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'Where are the prophets?': How academic theology failed us

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Against the backdrop of precarious global and local politics – a threat to democracy, global wars, xenophobic violence, oppressions of sexual minorities and a permanent youth precariat in South Africa – do academic theologies foster prophetic responses or succumb to imperial co-option? Departing from the Kairos Document's threefold call to conversion, this article laments the lack of a Kairos consciousness today, with reference to five areas of concern.

Contribution: This study explores what theological formation for prophetic communities might look like, marked by Le Bruyns' three elements of criticality, contextuality and change; participating in concrete sites of struggle and sustained by a 'lived faith'. It imagines theological schools as 'schools of prophets, servants and healers', not only breaking the silence but also going beyond prophetic rhetoric through embodied theologising.

Keywords: Kairos Document; Kairos consciousness; theological education; prophetic theology; prophetic communities.

Introduction

Without theological education and formation that foster a clear Kairos consciousness among emerging theologians and faith-based leaders, the church in South Africa will remain rather insular, while society around it collapses.

Forty years after the original Kairos Document (1986) was published, South African society – and the world – finds itself in a very precarious space. Apart from the persistence of socio-economic inequality, spatial apartheid, state and private sector corruption and general silences of the church, in South Africa, the global landscape is also fast shifting.

The banality of empire has departed from subtleties in the presidency of Donald Trump, and lurking in its shadows are the interconnected occurrences of xenophobic violence, oppressions of sexual minorities and youth unemployment of a permanent precariat, all time bombs waiting to explode. Gaza has ripped open the complicity of people of faith and institutions of higher learning who choose to remain neutral in the face of genocide. Wars in the Sudan, Ukraine and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have demolished cities and towns, killed thousands and left devastation and starvation in their wake.

As in the late 1980s – when many sectors of the church sleepwalked through theological corridors while South Africa was in a state of emergency, and the lead protagonists of the Kairos Document were mostly not academics based at universities, but people working in the trenches – we run the risk of practicing cerebral theologies, aloofly, even masquerading as black, liberationist or feminist or womanist. Or, we practice church theologies that ensure growth or sustenance of local churches, without a clear transformative impact on the neighbourhoods around us or in society at large. The church often struggles to discern and practice, deep solidarities, not only locally with disenfranchised and dispossessed people but also continentally and globally.

Kairos Palestine (2009) calls us to deep introspection to examine whether we have consistently lived up to the conversions of the original Kairos Document or whether we have departed from it, descending into neo-orthodoxies that have little concrete substance (cf. also West 2012).

If academic theology fails to foster prophetic theologies – being in solidarity with the excluded, doing brave socio-ecclesial analysis, discerning alternative imaginaries to the status quo and charting courageous actions of liberation and reconstruction for our times – our academic theologies are bankrupt.

The Kairos Document's call for prophetic theologies and prophetic communities

The Kairos Document (1986), adopted in 1985, was initially signed by 151 theologians but open ended to allow others to join in solidarity. It was a specific response to the intensification of the struggle between apartheid forces and a growing grass-root movement of resistance, expressed in the State of Emergency declared in July 1985, according to which state security forces were almost provided a free hand to deal with vicious repression against protests that occurred across the country.

The Kairos Document critiqued what it labelled state theology, which was mostly expressed by white Afrikaans churches and theological institutions, sanctioning the government of the day and its policies as righteous, as well as church theology, which tended to be the position of many historically English-speaking churches, cautiously opposing apartheid policies, but lacking depth of social analysis and failing to find itself in deep solidarity with anti-apartheid sentiments, partly because it benefited from the gains of apartheid.

In response to the failure of these two theologies to oppose and unmask the evil of apartheid, the Kairos Document called for a clarion conversion to what it called prophetic theology, which I will unpack in the next section.

What was prophetic theology?

The prophetic theology, to which the Kairos Document called the church, was not only to be expressed in prophetic utterances but required embodiment in practices and actions that showed themselves in defiance of the apartheid state.

Prophetic theology required a 'farewell to innocence', as Boesak (1976) labelled it, calling out the presumed ignorance of the evil realities of apartheid, which had people plead innocence, which increasingly became an untenable position. Instead, what was required was (an ongoing) conversion to a prophetic theology, as people were conscientised into a clearer understanding of what exactly occurred in South Africa.

