

African Public Theology

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Foreword

Traditional Christian theologies from the West have often concerned themselves with issues that are irrelevant to African concerns. The genius of *African Public Theology* is that it adopts an innovative approach rooted in the belief that the definition of theology as the study of God needs to be rethought. Theology is not only the study of God; it also involves the study of how God interacts with his creation. This expanded definition allows the thirty African scholars who have contributed to this book to offer fresh, pertinent and practical truths. Africa is served “real meat” rather than just crumbs from Western tables. Or to use an even more basic metaphor, this book scratches where Africa itches!

Of course, traditional theology still has its place and underlies much of the content of the book, as is clear in the chapters in Part 1 that discuss not only the nature and need for public theology but also the role of the Bible and of the doctrine of the Trinity in the formulation of public theology.

Part 2, Public Theology and Public Life, is the heart of the book. A mere glance at the table of contents will show you that the topics covered are important and relevant, and reading the chapters will convince you that the authors share a deep concern for Africa, the issues confronting Africa, and what God desires for the people of Africa. It is a passion that runs through the entire book.

Part 3, Public Theology and the Church, discusses the primary responsibility of the church in Africa as witnessing to God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. It reminds us that the Africa God wants and that we dream of can only become a reality through a movement of its many peoples.

African Public Theology not only asks questions believers, theologians and the church ask but even deals with the aspirations and passions of the African continent, as reflected in the African Union's *Agenda 2063*. That agenda advocates far-reaching public policies to tackle the continent's darkest demons – bad governance, corruption, socioeconomic injustice, religious competition, tribal and ethnic conflicts and political domination. *African Public Theology* offers intentional and robust interaction and recommendations on the issues on the ground.

Intergenerational Issues

Nathan Hussaini Chiroma

Intergenerational relationships are key to a sense of identity and belonging. The baton of tradition and community values has been handed down from one generation to the next, with each generation recognizing what they can learn from their predecessors and that they are responsible to both their predecessors and their successors, that is, to both to their ancestors and parents and to their children.

But today things are changing. The currents of rapid political, social and technological change that are flowing through Africa are separating the generations so that they drift apart. Their separation is not just intellectual and emotional, it is also literal, for a generation growing up in cities is geographically remote from its parents and grandparents in rural areas.

As African societies, we have to deal with a range of issues that did not face us in the past. Young people are questioning the authority of the older generation, and the older generation is constantly in friction with the younger generation. Key values are being eroded and vices like corruption are taking root.

It is thus important that Christians and Christian churches think deeply about intergenerational relationships. Our goal should be to restore relationships and instil values that will help us gain the Africa we want, an Africa that is free of corruption and bad governance and where the church will flourish and accomplish its purposes. We do not want an Africa of which it can be said, as it was said of ancient Israel, "After that whole generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the Lord or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel" (Judg 2:10 NLT).

Traditional Intergenerational Relations

Understanding the major circles of influence in traditional African societies is pertinent to any discussion of intergenerational issues. While the details of how these circles operate may vary across Africa, the basic sources of influence are the same.

- *Family.* The family is the foundation of society and the pillar of intergenerational relationships. Family shapes conversations, values, culture and relationships. In Africa, the concept of family is far broader than the Western nuclear family of parents and children. It embraces the extended family and sometimes even neighbours. That is why in some regions, younger people are encouraged to address those older than themselves as aunts and uncles, even where there is no blood relationship. The extended family supported the parents in raising children and passing on values from one generation to the next.
- *Community.* The influence of community life in Africa is evident in proverbs like “it takes a village to raise a child” and “the child belongs to the community.” A traditional African community was a place where people were committed to one another’s welfare, to a common goal and to a common understanding of the way to reach that goal. As Agulanna says, Africans believe “that it is in the community of other human beings that the life of the individual can have meaning or significance.”¹ That is why the concept of the will of the community carried such weight. Responsibilities were shared and each person was accepted based on their worth as a human being, not on what he or she could bring to the community. This context facilitated communication between generations and made for accountability in social life and matters of governance. Values were seen as shared, not private, and were passed on through intergenerational conversations.
- *Religion.* Religion has long contributed to shaping values, character and intergenerational relations. In most African communities, religion reinforced the apprentice culture in which both trades and the rituals associated with the worship of family or tribal gods were passed from one generation to the next. The accompanying values were also passed down through the generations. Elders and local priests were in charge of various rituals including the initiation rituals that marked the transition

from childhood to adulthood. These initiation rituals often involved formal instruction in the community’s beliefs and values. Those who violated these values were punished.

