

The effectiveness of Sesheke Church's transformational task: An exposition of the descriptive-empirical task from a practical theological perspective



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This article reports on the findings of the descriptive-empirical task of an original research into the effectiveness of the Sesheke Church's transformational task. Osmer's (2008) model of the four tasks of practical theological interpretation (descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic) has been employed in the original research. Each of the tasks addresses a specific stage of a proposed study, but this article, as already mentioned, reports on the descriptive-empirical task. The task seeks to understand the current praxis of the Sesheke Church regarding the transformation of their local community (Osmer, 2008:31–79).

The Sesheke Pastors Fellowship, referred to as Sesheke Church in the article, has accepted an obligation regarding the welfare of their community and formed a sub-committee in July 2007 to engage the church, government, and all other stakeholders in a transformation process. The aim of the Sesheke Church has been to bring about socio-economic transformation for the local community.

The researcher was chairperson of the sub-committee for seven years and has, therefore, been motivated to investigate the praxis and impact of the Sesheke Church's transformational task. According to the opinions of the participants interviewed, the transformational task by the church in Sesheke has not been effective for various reasons. This article discusses the reasons for the church's failure as perceived by the participants.

The researcher believes that this article will contribute to the understanding of practical theology with regards to community transformation from the unique context and situation of the transformational task by the church in the Sesheke area.

Introduction

This article reports on the descriptive empirical task as part of a larger research study that has sought to determine the effectiveness of the Sesheke Church in bringing about social and economic transformation to their local community. Osmer's (2008:4) four tasks of practical theological interpretation have been employed in the bigger research study to address the respective four stages of the research process. These stages involve descriptive empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks. This article provides an exposition of the descriptive empirical task from a practical theological perspective with regard to the effectiveness of the Sesheke Church's transformational task. Burns and Grove (2009:29) observe that by understanding the meaning of a phenomenon in its context, it becomes easier to understand phenomena in other similar contexts.

Background and problem statement

Sesheke is a small semi-rural town in Zambia situated right at the boarder of Zambia and Namibia and has a cross-section of people, including those from Angola. As such, it has a unique cross-section of lifestyle and challenges of its own. Unique to the Sesheke community is the history and relationship with the Zambezi Sawmill that has been liquidated since 1999. The Sawmill provided work opportunities to the local community and resulted in an influx of people from other communities. When the Sawmill was abruptly closed it was a severe blow to an already vulnerable community. Worse still, the company closed without paying workers their dues, causing great hardships to workers and their families living from hand to mouth.

With a population of about 66 000, at least 30 different church denominations, and the country's highest timber revenue collection from 17 out of 46 national forest reserves in Western Zambia, Sesheke remains amongst the poorest and least populated towns in the country (Vinya et al. 2012:4). It is in

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response to such a situation that the Pastors Fellowship of Sesheke formed a new subcommittee that would engage the church, government, and all other stakeholders in a transformation process for local communities to benefit from their God-given natural resources. The overall aim of the Sesheke Church has been to bring about socio-economic transformation for the local community.

In this article the concept, *church*, refers to the body of believers in Jesus Christ that transcends denominational boundaries. More specific it refers to a grouping, namely the Pastors Fellowship, that was formed, within the broader church, with the specific obligation of improving the welfare of the Sesheke community. It has been accepted for the purpose of this study that the church has a significant role to play in transforming the whole person.

The Pastors Fellowship consisted of 14 pastors from 14 different church denominations of mainly evangelical and Pentecostal persuasion, as well as one from the Seventh Day Adventist Church. The researcher served as chairperson of the subcommittee for seven years from its inception in July 2007. Several challenges arose, however, amongst which were political resistance, intracongregational apathy, and intercongregational divides along lines of affiliations to some church mother bodies. This might be similar of what is going on in other parts of the country and the outside world, particularly Africa.

Literature reports of different related case studies¹ in Africa, such as the advocacy for economic rights in Zambia (Gibbs & Ajuja 1999:80), the projects to advance human rights in the Kibera Slums of Kenya (Bodewes 2010:547) as well as the broader community of Kenya (Gibbs & Ajuja 1999:54), and the role of the churches in Malawi's democratic transition (Gibbs & Ajuja 1999:67–68; Kaiya, 2013:41–52). All these case studies reveal similar challenges, namely violent political retaliations, apathy, ethnic divisions, limited resources, restrictive protocols, and tensions between umbrella churches as well as amongst the individual church denominations themselves.