A central element to such a prophetic theology was to engage in deep forms of social analysis, particularly with those who were victims of the apartheid system. Kritzinger (1988) writes:

> The KD (1986:17) states that an important part of prophetic theology is a 'reading of the signs of the times': 'It must know what is happening, analyse what is happening (social analysis) and then interpret what is happening in the light of the gospel'. (p. 128)

Part of the analysis done by the Kairos Document was to describe the reality of two churches in South Africa – a black church and a white church. In some ways, this remained the same since 1994 although there are various permutations of how the ecclesial landscape has shifted. Township churches (black) tend to remain resource poor; suburban churches (white or mixed) tend to be resource rich or at least able to sustain themselves well and then there are congregations in culturally transitional areas that sometimes struggle to adapt to change and to survive, as well as new congregations planted by entrepreneurial ministers and a proliferation of megachurches that are often culturally diverse, even though – mostly still – white-led.

The Kairos Document called for a threefold conversion, according to Kritzinger (1988:129).

Firstly, it called for a 'turning from idolatry', which constituted in naming the apartheid god or the 'god of the state' as a false god. It was a conversion from a conviction that God was the domain of white people, superior to the majority of South African citizens, who did not share the same levels of human worth. Kritzinger (1988:1290131) emphasises the fact that the discussion of state theology in the Kairos Documents is not aimed at the state to start with, but at the Christian community and its equation of the state with the Christian God, which was later rejected as heresy. Kritzinger (1988:131) speaks of this as a painful process, especially for white Christians, who had to be converted from centuries of self-belief that God and the church were on their side, just to now be confronted with the evil of a self-made god. For black Christians, internalising their inferior status through a God who favoured white people also had to be confronted, which could be equally painful as they had to face a perpetual lie, but it also carried the potential to be radically freeing.

Secondly, the element of the call to conversion was a 'turning from neutrality' (Kritzinger 1988:131–134). The Kairos Document had a special critique for so-called church theology, which was directed at those churches that opposed apartheid, but rather quietly and diplomatically, without proper social analysis or social action. They often pleaded for reconciliation without considering or insisting on justice for all.

What the Kairos Document called for was the dismantling of unjust social structures, but it believed that such change would not come from the top, because those in power benefited from unequal structures. Conversion had to happen among the oppressed as well, through continuous conscientisation and mobilisation, aimed at changing the unjust structures that dealt suffering and oppression. Church theology did not actively promote this.

Thirdly, the element of conversion required a 'turning to liberating involvement', which included 'prophetic analysis' and 'liberating action' (Kritzinger 1988:134–136). Such analysis had to be rooted in the experiences of black South Africans in local township communities, who got subjected to increasing suppressiveness of the state, as resistance mounted. This is what created conditions for a

Kairos moment, in which the state was unwilling or unable to convert itself to change its own system, and the pressure for such change had to come from below. Such prophetic analysis was closely intertwined with liberating action, which is why the Kairos Document encouraged the church to work *with* its members to 'think and work and plan for a change of government in South Africa' (Kairos Document 1986:30). This included, Kritzinger (1988:136) writes, a call for civil disobedience among church members, shifting from the churches' general posture of 'caution and moderation', to a place of making 'sacrifices for justice and liberation' (Kairos Document 1986:30).

Kritzinger (1988:135) writes how prophetic theology, in the Kairos Document, required of the church 'to take sides unequivocally and consistently with the poor and oppressed' (Kairos Document 1986:28). The Kairos Document indicated that the church, in fact, already took such sides, 'merely by the fact that most of its members in South Africa are black' (Kritzinger 1988:135).

And yet:

> [*N*]ot all Black Christians are fully aware of the fact that their cause is God's cause, so they need to be called to see the extent of the crisis and to participate in the struggle for its eradication. (Kritzinger 1988:135)

The conversion that the Kairos Document required was not exactly the same for white and black Christians. Kritzinger (1988:135) wrote: 'White Christians, on the other hand, are called upon "to cross over to the other side to be united in faith and action with those who are oppressed"' (Kairos Document 1986:28).