Contemporary Intergenerational Relations

Western sources classify generations as Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and Millennials, but these categories reflect the historical experiences of people in the West. In Africa, it makes more sense to categorize generations in terms of the eras and trends with which they identify. Using this approach, we can identify the following groups.

- *Traditionalists*, that is, people who have lived in rural contexts for most of their lives and live by traditional African values. Such people tend to be conservative and cautious. They assume that the elders are entitled to be the leaders and that younger generations should not challenge them in any way. Such views can become a major source of conflict in intergenerational relationships. Conflicts may flare up in churches served by a younger (and often better educated) pastor, as well as in cases where the youth want to see changes in the church and in the community. The older generation will regard the younger ones as rude and as turning their back on their cultural identity, and the young will see the old as intransigent.
- *Nationalists* are people who came of age during the struggle for independence from colonial powers and whose values were deeply shaped by that struggle. Those who took up arms experienced military-style discipline and have strong bonds to their former comrades. Those who did not fight in person honour those who did. This group were often raised by traditionalists and as young adults they were exposed to colonial and military styles of leadership. Thus they are comfortable with autocratic leadership styles and reluctant to allow women and younger people to assume leadership. They honour the leaders who brought them independence and will not criticize them. They feel that younger generations do not adequately respect them and appreciate their sacrifices, and younger generations see them as stubbornly ignoring leadership problems. This too can create tension in churches and society.
- *Migrants* are people who have moved to the cities as urbanization has taken hold but who still retain strong ties to their rural backgrounds. Their lives are often defined by the struggle and disorientation that transition imposes. Many of them may want to retire to traditional communities when they

1. Christopher Agulanna, “Community and African Well Being in Human Culture,” *TRAMES* 14(64/59), no. 3 (2010): 282.

can no longer work, and they hold the values of traditional communities in high esteem. They may have the problem that their elders see them as losing their culture, while the younger generations regard them as too culture bound.

- *Urban Africans* have only known life in the cities and identify with city life more than with traditional Africa. They are better educated than earlier generations and may subscribe to Western economic values while looking down on those from traditional backgrounds. They are in general more open to women in leadership and have a more positive view of the young.
- *The digital generation* is the youngest generation. Their comfort with technology and access to mobile phones and the Internet means that they are exposed to a far greater range of cultures than any previous generation. They are more likely to question the culture of previous generations and to challenge authority.² They are now the largest generation in Africa and have established social networks far wider than anything their parents knew. They will be the future leaders of Africa, but they often find themselves in conflict with older generations, and their values are often still in flux.

Representatives of all of these generations can be found in African communities and churches, and it can be challenging for them to work together. Not only do they differ in age and experience but their world views and value systems are very different. Each generation values different aspects of African culture. But if Africa is to achieve the goals of *Agenda 2063*, these generations need to learn to work together, both in society and in the church, building on what is good from the past to construct the future.

Biblical and Theological Basis of Intergenerational Relationships

Our thinking about intergenerational relationships should be built not just on our cultural assumptions but on solid biblical and theological foundations. These foundations can then shape our practice. The place to begin is with our understanding of who God is. As we saw in chapter 4, God is and always has been a God of relationships. The relationship between the three persons of the Trinity serves as a model for our own human relationships, including our intergenerational relationships. Within the Trinity, the three different persons

2. Maggi Payment, "Millennials: The Emerging Work Force," *Career Planning and Adult Development Journal* 24, no. 3 (2008): 23.

are not in competition but work together in different ways to achieve the same goals. Their relationships are characterized by equality, unity and harmony.

