

THE CHURCH AND ITS THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION
IN LIGHT OF REFORM AGENDA IN AFRICA
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I. Introduction: Christianity deeply rooted in Africa but facing challenges

Christianity as a religious phenomenon in Africa traces its roots to the time of the apostles. It is neither a recent happening nor a byproduct of colonialism. Egypt's shore, for example, saw the church flourishing under their church leaders and theologians who were pillars of the universal church.¹ The rise of theological schools in Carthage and Alexandria with Cyprian and Tertullian gave the church its doctrinal stance.² Even with the rise of Islam, the history of Christian presence in Africa began like a drop in the ocean but later flooded the whole continent. Of lasting influence were the numerous missionary works that followed the footsteps of pathfinders like David Livingstone³ and Vasco D Gama.⁴ The result of such endeavors was Christianity becoming part of the landscape of the continent.⁵ Today, Christianity has become a majority religion in most countries south of the Sahara.

The African church, though established, has had its fair share of severe problems. Among them are secularism, urbanization, disunity among the denominations, political instability, and unending fragmentations resulting from the influx of new sects and ethnic religions. Also, the new order of incarnation of the gospel has brought about a variety of Christianity based on African personalities and individuals' presumed callings and gifts.⁶ Furthermore, in an attempt to make the gospel relevant to African Christian spirituality, the rise of theological motifs including liberation, inculturation, contextualization, reconciliation, and

¹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 68-78.

² John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), 25-26.

³ Tite Tiénou, *The Theological task of the Church in Africa: Theological Perspectives in Africa* (Burkina Faso: African Christian Press, 1990), 13.

⁴ Zablon Nthamburi, ed., *From Mission to Church: Handbook of Christianity in East Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Press 1995), 1.

⁵ Watson Omulokole, "The Quest for Authentic African Christianity," in Samuel Ngewa, Mark Show, and Tite Tiénou, eds. *Issues in African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers Ltd, 1998), 24-26

⁶ Baur, 473.

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reconstruction⁷ imposed a critical variance of thought and agendas on African Christianity.⁸ On the same note, the future of African Christianity may be endangered by the effects of traditional practices, education, technology, urbanization⁹, religious and social changes, and politico-economic challenges.¹⁰ In this respect, the present state of the church in Africa causes a great concern, threatening her strength and mission.¹¹

In the last few decades, the foundation of the Christian church was laid through liberation, inculturation, reconciliation,¹² reconstruction, and reformation. On the one hand, the two theological discourses among ecumenical circles in Africa have been liberation and inculturation.¹³ On the other hand, discussion of conversion and salvation has dominated theological reflection in evangelical and Pentecostal circles.¹⁴ These theological discourses have formed the basis for missional expressions and practices. Challenges arise from the above theological viewpoints as religious organizations address the church's mission in Africa. The hope is that the church as it develops its theological reflection will espouse a more comprehensive paradigm capable of inculcating an authentic African Christian spirituality. This spirituality goes beyond contentment with Sunday morning worship services in a good church building with modern equipment and elegant sermon presentations. The church must also take seriously the reform agenda in reconstructing our world in a multi-faceted way.¹⁵

This paper will therefore assess the reform discourse in light of Nehemiah and its implication for the Church of the Nazarene. It will present the current task of the Church of the Nazarene, discuss the concept of reform, highlight key principles in the book of Nehemiah, and draw out some truths about reform theology and its implications for the denomination in Africa.

⁷ Valentine Dedji, *Reconstruction & Renewal in African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 2003), 3.

⁸ Tiéno, 33.

⁹ Baur, 26-28.

¹⁰ Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa* (Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster, 2000), 237

¹¹ Dedji, 1.

¹² Stan Chu Ilo, "Towards an African Theology of Reconciliation," *The Heythrop Journal* (2009), 1-21.

¹³ J. N. K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Action, 2003), 208.

¹⁴ Mugambi (2003), 209.

¹⁵ Jean-Marc Ela, *Africa Cry* (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), 88.