A prophetic consciousness

The conversion the Kairos Document called for consisted of conscientising people about the situation black South Africans found themselves in and mobilising people for action. Nurturing such a prophetic consciousness was to counter the complicity of churches that embraced state theology and the ineffectual positions taken by churches that embraced a church theology. Such a prophetic consciousness would grow from experiential immersion and exposure, sound socio-ecclesial analysis and the ability to imagine radical alternatives to the apartheid status quo.

Le Bruyns (2015:461) held that the value of the Kairos Document lay not only in a time-bound understanding of its significance against its apartheid backdrop but rather in an embrace of a Kairos consciousness that remains valid, even in different times and contexts, when similar prophetic engagement is required. Various Kairos Documents were produced in the aftermath of the original 1985 document, with different histories and contextual challenges, mostly collectively crafted (cf. Le Bruyns 2015:461), with a Kairos consciousness as the unifying thread. Kairos Palestine (2009) and Queer Kairos (Nadar 2024) are two examples

Beyond prophetic individuals to prophetic communities

Kritzinger (1988:136) opines that the call of the Kairos Document was 'primarily a call to a communal praxis of liberation'. The very way in which it was constructed was the result of ordinary people – not professional theologians – reflecting critically on their contexts during the mid-1980s in South Africa, and this got expressed in the statement that is known as the Kairos Document (cf. West 2012).

It was not only the Boesaks and Tutus of the world, but it was the courageous and clear leadership of pastors and people of faith on the ground, in the face of brutal repression, that helped shape local prophetic communities, often inspired by the theological articulations of the more prominent individuals. It was in communities at the grass roots that futures beyond the apartheid reality were struggled-danced into being – during weekly liturgical expressions in townships across the country; in mass funerals for people who lost their lives at the hands of apartheid forces and in families who supported those among them who bravely resisted.

A Kairos consciousness today?

The clarity of the Kairos Document and the consciousness it fostered seems to be lacking today. Pockets of it might exist among some theologians and church formations, but the momentum that it took in the mid-1980s has long waned.

Discerning the prophets

At a recent book festival, Storey (2025) was asked who or where the prophets were today. He pointed to brave journalists, who relentlessly write and speak about oppressive and unethical power, at work to destroy the soul of the post-apartheid contract while eating away at the limited resources of the country, especially when meant for the poor majority.

I also consider the rather sophisticated analysis, organising and conscientising of social movements in different places and sectors of South African society as instances of communal prophetic praxis. While the church became increasingly silent – and therefore complicit – in post-apartheid South Africa, it is movements like the Treatment Action Campaign (n.d.), Section 27 (2025), Equal Education (2025), Reclaim the City (2023) or Abahlali baseMjondolo (n.d.), which provide prophetic impetus to name wrongs, create social and politically consciousness and mobilise action for deeper forms of change.

The church will do well to learn from their examples and to discern how best to be in solidarity with the struggles they articulate, which often are the collective struggles of large parts of the South African community, including the majority church, which is black and poor.

Prophetic interventions

The prophetic interventions of some of the aforementioned social movements helped save 5 million lives of people who

previously lacked access to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) medication. It exposes housing exploitation in the Western Cape and mobilises communities around access to decent and affordable housing in central parts of Cape Town. It resists illegal evictions from buildings in central Johannesburg and shows itself in solidarity with informal settlement dwellers and transnational migrants in cities and towns across South Africa.

Yet, the church at large finds itself largely outside of these interventions, partly, perhaps, because the Pharaoh now looks like us (Boesak 2017), and we were unable to reposition ourselves prophetically. Without prophetic interventions, broadly organised into movements that push back at the rot in the system, South Africans become complacent and systemic evil becomes normalised. Such prophetic interventions are urgently needed in the face of health xenophobia, municipal collapse, unequal education and lingering landlessness.

A call for continuous socio-ecclesial analysis and discernment

Both in facing South African and global realities, a Kairos consciousness helps provide the tools for analysis and discernment, sorely missed.