When it comes to intergenerational relations within the family, the church and society, we would do well to adopt a Trinitarian perspective, which can be described like this:

All the members of a family are equal in who they are as human beings. Each one is equal in value and dignity and worth; in this, they mirror the equality that we see among the three Persons of the Trinity. Because of this equality of dignity and worth, each member of the family ought to be accorded respect and be treated as someone created in the image of God.³

Adopting this perspective does not mean that the elders are not owed respect; they are. But what it does mean is that the young are also worthy of respect and cannot simply be dismissed as unworthy of a hearing. If both young and old can maintain a Trinitarian perspective on relationships, we will avoid much misunderstanding and many misjudgements.

God is a God of relationships not only within the Trinity but also with human beings. The Bible is the record of his relationship with those he chose as his people and commissioned to bring his blessings to the rest of humanity. It is striking how much generational imagery is used in the Bible to define God's ongoing relationship with us. He is our father and we are his children, and he speaks of himself as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," referring to a relationship that spans generations. This generational focus underscores our understanding of the importance of a family's passing on the right values from one generation to the next so that successive generations trust in God. It may also be worth noting that although God names the three patriarchs in historical order, he does not distinguish them in terms of status before him. Despite our age differences, we are all equal in God's eyes.

God calls on those who know and love him to share their faith and the story of what he has done with the next generation. This call is deeply embedded in the Jewish tradition, as Moses's instruction to the parents and grandparents of his day makes this clear:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and

3. Bruce A. Ware, "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: The Trinity as Theological Foundation for Family Ministry," *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 1, no. 2.

their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deut 6:1–9; see also Ps 78:4)

The sharing of such stories and the passing on the faith can only be accomplished in the context of good intergenerational relationships. Such relationships provide the soil in which passing values from one generation to another is not only possible but also sustainable.

One other truth that is sometimes forgotten when it comes to intergenerational relationships is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. (1 Cor 12:12–14)

In these verses Paul groups people by ethnicity and status – but these are simply examples. They are not the only groups that can be identified within the body of Christ. There are also men and women, and young and old. Paul's argument is that people of all ethnicities and all social statuses, including young people, are valuable and important members of Christ's body (see also Matt 19:14). Moreover, we need to remember that each member of the body needs every other member of the body (1 Cor 12:21–26). "Children need the adult members of the Body of Christ to grow as fruitful, persevering members. Likewise, the elderly and adults need youth to grow as fruitful, courageous members."⁴

We are reminded of the intergenerational nature of the early church when we read Paul's letter to Titus with its instructions to older men, older women, young women, young men and slaves. All had a role in the church, and all are to be a people of God, called to be "his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14).

God has long valued intergenerational ministry in which it is not solely the elders who instruct the young, but also the young who instruct the old. We see this in God's words to Jeremiah as he commissioned him to be a prophet: "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you" (Jer 1:7–8). In the New Testament, we see the same situation with Timothy, to whom Paul writes, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Tim 4:12).

In many respects, Timothy himself is an example of the fruits of intergenerational relationships. His grandmother and mother taught him the truths of the faith from his infancy on (2 Tim 1:5; 3:15), and as a young man he was mentored by the apostle Paul and travelled with him (Acts 16:1–5). Timothy then worked alongside other Christian leaders like Silas and Erastus (Acts 17:14; 19:22), and was eventually assigned responsibilities in major cities like Corinth and Ephesus (1 Cor 4:17; 1 Tim 1:2–4). His mentor, Paul could say that Timothy "is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am" (1 Cor 16:10).

Towards Intergenerational Relationships in Africa Today

In traditional Africa, people spent most of their time with those who were of their own generation, but there were also many opportunities for spontaneous interactions with older generations. The children and youth knew the elders, and the elders knew them. Each group could observe the other and know something of each person's character. The transition from childhood to adulthood was often marked by ceremonies and rituals in which the youth were given special instructions in their adult responsibilities by the community elders.