It is evident from the above discourse that the Sesheke situation has not been happening in a vacuum, but involves both local and global concepts. Stetzar and Putman (2006:5) rightly coined it as the emerging 'glocal concept' to signify the interplay of global and local concepts of a given situation. It even becomes more complicated when one views it from the open systems model where particular systems are seen to be nestled within other systems in the web of life according to Osmer (2008:200). This sort of complex 'glocal' web of life can be summed up in Bhaskar's (2013) analysis that the world is in a complex of crises involving ecological problems, social interactions amongst people, unequal distribution of wealth and resources, and the negligence of social justice.

1.A case study focuses on a single case or limited number of cases, studied over a specific period of time (Osmer 2008:51).

The fact that the local situation is part of a bigger web of life does not, however, imply that it can only be understood in global terms, because each case is still unique. Korac-Kakabadse, Kouzmin and Kakabadse (2002:166) state that insights from social sciences portray the world as an individual whole and web of relationships in which every action has complex, non-linear and unpredictable effects. Hence the theme of this research has had to deal with the uniqueness of the church's transformation task in Sesheke while also being aware of the global influence within the local situation.

The researcher has accepted for the purpose of this study that the church has a significant role to play in transforming the whole person; but it has not been the primary goal of this research to review the role of the church, theologically or theoretically in the discussion of transformation, as such debates have been well articulated elsewhere in practical theology (Delph 2005; Du Toit 2013; Osmer 2008:44). Rather, this study has aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of the local church's transformation task in Sesheke town in transforming their local community. By default, the researcher has endeavoured to understand how the challenges and lessons from this particular case can be connected to, or isolated from similar situations globally, especially in Africa.

Transformation in this case involves alleviating the plight of the poor and less privileged people of the Sesheke area as contained in the background. Effectiveness can thus be seen as a definite or desired effect of the efforts of the church in the Sesheke area.

In view of the background and problem statement, the task of the Sesheke Church to bring about social and economic transformation to the local community requires a holistic approach to other relevant contextual issues such as poverty alleviation, lifestyle, religious ethics, justice, and politics.

Aim of the research

The aim of the study from which this article is written has been to determine the effectiveness of the Sesheke Church's transformational task.

The concept, *transformational task*, is hereby used and applied within the context of practical theological reflection. Therefore, the multidimensional nature of practical theology functions as a framework that provides sufficient breadth to engage relevant interdisciplinary discourses, while allowing for thick descriptions of transformation in different contexts, thus providing sufficient depth also to allow for the rich texture and contextual understanding of the Sesheke Church's transformational task (Dreyer 2008:10). The Sesheke Church's task to bring about social and economic transformation to the local community in essence entails a total transformation and holistic approach to all other relevant contextual issues such as poverty alleviation, lifestyle, religious ethics, justice, and politics.

As it were, practical theology does not only consider what it can contribute to interdisciplinary discourses regarding transformation, but also what lessons can be learnt through these discourses (Dreyer 2008:14; Osmer 2008:164–166). As such, this research will also contribute to the understanding of practical theology regarding community transformation in the unique context and situation of the Sesheke Church's transformational task.

Accordingly, the objectives have been as follows:

- To understand the current church praxis in the Sesheke area, with regards to transformation as a result from a descriptive empirical investigation.
- To determine the contribution of existing research to the understanding of the transformational task of the church.
- To understand, from Scripture, principles that can be normative guidelines to the transformational task of the local church.
- To develop specific guidelines through critical reflection of the pragmatic task to be employed in the transformational task of the church in the Sesheke area.

This article reports on the findings of the first objective and the descriptive-empirical task as per Osmer's (2008) research model. The researcher has followed Osmer's research model because it is better suited to studying a small number of people, groups, or communities in depth (Osmer 2008:50). Apart from being one of the most widely used methodologies for doing research in practical theology currently (Woodbridge 2014:2), this model has been decided upon because it also deals with the practical theological interpretation of the research question (Osmer 2008:4).

Central theoretical argument

The central theoretical argument is that when the Sesheke Church performs an effective transformational task that consists of a good understanding of the target community and principles of community transformation, it would be instrumental in bringing about economic and social transformation within their community. This happens because they would have engaged in a responsible and organised process that empowers the community to be self-sustaining.

Research methodology

The original research has followed the elements of research design as outlined by Osmer (2008:48). These are: purpose of the research, strategy of inquiry, research plan (methods), and reflexivity (reflection on the meta-theoretical assumptions informing the study).