South Africa is facing ever-deepening inequalities instead of reduced income gaps. Class differentiation has increased with the emergence of a black middle class, which is not necessarily addressing economic inequality on a larger scale. As in cities across the continent, small black elites have formed, while the masses remain disenfranchised. Spatial apartheid has remained, with only small disruptions thereof, including inner city spatial change, which often included infrastructural decay.

The collapse of many governmental systems, from the Departments of Home Affairs and Health, to local municipalities' inability to achieve clean annual audits, has had disastrous effects for the populace. Only 30% of schools are functioning, and 30% of children below the age of five are stunted, putting them at a back foot educationally and psychologically for years to come.

In the face of these realities, with church members being both victims and perpetrators of systemic failure, how does the church view its role, and how does theological education prepare leaders of prophetic (Kairos) consciousness, able to analyse and discern wisely, not only contextual fractures but also the church's responsibility in relation to such fractures?

Discerning a prophetic vocation – not only in poor townships churches but also in newly integrated suburban churches, inner city churches or megachurches hosting a cross-section of South African society in Sunday worship services – will differ from context to context. Depending on their locatedness, membership profiles and resourcefulness, a prophetic vocation might require different kinds of conversions from different kinds of churches.

South Africa is not isolated from global affairs either. Kairos Palestine drew from the Kairos Document in its opposition to apartheid Israel, articulating the resemblances between the apartheid systems of South Africa and Israel (cf. Mabuza 2024). Discerning what solidarity might look like in 2025 – not only with the people of Palestine but also with victims of war in the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, cities and towns in the Ukraine, and almost 2 million people facing starvation in Myanmar – remains a Christian imperative if we acknowledge our common humanity. Even though we might not be able to halt conflicts in many of these places, at least acute awareness might assist in formulating a position, in informing governmental and other practices and in supporting possible relief or advocacy interventions if and when required.

A prophetic imagination

To be absorbed by pessimism is not prophetic either. The prophets of old did not only name wrongs but also often imagined preferred futures. Besides blatant corruption and decaying infrastructure in many spaces, South African cities and towns continue to brim with hope, marked by pockets of excellence. In a context of large-scale governmental failure, more so in some municipalities than others, there are increasingly examples of citizens taking ownership of addressing their own issues (although that often translates into 'double taxation').

Considering our prophetic vocation in isolation from what is happening in sub-Saharan Africa, on the continent, or globally, is to deny our planetary connectedness, so visible in transnational migratory patterns, hybrid labour arrangements, digital communication and climate change.

At some levels, we have entered a new global crisis, with democracy itself being threatened by rising populism, even in what used to be the cradle of so-called democratic values. Global debt of southern countries prevents them from advancing the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and wars and rumours of war destabilise entire regions. The 'othering' of people is being popularised, and xenophobia is being globalised.

There is great urgency for prophetic imaginations – steeped in Kairos consciousness – to be nurtured in local congregations, in ecumenical bodies and in regional alliances of churches and other religious leaders. In the absence of prophetic communities articulating and embodying prophetic imaginations, the death-dealing forces of empire will continue to destroy the planet, people and places.

How do we read the Kairos Document today?

The three theologies differentiated in the Kairos Document – state theology, church theology and prophetic theology – perhaps do not hold in the same way as when the document was first conceptualised. The apartheid state was replaced by

a democratically elected government that is supposed to work for the socio-economic freedom and prosperity of all South Africans. And yet, some critical institutions of the ecumenical church might have been subtly co-opted (for a while at least) into the mechanisms of the state as a result of historical allegiances in the struggle. Some churches today – just as the Dutch Reformed Church during apartheid – reflect close, and often uncritical, allegiance to particular political parties. Such proximities might allow for festering abuses of state power to go unchecked or for the divisiveness of identity politics to be theologically condoned.

The largest sections of the church have embraced a church theology that does not have an articulate public or political presence to keep the government and the private sector accountable. It justifies spiritual introversion, while beneficiaries of state and private sector corruption are often key figures in local congregations. Many white and Afrikaans congregations, who could be characterised as proponents of state theologies in the past, have made smooth transitions to embracing a church theology, both because they might not see those in power as 'their' politicians but also as a way to distance themselves from a previous dispensation in which bad power was religiously sanctioned. The largest sections of the black church probably find themselves practising church theologies, apathetic towards political delinquencies and inefficiencies of the day.