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II. The current task of the church in light of the missional hope

Central to our identity is a consideration of our past effectiveness in the role God has entrusted to us within His redemptive work in Africa. The Church of the Nazarene, part of the holiness and renewal movement, instrumentally engaged African spirituality very early in the 1900s.¹⁶ Authentic assessment of the structures and practices of the church must identify and preserve our strengths as well as discern and address our weaknesses. In our appeal for strategies of discipleship to fulfill our mandate to the world, using available resources will serve as a source of renewal.

The assessment of present theological reflection and leadership formation is informed by the church's effectiveness in fulfilling the mission of God. From the Wesleyan perspective, the concern to cultivate a biblically grounded, doctrinally nourished, and theologically balanced sense of what it means to live a Christian life is a transforming impact the church must embrace. This lifestyle of Christlikeness must be nurtured in African Christianity. And this is the task of the Church of the Nazarene in this generation.

III. The Church of the Nazarene and African Christian spirituality

The African continent has a history that is largely tragic, including socio-political, economic, and religious chaos.¹⁷ Bad governance and manipulation of ethnic and religious differences have resulted in misery for the people.¹⁸ Many Christians have fallen for lies and have been misled, leaving the church confused, discouraged, and betrayed. False dogma, end-time spiritual deception, and strange techniques in supernatural engagement are holding the church hostage. For example, the church recently past has suffered a storm of deceptions including the prosperity gospel, corruption, and hatred.¹⁹

Societies around the globe have understood the role of the church as setting an example of Christian social life. The church has been seen as a custodian of moral principle, as a critical

¹⁶ Mary Schmelzenbach, *Memories of Africa* (Kansas: Nazarene Publishing House, 1993).

¹⁷ KHRC, "Human Rights Commission," *Kenya Human Rights Commission*, consulted May 21, 2013, <http://www.khrc.or.ke>.

¹⁸ John Onaiyekan, "More challenges for the church in Africa," at Africa Catholic Peacebuilding Network, consulted May 21, 2013, <http://cpn.nd.edu/conflicts-and-the-role-of-the-church>.

¹⁹ Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa* (Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster Press, 2000), 237.

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norm for biblical spirituality resulting in the reform of society. In Jesus' words, the love for God and neighbor underlies the teaching of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 5:13-14). Because of this, any failure by the church to love is a blow to the church's commitment to society. In this respect, the weakness of the church has been her lack of love as a benchmark of biblical spirituality. Over and again, this lack of love has manifested itself in the lack of hospitality, selflessness, and compassionate lifestyle. The challenge of the church in Africa is attached to maintaining and practicing the love concept as a biblical spirituality and ethics. The idea of love as the central theme in Christianity seems to be defaced with current issues that weaken Christian experience with the world.

As a response, the holiness movement of the 19th century and the subsequent church movements – of which the Church of the Nazarene is a part – embraced a social ethic that takes the concept of love seriously. The mission and lifestyle of the church is oriented towards holiness, which encompasses Christ-likeness.²⁰ In view of this, the expression of biblical spirituality is seen in "perfect love."²¹ This is in line with the mission of the Church of the Nazarene, having responded to the Great Commission of Christ to the people of Africa (Matthew 28:19, NIV). The primary objective of the denomination is "the advancement of God's Kingdom by the preservation and propagation of Christian holiness as set forth in the Scriptures."²² The church thus purposes to relate biblical principles to contemporary society constituting a basic Christian ethic of love. This is a new way of life in love involving special relationship with God and fellow believers. This is expressed in the giving of care, feeding, clothing and sheltering the needy and marginalized in society, and by extension engaging the reform agenda.

Historically, the Church of the Nazarene has attached great importance to addressing human concerns and providing guidance to members' lives. Taking seriously the moral values and principles that bring community development, the church has in many ways been relevant to African spirituality. The admonition towards abstinence from worldly practices and

²⁰ J. A. Wood, *Perfect Love* (1880; reprint, Jamestown, North Carolina: Newby Books, 1967) 10.

²¹ Chris Armstrong, "How John Wesley Changed America," *Christianity Today* online for August 8, 2008, consulted May 21, 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/news/2003/jun20.html>.

²² From the "Foreword" of the *Manual*, Church of the Nazarene (2009-2013), 5.

