanisation of Kampala presents both a challenge and an opportunity for theological education. This study demonstrates that without intentional engagement with the socio-spatial complexities of African cities, institutions risk perpetuating colonial legacies and producing graduates ill-equipped for transformative urban ministry. The proposed roadmap – anchored in repositioned institutional identity, contextualised curricula, pedagogical renewal and the establishment of urban ministry research hubs – offers a strategic pathway towards contextual, liberative formation. As institutions like KEST continue to innovate, future research should evaluate the long-term impact of these reforms on community empowerment, ecclesial agency and social justice in African urban contexts.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Both authors, E.A. and S.d.B. contributed proportionally to the outline, and analysis of the article. E.A. contributed to the writing of the manuscript, and S.d.B. carried out review and editing.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance and permission were obtained on 14 April 2020 from the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Theology and Religion of the University of Pretoria (Application number: T005/20), and approved semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2022. All investigatory procedures implemented involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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 authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agencies of the author, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

- Akatukunda, E., 2023, 'Repositioning theological institutions for urban ministry: A case for the Kampala Evangelical School of Theology', *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission* 51, 21–40, viewed 17 April 2025, from <https://missionalia.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/370>.
- Boyer, E.L., 1996, 'The scholarship of engagement', *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 49(7), 18–33. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3824459>
- Bryceson, D.F., 2006, 'Fundamentals of urban life in Eastern and Southern Africa', in D.F. Bryceson & D. Potts (eds.), *African urban economies: Viability, vitality or vitiating*, pp. 2–38, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Byaruhanga, C., 2013, 'Theological education in Africa', in I.A. Phiri & D. Werner (eds.), *Handbook of theological education in Africa*, pp. 154–163, Regnum, Oxford.
- De Beer, S., 2022, 'Urban Africa 2050: Imagining theological education/formation for flourishing African cities', *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 46(2), 239693932110063. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393211006398>
- De Beer, S., 2023, 'Constructing an urban theology of liberation in South Africa today: A transdisciplinary praxis-approach in the interface between (Urban) faith, politics and planning', *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Missiology* 51(1), 85–114.
- De Beer, S.F., 2020, 'Theological education and African cities: An imperative for action', *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission* 48(3), 231–256. <https://doi.org/10.7832/48-3-418>
- Freire, P., 1993, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Penguin Classics, London.
- Gifford, P., 1998, *African Christianity and its public role*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, IN.
- Goodfellow, T. & Titeca, K., 2012, 'Presidential intervention and the changing "Politics of Survival" in Kampala's informal economy', *Cities* 29(4), 264–270. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2012.02.004>
- Haas, A. & Ngoga, T., 2018, *Where are Kampala's missing houses?*, International Growth Centre, viewed 23 November 2023, from <https://www.theigc.org/blogs/where-are-kampalas-missing-houses>.
- Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), 2012, *Kampala physical development plan; updating Kampala structure plan and upgrading the Kampala GIS unit, Final report*, viewed 17 April 2025, from <https://www.kcca.go.ug/uploads/KPDP%20Draft%20Final%20Report.pdf>.
- Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), 2020, *Strategic plan 2020/21 To 2024/25*, viewed 23 April 2025, from <https://www.kcca.go.ug/uDocs/Kampa-City-Strategic-Plan-2020-2025.pdf>.
- Katongole, E., 2011, *The sacrifice of Africa: A political theology for Africa*, Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Knoetze, J.J., 2020, 'Transforming theological education is not the accumulation of knowledge, but the development of consciousness', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 41(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v41i1.2075>
- Land, S.M., Hannafin, M.J. & Oliver, K., 2012, 'Student-centered learning environments: Foundations, assumptions and design', in D. Jonassen & S. Land (eds.), *Theoretical foundations of learning environments*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Lindell, I., Ampaire, C. & Byerley, A., 2019, 'Governing urban informality: Re-working spaces and subjects in Kampala, Uganda', *International Development Planning Review* 41(1), 63–84. <https://doi.org/10.3828/idpr.2019.4>
- Love, C., 2022, 'Healing the Cartesian wound: Towards a re-membering pedagogy in theological education in South Africa', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(4), a7726. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i4.7726>
- Lubega, H., 2017, 'The Anglican church and its influence on Ugandan politics', *The Daily Monitor*, viewed 20 June 2024, from <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/magazines/people-power/the-anglican-church-and-its-influence-on-ugandan-politics-1690606>.