Vellem (2010) spoke of church theology as described in the Kairos Document 'in which the criticism of the state was superficial, guarded, exaggeratedly cautious and ultimately impertinent to "the signs of the time"…' Today, most of middle-class and suburban churches – black and white – are characterised by what Vellem (2010) spoke of as churches 'not zealously committed to dealing with structural challenges in society that demanded social and ecclesiological transformation'.

Theological education and the theological postures of the Kairos Document

Whereas it was rather clear which of the Kairos theologies different theological institutions most reflected, some three decades ago, it has become more blurred today. Individuals teaching at different institutions, and some institutional vehicles that are part of the bigger whole, might resemble something of deliberate attempts to embody prophetic theologies.

Many of the church theologians represent some brand of reconciliatory or reconstructive theology or, perhaps, attempts at articulating public theology, although often rather rhetorical. The boldest liberation theologies have often become neo-orthodoxies, rhetorically practised, but not necessarily evident in ecclesial or communal practices.

My reading of theological education in South Africa today is that it largely failed to sustain a Kairos consciousness, pedagogically and institutionally, with minor expressions perhaps to be found in centres such as the Ujamaa Centre (n.d.) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Desmond Tutu Centre for Social Justice and Reconciliation (2019) at the University of the Western Cape or the Centre for Faith and Community (2025) at the University of Pretoria, all at least making deliberate attempts to be on journeys of ongoing conversion, marked by 'contextuality, criticality and change' (Le Bruyns 2015:461).

As a result of the above, many theologies are generic or, at best, use liberationist rhetoric. What is sorely lacking are clearer instances of continuous and concrete solidarity.

Theological education in 2025: Fostering a Kairos consciousness

The assumption of this reflection is that a Kairos consciousness – and the conversion(s) required by it – is as important today as when it was first drafted. However, contexts have changed dramatically over the past four decades. Some of the authors of Kairos found themselves playing leading roles in government and private sector; the church landscape in South Africa has changed and theological education faces its own challenges of transformation and relevance.

It is ironic that the only remaining stand-alone faculties that teach theology or theology and religion are in formerly white and Afrikaans institutions, which represented the state theology of the Kairos Document so clearly in the 1980s. Ironic then, that they survived institutionally post-apartheid, while more prophetic schools of theology have been relegated from positions in which theology held a more central disciplinary place, being absorbed into more diverse faculties of humanities or social sciences. One can only speculate about the reasons for the above, which might require more careful enquiry.

And yet, all these institutions have changed rather dramatically in terms of their student bodies, reflecting a wide range of South African society, with as many as 33 Christian denominations, but even non-believers and people from other religious persuasions, in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria.

In this Faculty (where I am based), we need to engage very honestly and self-critically with the question of whether our curricula, pedagogies and epistemic locations have sufficiently shifted to accommodate such diversity with integrity, or do we remain beholden to a largely white and reformed ecclesial tradition of yesteryear, failing to recognise and meet students (and contexts) where they are.

I offer a number of critical reflections.

Firstly, I lament the fact that some of us, and some of our institutions, *masquerade radical theologies* (whether black theology, liberation theology, womanist theology, feminist theology, or queer theology), although we have departed from solidarity. These theologies have often become neo-

orthodoxies, articulated in classrooms but seldom originating from the existential pain and struggles of grass-root spaces. There is even a cognitive dissonance between the radicality of our teaching and writing – in the week – and our colonial ecclesial forms over the weekend.

Secondly, the *captivity to suburban classrooms* of most of our dominant theological institutions in South Africa needs to be challenged. Our theological constructs, our spaces of instruction and our geographies of engagement reflect our own middle-class captivities and have long departed, if ever it was present, from urban townships, informal settlements, inner cities or deep rural areas. Van Wyngaard and Louw (2023) write about the impact of our suburban theologies on the life and being of the church. Not only do we accompany suburban Christians to perpetuate suburban theologies and forms of church, but we also fail to help suburban Christians deconstruct the coloniality and class captivity of their theological upbringing, while we socialise township and rural theological students into suburban ways of breathing and living God.