The researcher has made use of Osmer's (2008) research model that includes the four tasks of practical theological interpretation as earlier mentioned. The focus of this article is on the descriptive-empirical task and involves attending to what is going on in the lives of individuals, families, churches, and communities (Osmer 2008:33–34). According to Osmer,

the descriptive-empirical task is grounded in a *spirituality of presence* – a term he uses to describe a spiritual orientation of attending to others in their particularity and otherness within the presence of God. He further writes that this type of quality relationship with others ultimately depends on the communion-creating presence of the Holy Spirit. As such, the transformational task of the church in the Sesheke area is hereby attended to in its particularity and otherness within the presence of God and communion-creating presence of the Holy Spirit to understand what is going on.

As mentioned, the problem that has prompted this research is that the Sesheke area has not transformed despite efforts by the Sesheke Church's transformational task and the presence of abundant natural resources (Vinya et al. 2012:4).

The descriptive-empirical task in the original research has focused on an empirical investigation of the present praxis in relation to the transformational task of the church in the Sesheke area whereby the present praxis can be observed and explained. The researcher has noted with caution that the study is one of *medium risk* because it touches on the economic reality of the participants and may thus be perceived as threatening, although it is not the intention of the study. The researcher has taken note of this potential threat and has therefore addressed it with the sensitivity and respect that it demands. As such, the specific ethical requirements for qualitative research set out by the North-West University have been strictly adhered to. To ensure that the ethical route is strictly followed, the North-West University Ethics Application Form accompanied the submission of the research proposal. Accordingly, the North-West University Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (NWU-IRERC) has approved this research and issued the Ethics Approval Certificate of Project (Ethics number: NWU-00505-16-A6). The application of ethical norms has not only occurred at the end of the research, but has been present from the beginning and influenced it throughout (Browning 1991:39). The project head and other associate study leaders have had at their disposal the necessary background and experience to direct this study along acceptable ethical and professional lines.

Personal interviews have been conducted with individuals who qualify according to the set requirements, namely a church leader who has been involved with the transformational task in the Sesheke area since its inception in 2007, or a local community leader in a specific area where the Pastors Fellowship has carried out transformational activities for the past seven years. No fixed sample size was determined beforehand, as interviews have had to be conducted until the data got saturated (Borg, Gall & Gall 1993:101; Parse, Coywe & Smith 1985:391). The sample selection has also allowed for gender representation. The research question asked to the participants was the following: How can you describe your experience of the Sesheke Church's transformational task during the past seven years?

Participants have been expected to tell the researcher each their personal experience of the Sesheke Church's transformational task since its inception in 2007.

To ensure the welfare and comfort of participants, the researcher has explained fully the research purpose and process to each participant prior to the interview and participation in the interviews has been completely voluntary. He has assured the participants of confidentiality and anonymity from the outset. Moreover, the scheduled interviews have been conducted with participants in their geographical or naturalistic settings where they have been most comfortable (Lincoln & Guba 1985:306).

Personal notes of the researcher's experience during the interview process, observational notes of the participants' verbal and non-verbal expressions, and methodological notes concerning the research process have been made. The interview time has been estimated to be 30 minutes per participant. Responses of participants have been recorded and transcripts of the recorded interviews have been handed over to an independent coder for coding to avoid researcher biasness regarding data interpretation and the bigger research process.

The type of sampling that the researcher has used is purposive sampling as participants have been selected on basis of their relevance to the research (Gibson & Brown 2009:56). Inclusion and exclusion of participants has, however, been completely voluntary with fully informed consent of each participant in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the North-West University as earlier indicated. Moreover, participants have been selected from within the Sesheke area because research must be contextual if it is to be intelligible and relevant (Schwandt (2001:37).

Reporting and dissemination of research findings has been carried out in a responsible manner which is accurate and honest. After completion of the project, the researcher arranged for a meeting with all the participants available to make the research findings and guidelines known to them and to thank them for their participation. To ensure future reliability of the information disseminated and for the sake of those who may not be present, the Pastors Fellowship has been entrusted with a copy of the results and guidelines for all other participants to access.

It is expected that the study will be of value to the participants in the sense that an effective transformational task by the Sesheke Church will bring about social and economic transformation to the local community.

Research design

The researcher has drawn on applied summative evaluation because the study has had to be conducted in a real world-situation and concerned with the effectiveness of a program (Osmer 2008:49). The strategy of inquiry that the researcher has followed is qualitative research because it tends to work

well with relatively small numbers or cases and finds detail in the precise particulars of such matters as the people's understandings and interactions (Silverman 2006:9). Reflexivity in the research has involved literature review in neighbouring social sciences like Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, and Economics to establish the meta-theoretical assumptions pertaining to the transformational task by the church in the Sesheke area (Osmer 2008:57–58). As qualitative research, the study has had explorative, descriptive, and contextual foci (Blaikie 2000:73; Bryman 1988; 1992; 2000; Osmer 2008:59; Schurink 1998:281).