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developing personal habits relevant to the Christian standard has been embraced.²³ In this respect, to be identified with the visible Church of the Nazarene as a blessed privilege, it is required of all who desire to unite with the Church that they shall show evidence of salvation from their sins by a godly walk and vital piety; and that they shall be, or earnestly desire to be, cleansed from all indwelling sin. This is the concept of holiness understood as loving God with all our being.²⁴

To be a Christian, therefore, is having faith and giving evidence of love for God and neighbor, a love that grows throughout one's lifetime.²⁵ The Church of the Nazarene from its formative years has articulated her theology of socially expressed holiness as love for God and neighbor.²⁶

IV. The concept of reform agenda in the African Church

Conservation, transformation, and renewal of both the spiritual and physical life of the people is key to the reform agenda.²⁷ Critical evaluation of Africa as a continent “portrays it as sick, starved, bleeding and crippled...economically Africa is living under debt.”²⁸ Reports indicate that Africa has suffered active conflict and human rights abuses.²⁹ In short, Africa is a "dark continent." There are diverse problems that need to be tackled by leaders called for the purpose of reconstructing the society. The portrayal of this is evidenced in the reform made by the church in education, health, social, moral, and community life of the African people.

In addressing the African church's concerns, every century has had motifs for doing contextual theology. This theology reflects on the struggles of the African people at both spiritual and physical levels. There have been predominantly five patterns in African

²³ Rodney Reed, *Holy with Integrity* (Salem, Ohio: Schmul Publishing Company, 2003), 43-47

²⁴ Sondra H. Matthaei, *Making Disciples: Faith Formation in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2000), 25-26.

²⁵ Matthaei, 38.

²⁶ Harold E. Raser, "Beating Back the Amnesia: Love for Neighbor in the Church of the Nazarene, 1975-1998," in *The Tower: the Journal of Nazarene Theological Seminary*, 3 (1999), 71.

²⁷ Mugambi (2003), 53.

²⁸ Mary N. Getui and Emmanuel A. Obeng, eds., *Theology of Reconstruction: Exploratory Essays* (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 1999), 262.

²⁹ B. Zeude, *Society, State and Identity in African History* (Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies, 2008), 1-2

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theological reflection known as liberation, inculturation, contextualization, reconstruction, and reconciliation. Liberation and inculturation were the central ideas for African theology in the 80s and 90s.³⁰ In line with reform thinking, the 19th to 21st century were decades of reconstruction, including constitutional reform and economic revitalization.³¹ This social reconstruction is about “reorganization of some aspects of a society in order to make it more responsive to the changed circumstances.”³² Reconstruction highlights the necessity of creating a new society as individuals, cultures, and churches.³³ The process of reconstruction as advocated above is multi-disciplinary, demanding cooperation and consultation.³⁴

In this, the pressing need for interpersonal relations and restoration of communion, harmonious co-existence emanating from holistic, relational, and ultimate restoration of life cannot be ignored.³⁵ Scholars agree that there is need for a paradigm shift to a theology of reform as a framework for theological thinking.³⁶ This reform paradigm is a principle of working together for the common good of the universe in terms of building the ruins: emotional, mental, social, religious, and physical. This paradigm finds its footing in change of heart and attitude to allow common contribution for common good.

Theological reflection of reform therefore is about rebuilding our society after struggle and redemption of the image of God in Christians. It is a holistic approach to mission as we engage our society. It is about forming a new community of those who work together for the common good of the nation in all spheres of life. It is putting our energies, skill, and profession to work in order to reconstruct the broken lives and structures in society. The leadership in this agenda is those that are called by God and sent to lead in providing hope to the destitute society.

³⁰ J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War* (Nairobi: EAE Publishers Ltd, 1995), 2.

³¹ Mugambi (1995), 5.

³² Mugambi (1995), 12.

³³ Mugambi (2003), 30.

³⁴ Mugambi (2003), 58.

³⁵ John Rucyana, *The Bishop of Rwanda* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 178-180

³⁶ Mugambi (1995), 5.

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V. Leadership and reform agenda in Nehemiah's discourse

The above scenario presents us with the desire for leadership that will transcend hard work to working smart. This kind of leadership seems to be rare on the African continent, a continent that faces challenges with vigor and courage.