Thirdly, the *hidden curriculum* remains an issue neglected in our conversations about curriculum transformation. Not having proponents of African-initiated churches on our faculties as lecturers or even guest lecturers, in contexts where large numbers of students come from apostolic and other African-initiated church formations, is to communicate the predominance of particular theological strands to the exclusion of others.

Fourthly, I lament *the allure of virtual absences*. We live in a time in which virtual possibilities reduced the necessity to be in each other's spaces. While it might be convenient, and even cost-effective at times, and while in certain instances it can cross boundaries of geography and distance to create global interactions, I remain convinced that we need spaces for theological formation in which we can share a meal, laugh and discover together, which can only happen in limited ways in virtual spaces. I juxtapose virtual absences with an incarnate and physical presence among people, without which our theological and personal certainties might go unchallenged.

Fifthly, the *anxiety of being present* in some ways mirrors the allure of virtual absences. We have a perpetual fear of 'the other', brutally expressed today in blanket deportations, violent xenophobic attacks or vitriolic political rhetoric. It also gets reflected in our inability to acknowledge who our students are and how their presence among us challenges the way in which we continue to do theology together. Being authentically present would require us to set aside our narrow curricular, denominational and theological agendas, to truly hear those who now occupy our theological spaces: being converted through the bodies, cries and hopes of those entrusted to our theological spaces today.

In spaces of new and disarming diversity, we need to foster epistemologies of presence, vulnerability and not-knowing, taking a leaf from the journey of Nouwen (1990) who exchanged the theological corridors of ivy league university to become resident among a community of severely mentally disabled people – he had to unlearn and learn anew, how to accompany people through be(com)ing present.

Many theological spaces host theological gatekeepers, committed to retaining the status quo; theological bystanders, maintaining undercover silences; theological populists, specialising in rhetoric void of embodied solidarities and, sometimes, theological activists, seeking to engage in scholarship of solidarity. These internal tensions, unfortunately, seldom result in creative fusions that birth schools of servants, healers and prophets. Theological education, post-apartheid, by and large failed to foster prophetic theologies or prophetic communities. Conscientising students into *doing* theology that is prophetic and liberative – making work of contexuality, criticality and change (cf. Le Bruyns 2015:460–477), consistently – seems to me to be a rare trait of much of our theological engagement.

Theological formation for prophetic communities

Le Bruyns (2015:460–477) wrote about the resurgence of Kairos theologies around 2015 and highlights three critical components of *contextuality*, *criticality* and *change*. Resonating with Le Bruyns, but drawing from the praxeological approach of liberation theologies, I advocate for six elements to be present threads throughout whatever theological content or Christian tradition it is that we are steeped in. I submit that – without these elements – we will fail to foster prophetic theologies, rather serving as custodians of empire, and preservers of the status quo.

Contextuality

Much of theological education seems to be generic, while a Kairos consciousness, according to Le Bruyns (2015:475–476), takes local contexts and contextual analysis seriously. Contextuality involves both *solidarity* and *analysis*.

Immersed solidarities

Our theological engagements should foster solidarity - both local and global - as a core posture of faith (cf. Rieger 2022:141-196). This should be enabled, invited and facilitated, not only in modules on community engagement or development, diaconate or social justice but also in systematic theological modules, which would do well to explore themes such as human dignity, salvation-liberation and theodicy in contexts where indignities, unfreedoms and suffering are the dominant markers.

Akatukunda (2025 [pers. comm., 6 May 2025]) in Kampala partners with his Old Testament colleague to read the Old Testament in the slums of Kampala, allowing the context to ask critical questions of the text and re-reading texts through the questions and perspectives of slum dwellers and their experiences.

Tools for doing critical analysis

Much of our theological education remains focused on the readings of texts, seldom providing students of theology with proper tools for engaging in critical societal or community analysis. For the Word to be fleshed out in local communities, students need to hone skills to engage in social and ecclesial analysis, analysis of community assets and needs and an analysis of powers and systems, to help understand how local geographies and communities are shaped.

Methodist minister, Storey (2025), speaks of how their theological formation prepares them for pastoral visitations with sick people in hospitals; yet, they never learnt how to engage with collapsing health systems. Fostering analytical competencies will enable students of theology to read biblical texts but also to read complex systems well, in order to become both priests and prophets in a fractured society.