Data collection

Empirical data have been collected by the researcher with due attention to empirical evidence guidelines to gain knowledge on the effectiveness of the church's transformational task in the Sesheke area. In accordance with purposive sampling, participants have been selected from within the Sesheke area because the context where the research takes place must be acknowledged to understand the surrounding dynamics and systems (Schurink 1998:281). The actual size of the sample has been determined by the stage at which data saturation became evident (Borg et al. 1993:101; Parse et al. 1985:18).

The researcher has taken into consideration the advantages and disadvantages of interviews (Botha 2001:17; Sapsford & Jupp 2006:99) as well as the guiding principles in interviewing in accordance with Berg (2004:110), Osmer (2008:61–62) and Sapsford and Jupp (2006:117–118).

Data analysis

The qualitative data has been analysed and interpreted for purposes of understanding rather than explanation (Bamberger, Rugh & Mabry 2012:293). As patterns emerged, the most important themes have been identified. This has involved both macro and micro examination of the data as well as identification of patterns and themes, both broad-brush and fine-grained (Bamberger, Rugh & Mabry 2012:314). In accordance with Marshall and Rossman (2011:161), the interpretation of data has therefore given meaning and coherence to the themes, patterns, and categories and thereby developed a storyline that makes sense.

To discipline the researcher's subjectivity to possible biases in this regard, an experienced coder has also coded the interview transcriptions independently. Trustworthiness of the research process has been measured in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln 1989; Lincoln & Guba 1985:294).

Results of the descriptive-empirical task

This section discusses the four themes that have emerged from the analysis of the interviews and field notes of the researcher's observation

Theme 1: Reasons why the church failed at its transformational task

The overwhelming opinion of the participants was that the Sesheke Church had failed at its transformational task. Even though participants acknowledge that there are no shortages of churches in the area (*Uh there're so many churches within and each church has got its belief*) they are of the opinion, that this fact does not necessarily bring about improved quality of life or solution for survival. Yet, comments of some participants revealed that they believe the church should transform people's lives:

P10: 'I feel the church didn't do enough.'

P14: 'Uuuh, I've not the, I've not seen the effectiveness of that.'

P11: 'That's way I can say the church for transformation they have not done anything, because people still remain the same they have never changed!'

In the interviews, the participants identified numerous reasons which they believe were responsible for the failure of the church's transformational task in Sesheke. These reasons are categorised and discussed in the following seven sub-themes.

Lack of participatory transformation practises

The participants' opinions were that the implementation of programmes aimed at transforming the community, was done in a top-down style that did not allow the community to play an active role in their own transformation. Further, the origin of the vision seems to have come from an outside faith based organisation (FBO):

P4: 'Through organisations such as EFZ, eeh, there was a program which where they were concerned the use of natural resources in the area of Sesheke.'

P9: 'The Pastors Fellowship, we're working with them, but I would say not effectively because they don't often involve us.'

P3: 'When you go there, discuss with the people, yes. Make even a PRA survey (R: what is a PRA?) [eh he he] or community assessment (R: okay, community assessment) community assessment ... But that one had not come out.'

Church politics or personal gain

The success of the community transformation actions was impeded by the self-centered actions and aspirations of churches and leaders that were aimed at improving their own status and position, or to achieve greater power:

P7: 'And where there're churches, you may find there's conflict ...'

P16: 'Ehm, if I may put it in this way, for some would do it for the sake of how many numbers when have done this and that will my church have, and I as a pastor reap out of that?'

P18: '... and, eeh, but then it came to a point where, after a you you have gathered, uuuh, those that, the the the new converts, and then some people start choosing who they want in their church. And, I thought no, uuuh I'd rather fight for something else than fighting for the, eh for who should be in the church.'

Oversimplified approach to transformation

The transformational efforts of the church are seen as oversimplified and inadequate as it did not provide a holistic solution to the needs of the community. It seems that a single aspect was focused on to the detriment of the survival and well-being of the community. Only the aspect of forest preservation was addressed without addressing the underlying reason why people were cutting down trees, namely for their survival. Additionally, certain sections of the community were not part of the process:

P7: 'But if we want just to talk about no the church went to that community, they talked to them about deforestation and the badness, but if their source of life is from that forest, you tell somebody stop! Don't get your meal from there, while him is eating, that is not, that is ungodly ... They said fine, we're not raising any objection, give us an alternative! ... When we left, all the people returned to their former way of living, as survival is bigger than nature preservation.'