In today's urban environment, however, the only members of the older generation with whom youth have regular interaction may be their parents and teachers. There are fewer opportunities for interaction with other generations on a daily basis. While there is nothing wrong with associating with those of one's own generation – everyone needs to be part of a web of peer relationships – the lack of close intergenerational relationships presents a problem in that it

4. Ed Springer, "An Introduction to Intergenerational Ministry," Youthworks (2019), <https://youthworks.net/articles/an-introduction-to-intergenerational-ministry>.

makes it difficult to transfer values. It also creates a tendency for the different generations to view each other with mutual suspicion rather than with love and understanding. Older people mistrust the youth and complain that they do not follow the advice of their elders. Meanwhile, the youth are frustrated because they feel that older generations are attempting to make them conform to a world that no longer exists. For the African Union's *Agenda 2063* to be effective and sustainable, there is a need to consciously build intergenerational relationships. What follows are some suggestions for how this can be done.

Transferring values

Lectures and sermons are not enough to ensure that values are passed on from one generation to the next, for young people are exposed to even more powerful counter-influences in their world around them and in the media. By far the best way to teach young people morality and ethics is through modelling them in the context of relationships.⁵ Morality and ethics cannot simply be taught; they must be caught, like viruses, through intergenerational relationships. Older generations must be prepared to spend time with younger people and to demonstrate what it means to live by the values they preach. Such modelling is not easy, for it requires living consistently at all times. It also requires humility. Older generations have tolerated conduct that will not help us to reach the goals of *Agenda 2063*. When the youth bring this to their attention, elders may need to listen and repent! They can do this secure in the knowledge that by deliberately modelling values, they can have a deep effect on the faith, social, academic and moral development of young people.

Creating opportunities

If one wants the older generation to be a model to the younger generation, it is important to provide opportunities for the generations to serve together or to deal with a moral issue together. It is as people work together on community projects that the generations are brought into contact and learn from each other. Often, however, we tend to think in terms of "youth projects" or "women's projects" and compartmentalize service so that there are few opportunities for generations to serve side by side. Intergenerational community needs to be established as a core value.

5. Albert Bandura, "Modeling Theory: Some Traditions, Trends, and Disputes," in *Recent Trends in Social Learning Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 1972), 35–61.

There is plenty of scope for intergenerational cooperation in opposition to corruption and bad governance. These evils affect everyone in the community and are thus intergenerational in their effects, so they need to be addressed in the context of intergenerational relationships. Addressing them should not be left to isolated individuals or to members of only one generation. An example of how generations can work together against corruption comes from Northern Nigeria, where a community group chaired by young people championed the removal of a sitting senator over verified allegations of corrupt practices and misappropriation of funds. It was initially the young people who pushed for this, but when they had explained their position to the elders in the community and provided proof of the senator's corruption, both young and old worked together without regard to their generational differences and achieved their common goal. If the power of intergenerational relationships can work in Northern Nigeria, it can also work in many other parts of Africa.

Encouraging participation

Young people must not be seen merely as agents who will carry out the plans of others. There are many who treat them in this way without concern for their long-term wellbeing. But treating people as tools falls far short of Christian love. Nor must young people be seen merely as participants in activities designed for them by others, no matter how well-intentioned those others are. As the example from Nigeria illustrates, youth must be active participants in initiating, planning and carrying out projects. In other words, they must have a voice in deciding what to do and how it should be done. If young people are merely consulted and all decisions and policies are made by others, the youth will not assume any responsibility for the outcome. But if they have been part of the decisions and the implementation, they will learn to take responsibility for the outcome.⁶

When our culture denies young people opportunities for involvement with adults and parents in working for the Africa we want, they go out into the adult world relationally, mentally and morally unprepared for the challenges of adulthood. Intergenerational relationships can provide realistic opportunities for mentorship and accountability while also empowering the young.

6. See Jones Adu-Gymafi, "Young People's Participation in Public Policy Formation: A Case Study of the National Youth Policy of Ghana," Doctoral thesis presented at the University of London, 2013.