Criticality

Le Bruyns (2015:471–475) regards criticality as the second important ingredient of a Kairos consciousness. The cultivation of critical self-, ecclesial and societal reflexivity is essential: on the one hand, to make sense of the contexts in which we are invited to serve, but, even before that, to allow for local contexts and voices to expose us to our own personal, ecclesial and theological prejudices or blind spots.

Fostering criticality should be a key responsibility of theological formation, going beyond critical, deconstructive engagement with biblical texts and histories only, but rather developing the critical competencies to engage critically and deconstructively with societal spaces, systems and relationships.

Fostering theological reflexivity

South Africa's educational system continues to 'deliver' learners who do not necessarily have the ability to think independently in critical ways. If theological education is not intentional about fostering such competencies, and with the dawn of AI and virtual accessories – which further prevents independent critical thinking – too many theological students graduate without the ability to reflect critically on social contexts or to relate biblical texts creatively, responsibly or constructively in society.

Being a theological student in the 1990s, I was exposed to the work of Schreiter (1985) and others, appreciating the importance of constructing our own theologies, especially against the backdrop of experiencing a growing tension between my immersions in Hillbrow in Johannesburg's inner city, and the textbook knowledge I was exposed to in my theological training. This cognitive dissonance helped activate a desire within me to construct an own theological response in which I could locate myself boldly.

Still today, this task of fostering competencies to reflect and construct one's own critical and context-responsive theology requires intentionality.

Change

The third element, which Le Bruyns (2015:469–471) highlights as part of a Kairos consciousness, is the element of change. Prophetic theology names that which is to be transformed and sometimes outlines exactly what needs to be done in order to achieve deep change. In the Kairos Document, 'the call to conversion… is the call to active participation in the struggle of the oppressed for justice and liberation' (Kritzinger 1988:136).

Embodied theologising: Concrete participation and action in sites of struggle

Nurturing a prophetic consciousness, or prophetic theology, requires the immersed, analytical and critical-reflective elements I described already: indeed, embodied theologising, marked by concrete participation in actual sites of struggle. The Kairos Document required black and white Christians 'to join God in his identification with the interests and struggles of the oppressed' (Kritzinger 1988:136). This meant a claim not only on individuals, but, rather, calling people into 'a communal praxis of liberation' (Kritzinger 1988:136), subverting the tyranny of the apartheid state.

Embodied theologising today is to participate alongside communities of struggle in their aspirations. For example, instead of merely *speaking* of the SDGs, a theological praxis shaped by Kairos consciousness will collaborate with local communities in their work towards realising the SDGs.

Fostering prophetic consciousness and imagination

Ways need to be found to foster a prophetic consciousness and imagination – through curricular content, pedagogical approaches and shifting geographies. This should include interlocutors that represent marginalised communities in order to help foster an alternative consciousness. Such a consciousness will be aware of what is wrong or broken but also an imagination of a preferred future, healing societal fractures.

Sustained by 'lived faith': Nurturing Kairos spiritualities

The sustenance of a prophetic consciousness relies on a deep, sustaining spirituality that connects faith and life, prayer and politics and contemplation and justice. We should explore creative ways of nurturing a spirituality of life through our theological curricula and formational engagements, even at public universities, countering the ways in which spirituality ('lived faith') and theological reflection have been dichotomised, as if they do not belong together (cf. Gutierrez 1988).

Fostering a Kairos consciousness, as breaking the silence

Fostering a Kairos consciousness is to embark on a life-long prophetic journey – unlearning as we face issues of race,

whiteness, gender, class and theological complicity; possibly different ways of being, churching, doing or caring; finding new companions, guides and interlocutors and co-constructing possibly new and liberating socio-spatial-economic realities.

Our theological silences in the face of multiple death-dealing situations need to be broken through critical (self-)education. From child hunger and student homelessness, to gender-biased violence and xenophobia, our theological agendas need to engage robustly, as our own communities and congregations are already deeply affected. The premise is not that every theologian will tackle every issue decisively, but in engaging these issues as part of our theological formation, we learn how to reflect ethically on such issues, and how to discern and possibly construct appropriate – and prophetic – ministry responses, if and when required.