P16: 'You have to give something as a replacement for what you are taking away from them.'

P3: '... you leave the other people, then the the program will not work out because you're se you're doing it only to your church.'

Underlining dualism: spiritual opposed to physical

An underlining dualism – spiritual guidance opposed to physical well-being – with regards to the task of the church is also seen as a reason why the church is not successful in its transformational task. The church's task is regarded attending to the spiritual needs of the people, opposed to their physical well-being rather than embracing both these areas as part of the church's task:

P11: 'Uh I think the only the only thing, is only spiritual, that's all. Only spiritual! ... Only spiritual. Spiritual, so that, preaching to the people so that they have they serve from they move away from ev from evil they have to do good. [Only spiritual, that's all] ... yes only spiritual.'

P12: 'There're so many pastors who came to this area ... but all e most of the pe pastors I've experienced, they're those those pastors who are healing people.'

Lack of skills and understanding of the transformational task

A lack of skills and understanding of the transformational task is mentioned as a reason for the failure of the church. It also became evident that the church in Sesheke did not have the skills to work with external experts to ensure that the transformation addresses the basic needs of the people in the communities:

P3: '... Make even a PRA survey ... or community assessment ... Eeh the community themselves come ou out with their own needs or their own activities. When you come back, for those people to implement, if you ask, make a request to any organisation, after going to the communities, I don't think any organisation will refuse because you have already started on the ground. What you need is just support ... But that one had not come out.'

One person understands community transformation as collecting money to build a house for the pastor:

P3 '... and also from that money it would maybe add up to the amounts that people brought to build a pastor's house.'

Another equates community transformation to church planting:

P8: 'The transformational projects is very successful because I planted 6 churches in 17 years.'

Non-sustainable interventions

It's like the entire transformational project by the church could not be sustained because no replacement strategies were put in place and there were no follow-ups or planning meetings. Another reason the participants evaluated the interventions as not sustainable was because it was dependent on resources from outside the community for its survival and success:

P10: 'I'm saying from the beginning this went very well, but as the, the the the what? The committee or whatever the term grew, expectations, eh mixed feelings uuh, then things like, as if you can say things started falling apart.'

P16: 'UHmm, they still go back, the reason is, in as much as the alternative is provided, eeh, the transition itself is a bit hard, because it has some implications and certain requirement that are needed for them to move to that point, and that's where the issue of empowerment comes in.'

P3: 'And then for the group, they'll wait for that, likeee, [EFZ if it doesn't come], they'll also not meet to do things together, because there's no support from that organisation that brought them together.'

Lack of resources

A lack of resources in terms of transport and funding for the Pastors Fellowship was seen to be amongst other reasons why the church failed at its transformational task. This was further associated with the non-existence of roads in some areas which made accessibility to the communities difficult:

P7: 'How do we raise transport, to go out to the community?'

P14: 'uhm, asking from the donors. I hear the the this Pastors Fellowship you're being funded. Can't it beee, also, go down to the grassroot, to help the those who are, who cannot afford, eeh to improve their livelihood?'

P19: 'I don't know maybe but on my own what I saw was we used to meet, but now going in the ee, there was some kind of no funding no good funding ... Sooo, we're failing to go out there.'

Theme 2: Church impact

The participants did identify interventions of the church that are beneficial to the community, but these could, however, not be described as sufficient to bring about community transformation:

P2: 'Uuh, to my experience, the church is doing what it what it can to transform the lives of people in, in different areas such as poverty alleviation, and, eeh in terms of human rights, it is doing what it can to educate the people, yees.'

P8: 'And we also came up with ii, during the Independence Day, we came up with a program of assisting the people in the prison, (R: okay) so we bought some meal meal, some sorted items I

could say. (R: Okay). Then we helped the people in the hospital, the people at the prison.'

Theme 3: Expectations regarding the transformational task of the church

In general, the participants expected the church to be involved in transformation of the community and do more than what it was currently doing to empower the local communities:

P2: 'The church can do much more than what it has done up till now.'

P16: 'Empower them, and the church has to come in in some way ...'

The expectations that participants have with regards to the transformational task of the church are discussed in the following three themes:

Church should impact the community holistically

Even though an underlining dualism regarding what is regarded as the task of the church was identified, there is ample evidence that the participants expected the church to be part of a holistic transformation of the community by attending also to the physical needs of the community:

P18: 'Our main problem is not to raise the dead. Our main problem is not to bring in the lost. Our biggest problem currently is to sustain our lives. If we can bring back the church into farming, into livestock, I am sure we will make a big difference.'