Acknowledging gifts

Each generation has gifts that it can give to the other, but too often we misunderstand or make assumptions about each other's gifting. The older generation may assume that the gifts of the younger generation will take years to mature, and so may prevent youth from exercising those gifts in ways that will lead to mature use of them. On the other hand, the younger generation may think that the ideas of the older generation are no longer relevant today. Their eyes too must be opened to the gifts of their elders. In a village the generations would have been in close contact; in cities it is easier for the youth to exist as a completely separate cohort and to know little of the gifts of the older generation, and vice versa. But the only way the generations can discover and share their gifts with each other is if the youth and the elders spend time together.

Recognizing and working with youth-oriented organizations

A recent study on African Christian leadership in Kenya, CAR and Angola has shown the enormous influence of youth organizations.⁷ Some are international organizations like the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) which has been working in Africa for many years, but others are local organizations. It is well known that most African Christian leaders testify that their lives have been deeply influenced by such organizations, as well as by the church and choirs they belonged to in their youth. Youth organizations are the places where youth can learn basic leadership skills. The importance of choirs should also not be neglected.⁸ Many young people belong to choirs where they socialize, learn biblical truth and discuss socio-political issues – often in the words of the songs. Music is a ministry that should not be neglected when establishing intergenerational relationships.

Obstacles to Intergenerational Relations

Listening to the voices of the youth will require a cultural change. African elders do not normally consult the young. The youth too will have to learn

how to communicate their ideas clearly while still showing respect for the older generations. Such changes can be difficult, but the ideal place for them to start is in the church where the Trinitarian pattern of relationships lays a strong foundation for intentional intergenerational relationships, and the model of the body of Christ reminds us that every member is important and has something to contribute. The older generations have years of experience and practical knowledge to draw on; the youth can contribute their knowledge of contemporary culture and of technology as well as their energy.

But it is not merely traditional culture that can impose a barrier to communication between generations. There is also sometimes a language barrier! Young people may have a different vocabulary and reference concepts that are unfamiliar to their elders. They may use forms of address that their elders perceive as disrespectful without intending to be so. This is surely a case where both parties must take the words of James to heart: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (Jas 1:19). Communication is possible if both sides are willing to make the attempt.

The best way to overcome these obstacles is for the leadership to demonstrate their own commitment to intergenerational relations. Others will follow the leaders' example. It is also advisable for the leaders to start the process slowly. Intergenerational relationships take time to develop. Trust has to be built up and cannot blossom overnight. We must also establish accountability and support structures that will sustain intergenerational relationships and a free flow of communication between the generations. These structures are especially important given that in most African cultures, young people cannot hold adults accountable. But intergenerational accountability demands that we hold each other accountable for how we got our wealth, our positions etc. We must be willing to answer tough questions from one another, especially when we suspect evil practices on the part of some members of the community.

Finally, it is important that congregations grasp the biblical and theological thinking underlying intergenerational relationships and understand that a commitment to such relationships is part of their Christian calling and an important element in the respect culture in many communities. A clear biblical understanding of intergenerational relationship will enhance the sustainability of our working together to fight corruption and bad governance in Africa by enabling communities to respond as biblical Christians and not just as cultural Christians.

7. Nupanga Weanzana, "Word and Deed: Patterns of Influential African Christian Organizations," in *African Christian Leadership: Realities, Opportunities, and Impact*, eds. Robert J. Priest and Kirimi Barine (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2019).

8. See the section on empowerment through choirs and music in H. Jurgens Hendriks' chapter "Empowering Leadership: A New Dawn in African Christian Leadership," in *African Christian Leadership*.

Conclusion

The role of intentional intergenerational relationships in passing down values in the community is crucial for the African continent, especially as more than 50 percent of the population of Africa is under the age of twenty-five. Comprehensive discussion of intergenerational relationships with the goal of reaching a common understanding of our mutual responsibilities will strengthen us in our fight against corruption and contribute to our achieving the goals of *Agenda 2063*.

Questions

1. How can intergenerational relationships be enhanced in your community, church or sphere of influence?
2. Discuss how intergenerational relationships can be used to promote accountability in getting the Africa we want.
3. What are the opportunities and challenges in your church and community with regards to intergenerational relationships?

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