How do we reflect on Gaza in our Old Testament lectures, on the impasse between the church and destructive youth cultures in places like Westbury or Coronationville, with prophet Amos on yet another housing scandal in which government officials deprive the poor of shelter?

In recent weeks, church leaders in Gauteng engaged with civil society leaders about the crisis of government funding for the work of non-profit organisations (c. Pongweni 2025). The provincial department of social development sent R 102 million of unspent funds back to the National Treasury, while non-profit organisations serving 'the least of these' are bleeding dry. Spaces that provide home to homeless women, victims of violence or vulnerable children had to close in the past 24 months because of incompetent, corrupt or unaccountable government practice.

Wherever there is silence in the face of such political or economic neglect or abuse, the church becomes complicit. A Kairos consciousness will demand that the church stand in solidarity with the poor and vulnerable and those seeking to serve them in critical-constructive ways, piercing the silence.

Beyond prophetic rhetoric

Koopman's (2014:139–152) five ways of prophetic speaking help us beyond the impasse of prophetic rhetoric. Koopman speaks of *critique, visioning, storytelling, technical analysis* and *policy-making*, as five ways of prophetic engagement. These include not only the ability to read and deconstruct policies, plans and budgets that inform how society gets shaped but also the ability to create spaces for imagining preferred or different futures. Such competencies should be cultivated throughout the theological curricula – ranging from critical engagement with Old and New Testament literature and church history, to reflecting on societal fractures in systematic theology, ethics and practical theology.

Complementing Koopman's five ways of prophetic speaking, I would add *awareness-raising (conscientising), organising and lament* or *celebration* as additional ways of prophetic speaking. Fostering a prophetic consciousness in communities and churches; organising communities as a way to build good power and constructing liturgical practices that lament and celebrate struggles or hopes in society are disciplines that should be cultivated through our theological formation.

Conclusion

Schools of prophets, servants and healers – Learning from eKhenana

The eKhenana community[1] is based in Cato Manor in the city of eThekwini. Associated with Abahlali baseMjondolo, a progressive landless movement working on behalf of informal settlement dwellers to advance their right to the city, the eKhenana community created a corrugated iron structure at the centre of their community, known as the Fanon School. Here, people who seldom had access to university education read Fanon, Biko, Freire and others, schooling themselves in critical paradigms that help them understand not only what is happening to them but also why it is happening. They foster a collective consciousness that puts them at odds with dominant political formations in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, as they seek to outwit bad power. A number of their leaders have been assassinated by local politicians from the ruling party (cf. Masiangoako 2022; Matamba 2023).

Schools of theology should draw rather deliberately from such spaces to help foster s*chools of prophets, servants and healers*. Offering classes on theological ethics in the 'rough grounds' of social movements will help to demystify our intellectual engagements, allowing hard contextual questions – and disciplined communal practices – to reshape our theological constructs. There is much to be learnt from the pedagogies and struggles of social movements, which can help liberate theological rigidity, energising it with prophetic boldness and clarity.

Our theological schools should equip people who can accompany people on faith journeys, who can contribute to heal the sick and broken hearted, but who can also engage critically constructively with structural impediments that cause sickness or fracture. The competencies to accompany, heal and transform structures can only grow from proximity and exposure to wounded people and wounding systems – and such proximity will inevitably move those of tender hearts to holy anger and faithful compassion.

Embodied theologising requires the cultivation of anger and compassion as possible sources of liberation-transformation. As 'schools of prophets, healers and servants', our theological curricula and pedagogies should be designed to prick the numbness and de-immunise itself against imperial co-option – being a thorn in the flesh of self-satisfied universities, the postcolonial state, big capital, an apathetic church and

1.A well-organised informal settlement community that participates in the landless movement known as Abahlali baseMjondolo, organising themselves around cooperatives. eKhenana is politically targeted by the ruling political party and three of its residents were assassinated in 2022.

slumbering civil society. Perhaps such an imagination is wishful thinking. Yet, the long-term effects of our silences are too ghastly to contemplate. We owe it to our children to act fast and furious.

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