- Mugambi, J., 2013, 'The future of theological education in Africa and the challenges it faces', in I. Phiri & D. Werner (eds.), *Handbook of theological education in Africa*, pp. 117–125, Regnum, Oxford.
- Musana, P., 2010, 'Religious pluralism in urban centres: The contribution of Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches to Christian witness in Kampala City, Uganda', in C.M.A. Nwoye (ed.), *Urban ministry in Africa: Theological reflections for the 21st Century*, pp. 46–60, Paulines, Nairobi.
- Musana, P., 2017, 'Pentecostals and politics in Uganda', in P. Musana, A. Crichton & C. Howell (eds.), *Ugandan churches and the political centre*, pp. 99–118, Cambridge Centre for Christianity Worldwide, Cambridge.
- Nadar, S., 2010, 'Contextuality and inter-contextuality in theological education: An African perspective', in D. Werner, D. Esterline, N. Kang & J. Raja (eds.), *Handbook of theological education in World Christianity*, pp. 129–135, Regnum, Oxford.
- Nnagendda-Musana, A., 2008, 'Housing clusters for densification within an upgrading strategy: The case of Kampala, Uganda', Doctoral Dissertation, Royal Institute of Technology & Makerere University.
- Nyamnjoh, F., 2024, 'Reimagining African scholarship: A convivial approach', *Acta Academica: Critical Views on Society, Culture and Politics* 56(2), 198–222. <https://doi.org/10.38140/aa.v56i2.8967>
- Oketch, M.L., 2021, '50% of workers walk to and from Kampala', *The Monitor*, 27 October, viewed 17 April 2025, from <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/50-of-workers-walk-to-and-from-kampala-study-says-3598394>.
- Pitts, W., Miller, S. & D'Souza, A., 2014, 'Teaching in contexts and complexities: Using cogenerative dialogues as an integrated collaborative approach', in K. Tobin & S. Ashraf (eds.), *Transforming urban education: Urban teachers and students working collaboratively*, pp. 245–262, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam.
- Swart, I., 2012, 'Mobilising faith-based organisations for social development through a participatory action research (PAR) process', in I. Swart, H. Roemer, S. Green & J. Erasmus (eds.), *Religion and social development in post-apartheid South Africa: Perspectives for critical engagement*, pp. 309–323, Sun Press, Stellenbosch.
- The Government of Uganda, 2010, *The Kampala Capital City Authority Act*, 2010, viewed 30 June 2025, from https://www.kcca.go.ug/uploads/KCCA_ACT_2010.pdf.
- Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2024, *The national population and housing census 2024 – Final Report - Volume 1 (Main)*, Kampala, Uganda, viewed 22 May 2025, from <https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/National-Population-and-Housing-Census-2024-Final-Report-Volume-1-Main.pdf>.
- UN-HABITAT, 2014, *The state of African cities 2014: Reimagining sustainable urban transitions*, viewed 23 April 2025, from <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/State%20of%20African%20Cities%202014.pdf>.
- Van De Ven, A.H., 2007, *Engaged scholarship: A guide for organizational and social research*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Ward, K., n.d., 'A history of Christianity in Uganda', in *Dictionary of African Christian biography*, viewed 03 July 2025, from <https://dacb.org/histories/uganda-history-christianity/>.
- World Bank Group, 2017, *From regulators to enablers: The role of city governments in economic development of greater Kampala*, viewed 10 March 2023, from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/99aca13b-5c28-52be-9f8a-f47fd0fea684>.