Nehemiah as cupbearer to a Persian king, having lived in all comfort, honor, and ease, did not forget his roots as an Israelite. In a foreign land, he became distressed upon hearing about the misery of Jerusalem. The situation indicated that the survivors were in distress and facing contempt and mockery. The city of Jerusalem was defenseless against destructive intruders. Nehemiah's reaction was mourning and weeping (Neh. 1:4). His grief is full of feeling for others, a sense of community, and sensitivity to the diverse challenges of his fellow Israelites. This was followed by a prayer of intercession as he laments to God for the deliverance of his people from oppressive life issues.³⁷

The project of rebuilding of walls (chapters 1-6) and renewing of Jerusalem's worship (chapters 8-10) are reconstruction and a reform endeavor. Nehemiah's key achievements "were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and bringing about civil and religious reforms."³⁸ His leadership is identified as a great example in leading enterprises for God.³⁹ The descriptions include a man of "personal zeal," "pastoral commitment," and "practical wisdom."⁴⁰ In this respect, Raymond Brown argues that the narrative is dramatic, exemplifying "obedience, demonstration of heroism, emphasizes partnership and inspires confidence."⁴¹ Nehemiah was "infinitely compassionate, transparent, a man of integrity, under great authority, visionary for great things, ability to inspire others, sensitive adaptability, prepared to make personal sacrifices, ability to use dependable colleagues, and enviable tenacity."⁴² According to Lester Grabbe, Nehemiah is portrayed as a courageous reformer even in his rebuilding of the wall, an economic reformer (chapter 5) and a religious reformer relating to intermarriages (Chapter

³⁷ Tokunbo Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: Word Alive, 2006).

³⁸ J. Carl Laney, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 69.

³⁹ J. I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness: Wisdom from the Book of Nehemiah* (London: Hodder and Stroughton Ltd, 1995), 29.

⁴⁰ Packer, 3-36.

⁴¹ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 13.

⁴² Brown, 22-24.

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13).⁴³ Jensen considers him an able leader and gifted in many ways to do God's will.⁴⁴ William MacDonald commented on Nehemiah's leadership:

Nehemiah is often used as an example of effective leadership. First, he had a vision of a goal to be achieved...he decided on a proper course of action. Then he motivated others to share his vision and become actively involved...see him delegating authority and assigning tasks. He supervised the work and checked on performance until the project is satisfactorily completed."⁴⁵

The practical importance in Nehemiah's leadership is the identification of the problem and seeking of the will of God for it. Derek Kidner argued that this prayer "shows where his priorities lay."⁴⁶ In this prayer are important elements for reform including "commitment and context."⁴⁷

VI. Implications for the church

In a continent where drought, negative ethnicity, famine, and other effects of political instability distress society, the reconstruction concept is relevant and practical for rebuilding of the society. J.N.K. Mugambi is correct that after the Cold War, Africa was in ruins politically, economically, and otherwise.⁴⁸ The ideas and practices inherent in reconstruction theology call both Christians and non-Christians to action, to rebuild the ruined infrastructure, social relationships, economic system, and to foster political stability. The principles behind reconstruction theology enable theologians, Christians, and all society to contribute to the urgent task of rebuilding the nation from a Christian perspective. In the context of this "New world Order," the inspiration found in Nehemiah is critical to the African church today.

It is clear that Africa has to re-build its ruins, from the destroyed infrastructures to broken societies. This task calls for a new form of theological discourse as developed by African theologians like Mugambi. He argued that the "pre-eminent point...is to foster...habits

⁴³ Lester L. Grabbe, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 173.

⁴⁴ Irving L. Jensen, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther: A Self Study Guide* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1970), 57.

⁴⁵ William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: A Complete Bible Commentary in One Volume* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 483.

⁴⁶ Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah: An Introduction & Commentary* (Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 78.

⁴⁷ J. G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 75.

⁴⁸ Mugambi (2003), 195.