P7: 'You see, as a church, eeh, you can not only talk about spiritual issues, – because the spirit is living in the human body which requires food on daily basis ... Because hunger, if you are not able to sustain your liv your livelihood by getting some reasonable amount of food that is supposed to be taken by your family, you resort to anything because you become a slave, you become a slave of hunger, slave of poverty ... Find the food for the body, when you have the food, then you're able to speak about spiritual matters to the body that is health!'

The church should liaise with the government on behalf of the people

The opinion is held that the church does have influence with government and should act on behalf of the community. In contrast, however, the church is suspected to be government informants instead of people's advocates to the government. Lack of communication seems to be a reason for this suspicion:

P2: 'So the church should do more, eeh by simply eh getting involved in government eh programs to educate the church, to educa sorry to educate the people, eeh on what they can do to to uplift their standards of living.'

P16: '... I'll take a typical example of oo, those that sell charcoal. Uuh before the sensitisation, the seminars and the workshops and the likes, people were that free to come along with a bag of charcoal and sell anyhow ... This time around, you have, to be a known person that you're not connected with the forestry department or else, if you ask is there charcoal here, a place where you you know for sure you can

find charcoal, they'll not tell you we have charcoal ... They'll suspect you to be an informer.'

The church should empower the people

The participants understand the importance of empowering people as part of the transformation task of the church. The church should make available the training, information and resources needed for people to succeed in their own environment:

P17: 'So, they need empowerment in terms of I think ii, eeh, in terms of agriculture, maybe new farming skills, eeh, encouraging them to buy, eeh certified seed. Then for those who involve themselves in timber production, maybe if they can be given tuma small loans, yes so that they can actually sustain themselves instead of depending on people, who come from very far away.'

P4: 'Because us as church here we're looking, we're main on transformation, that at least at the end of the day the people themselves can able to identify the local resources and can able at least to help themselves.'

Theme 4: Transformational challenges

The challenges that the participants expressed can be grouped into two subthemes. The first will relate to challenges that are specific to the context of the Sesheke community. The second group will be in relation to the operational implementation of the transformational task of the church. The second group of challenges is, however, influenced by the first group.

Challenges related to particular community characteristics

The following challenges are related to particular community characteristics of Sesheke.

Poverty: Poverty is identified as a major problem to an extent that members of the community cannot afford acceptable living standards. People cannot afford decent meals, accommodation, or to pay school fees for their children to attend school:

P7: 'People are slaves of hunger and poverty.'

P14: 'But most of the ee parents, they've failed to take their pupils to high school, because of being poverty.'

P16: 'Amidst the privileged few you'd find the masses wallowing in poverty ... uuh, cannot afford decent accommodation.'

P16: 'Uuh, where some ... cannot afford, eh decent meals or three meals if we may put it that way, in a day.'

Position of the ex-employees of Zambezi Sawmills: The Zambezi Sawmill provided employment opportunity to the local community and also caused an influx of people from outside Sesheke, but when it was closed abruptly (liquidated) (P: Since ninety nine up to this time.), it was a severe blow to an already vulnerable community. Worse still is that the company closed without paying workers their terminal benefits and this has caused great hardships to workers and their families living from hand to mouth:

P12: 'Uuh, I'd say just after the company was closed, we have been suffering heavily.'

P15: 'It has been liquida, alo! ... liquidated yes.'

P13: 'We haven't yet received our money.'

P14: 'They now live in poverty without the possibility of returning to their homelands.'

Education across all sectors of the community: A major vulnerability of the community is being identified as the lack of skills, knowledge and training of the community members:

P18: 'According to me tha – the need, hha, well to start with I think, education is part of it. Uh in all aspects I think uuh education is needed ... even if we bring that money, when, people don't know what to do with money there'll still be a very big problem.'

P14: 'We've produced a lot of pupils to high school. But most of the ee parents, they've failed to take their pupils to high school, because of being poverty.'

P16: 'It is in Sesheke in my observation, where we still have places where a grad one child still has to cover a long distance to access this education.'

P16: 'No tertiary institution ii uh which I would, point to say now we have an institution, apart from the primary, the preschool, primary and secondary schools tha we we may have around.'

Cultural and language barriers: The cultural diversity and practices found in Sesheke pose reasonable challenge to the transformational task of the church.

P8: 'So you cannot expect those people to have transformation, no, because they still believe in their traditional they still believe in their culture whatever.'

P18: 'We are, Sesheke has a few people from, uh from Angola, aand and and when we talk about the the different cultures, uuh also that also has an effect to a certain eh level ...'

Accessibility of communities is made difficult not only by the lack of transport, but also the non-existence of roads to many communities:

P18: 'If there are no roads, you do not know of the existence of communities ... continuous outreach to communities that are not accessible is difficult.'

P7: 'How do we raise transport, to go out to the community?'

The vulnerable members of the community are suffering: Children, youth, and widows in the communities are suffering and there is need to address their plight:

P13: 'Children are suffering.'

P13: 'Widow, widowers, are suffering.'

P15: '... Uuh the community, especially the youth they're a problem. They drink too much ...'=they use bad language, insults during the night you find that they, they insult adults in the night.'

P7: 'Let's get the living skills to the people. The young stars we're seeing them they have no employment. Let us get back into our drawing board. Let's come up with a carpentry project.'

Farming: The participants view farming as an 'asset' within the Sesheke community, but the community seems to be in a predicament as they are fighting for survival. Their actions are seen to be illegal because they have to farm in forest protected areas:

P11: '... so what can we do? The only thing we can do is to go into farming! And cut trees so that we can find a living. Do farming so that we can get something to eat. Without doing that, then you're dead or you go and steal ... and then the law will visit you! ... The main activities is farming.'

P14: 'People of Sawmills ... anyway they're good farmers.'

P11: 'So, when I talk of farming that means they have to go into the illegal cutting of trees and then make their farms in the bush.'

P17: 'So, they need empowerment in terms of I think ii, eeh, in terms of agriculture, maybe new farming skills, eeh, encouraging them to buy, eeh certified seed.'

Water: Clean and safe drinking water is a necessity to human existence. Apparently, the water supply in Sesheke is described both as unclean and inadequate by the participants:

P16: 'Water – is an issue. Right here in town the water we drink is iii, is not that, that good ... you can check in your bottle or if you put in a glass, let the water settle, right away you'll find residuals.'

P14: 'Meanwhile, we rely upon two boreholes, here in Mangamu we have this one at the school, one in the compound ... We need about three or four more boreholes.'

Challenges related to operational practice

The following challenges relate to operational practice.

Cooperation with government departments: Government projects are either a positive contribution or a hindrance. The government has its own agenda, which may not necessarily be aligned to that of the needs of the community. Careful planning and consideration of involving government projects and aid is required. In one interview, it became apparent that some of the community members saw the church as an informant of the government regarding illegal farming and charcoal production as earlier quoted:

P16: '... They'll suspect you to be an informer.'

P7: 'pastors are always invited to higher government committees meetings on district level. They are saying that pastors are important role players ... So the politicians will have very little, actually, eeh, to make us fail to achieve our objectives. If properly disseminated, if properly given to the politician to say no, we have seen abcd bra bra bra, if we work together tha, kaili that would be complementing the work that government is supposed to do! Can they refuse that? Noo! I don't think so, pastor ...'

Financing transformation projects: Part of the transformational process is to transform the mind-set of the church, namely that

finances must come from outside donors rather than from the church itself.

P3: '[They could do], but [what they don't want is to get something from their pockets], and donate and, to do that activity from their own pockets. They prefer getting money from an organisation.'

P7: 'Suppose the churches were coming up to say no, were the sho, there's shortage of, eeh, essential drugs ... We as a church we're coming together, we work together in this program. We will raise funds to buy the drugs for TB which is common here so that we give it ti the health in our locality here, so that we diffuse eeh the shortage. But that is not forth coming.'

Establishing community participation: None of the interviewees indicated that the church in the target community was involved in the planning of the project. Cooperation creates a higher chances of success. It is important not to move into an area as 'the saviour of the community' but rather as the 'partner of the community'.

- (P3): When you go there, discuss with the people, yes. Make even a PRA survey ... or community assessment. Eeh the community themselves come ou out with their own needs or their own activities.
- (P4): ... that at least at the end of the day the people themselves can able to identify the local resources and can able at least to help themselves.

Incorporating the Pastors Fellowship: The participants also identified the lack of corporation within the Pastors Fellowship and the local churches in Sesheke as a challenge facing the church's transformational task. It is assumed that the Pastors Fellowship is a key to bringing harmony amongst the different churches.

- (P7): A changed church will be an example for others in the community to follow suite.
- (P7): Churches presently end up quarrelling with each other.
- (P3): Each church wants to work on its own.
- (P16): Churches want to work in isolation so that they can gain for themselves.
- (P9): ... I think we have to revisit our work we have to evaluate go back to our roots, see our goals, see where we our failures and then we can uplift we can still do better than this.

Engage Social Institutions: The other challenge facing the operational practice of the church's transformational task includes the accessibility and support of social institutions such as schools, hospitals, and prisons.

- (P17): But if they help the school, or the clinic that is there, I'm sure the they'd have helped almost everyone, because a school is a public place and a clinic is equally a public place, where almost everyone goes.
- (P7): To prisons, what do we do? Do we help those souls for, to transform them, so that when they come out the prisons, they're acceptable in the societies where they

come from? How much programs have we put as a church in Sesheke? Do we plan for those people in prisons, and so on and so forth?

Effective planning and implementation: It is evident from the interviews that planning and implementation are some of the challenges participants felt needed to be addressed to achieve successful transformation.

- (P3): Implementation is the major challenge – yes, it is a major problem.
- (P7): I think the church must move away from theory to practical ... So the best would be may be to come up with an alternative.
- (P18): Uuhm first of all I think the issue of uuh, the country itself, uuh you know, for example the workers in Zambia, uuh the very fact that they cannot stay in one place for a period long period, so that brings a lot of transfers in, uuh, in and out ... This results in a high rate of employees transfers causing constant change of church members and community members.

Conclusion

The descriptive-empirical task has endeavoured to discover, understand and describe relationships amongst a set of concepts and in so doing, present a systematic view of the transformational task of the Sesheke Church. Ultimately, the church is seen to be a key stakeholder in transforming the local community as per its biblical mandate to be the salt of the earth, light of the world, and to respond to all human needs. This is also evidenced from the wide range of expectations the participants have had regarding the transformational task of the church in Sesheke.

According to the empirical research the transformational task of the church in Sesheke, however, has not been effective as perceived by the participants. The analysed data has also revealed various reasons why the church failed at its transformational task. Although some of the interventions of the church were seen to be positive, they could not be described as having transformed the community. The participants expected the church to transform the community holistically. It has also become apparent that there is a lack of skills and misunderstanding about the transformational task on the part of the church as well.

One of the major contributing factors to the failure of the Sesheke Church's transformational task is the lack of community participation in the planning and implementation of transformation projects. The community members have been passive recipients of externally designed projects rather than partners in, and owners of, the transformational projects. Said another way, the church moved in as a saviour rather than a partner of the community. Finally, both community leaders and inner members of the Pastors Fellowship have expressed several transformational challenges in relation to the Sesheke community characteristics in particular and also to operational practice.

The research findings in this article have revealed the need for the church to engage effectively in transforming the local community as commanded by Scripture and expected by the community itself. It also alludes to the fact that the church's transformational task is not a straightforward and intuitive one, but one that requires purposeful reflection and skills. These findings have implications for the praxis and curriculum of practical theological interpretation according to Osmer (2008).

In conclusion, the normative task, namely 'What ought to be going on?' as per Osmer's (2008:4) model has not been discussed in this article. This task, however, did form part of the original research and has sought to understand the normative guidelines for Scripture to direct the transformational task of the church in Sesheke. A brief summary of this task will help to understand the impact of the descriptive-empirical task on ecclesiology.

Exegeses of the two texts of Scripture guiding the research (Mt 5:13–16 and Mt 25:35–40) have shown that the church has a biblical mandate to do good works, which may be characterised as deeds of mercy and reconciliation with God and man in Jesus Christ. By implication, the church has the mandate to engage in community transformation activities that seek to alleviate the plight of the poor and needy with the overall aim of glorifying God. As such, the church should also focus on good practice, which involves deriving norms from good practice by exploring models of such practice in the present and past, or by engaging reflexivity in transforming practice in the present. It is equally important for the Sesheke Church to acknowledge the working of the Holy Spirit as an integral part of community transformation.

Ethical reflection has shown that there is an ethic of equal regard grounded in the narratives of creation and the ministry of Jesus Christ that point to the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings. This is an important premise in many respects as ethical propagation of the gospel must address both the spiritual and physical dimensions of persons and communities, which are affected in one way or another by the prevailing social, economic, environmental, and political conditions. Therefore, it is correct for the church in Sesheke to engage in a community transformation task, but they should establish the relevant biblical and moral basis in order to be effective.

A separate article will report on the pragmatic task (Osmer 2008:176), which consists of guidelines to address the effectiveness of the church's transformational task. Said differently: strategies of action to reach the aim and objectives of the transformation task of the Sesheke Church.

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Authors' contributions

W.H. was the study leader. R. H-R. was the study supervisor. D.M. was the researcher.

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