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of responsibility, accountability and reconciliation in which victimizers and victims alike can have their personality healed, their dignity restored and their humanity created anew.”⁴⁹

The church as a social institution remains the most important instrument of reconstruction in Africa. Following the destruction of our socio-economic and political life of our country, Christianity has the message of hope and reconstruction for the nation. The hope to revitalize the collapsed social institutions must be accompanied by determination to utilize the available and potential resources for the welfare of the nation. The church today is full of a young generation that is skilled for the reform agenda. The church has the responsibility to prepare the people for the task. This is the example found in the book of Nehemiah with Nehemiah taking the lead and responsibility in rebuilding the walls and reforming the worship of Yahweh. These characteristics are critical to the reconstruction agenda in Africa. The schema of reform reflection depends amazingly on the type of leadership portrayed. Reform as a process can thrive around a leadership that exemplifies Nehemiah. This new paradigm shift into transformation theology is critical to the church movement in Africa. This reform agenda is a call to change our reflection agendas into a holistic, holy task of transforming and conserving the Christian freedom given by Christ as we engage our skills and professions.

The goal of this kind of leadership is nothing short of transformation of the world. As Isaiah foretold: *"And they shall build the old wastes, and they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations"* (Isa. 61:4, KJV). This, in reality, was the task that Nehemiah championed in his leadership to the returnees in Jerusalem. Africa can be considered similar to the situation of Judah in the days of Nehemiah. Key to the above reform agendas are the Christian mission activities in freedom, economic empowerment, structural upgrade, political stability in societies in Africa and holiness lifestyle among Christians.⁵⁰ The church in Africa must strategically consider "rolling of sleeves" to engage solutions to the African day-to-day challenges and struggle in this contemporary society.

We admire Nehemiah's concern, leadership style, sacrifice, and inspiration in the rebuilding of the nation. Nehemiah became the key model in the theology of reform.

⁴⁹ Mugambi (2003), 6.

⁵⁰ See Chanshi Chanda, *Christ-like Justice and the Holiness Tradition* (Lenexa, Kansas: Prairie Star Publications, 2010), 42-56.

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Nehemiah's engagement in reconstruction of Jerusalem's ruined wall and worship of Yahweh is remarkable and admirable for the church in Africa. The crucial point in Jesus' Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) is the assurance of power and authority given for the sake of the world.

The platform given to the church and church leaders in Africa is critical for the reconstruction of the nation. The gospel presents to the church the power to do the following:
Reform the society

One of the fundamental issues for Christianity today is found in how Christians interplay the gospel of salvation with the global crisis of famine, war, health, justice and so on for a better world. Diverse theological traditions have brought a dichotomy between secular and sacred that touches on actions required for change in our societies. In support of this, Paul Gifford's analysis on the study of Ghanaian Christians indicates that other Christian traditions believe in economic and political involvement while others adopted passivity in both economy and politics.⁵¹ On the same note, apart from economy and politics, other areas of interfaith controversies are rampant all over the world. It could be a great dilemma for Christianity to take irresponsible stances on issues that affect our societies and somehow merely wait for the second coming of Christ as the ultimate solution. The ministry of Jesus is a pointer to the fact that He was a real change agent (Mark 2:18-22; Rev. 21:5). The story of Peter in Acts 10:9-28 describes Peter as travelling from change opponent to great change proponent. Werner Urstorf echoing this point argued that in times of need posed by geopolitical and economic demands, it is illogical to keep rigid faith traditions and cultural boundaries⁵² and avoid acting to change the world for good.

Preserve society

The issues of corruption, greed, and selfishness threaten to break us apart and thus require innovators and creative leaders. All people are stakeholders in this creative solution that seeks to answer economic and socio-political problems of our nations. Christians then follow their father God who is an innovator from the beginning until now (2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 3:8-9; Rev. 21:5).

⁵¹ Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Economy* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 2004), 150-170.

⁵² Werner Urstorf, "Global Christianity, New Empire and Old Europe," in Frans Wijzen and Robert Schreiter, eds. *Global Christianity: Contested claims* (Amsterdam: Rodopi), 45.

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Empathy and understanding is vital to bringing godly changes to our socio-political and economic crisis of Africa and beyond (Gal. 6:2; 2 Cor. 1:1-8). The function of the church is to preserve from decay and bring out the flavor (salt of the earth). This is the commitment to the promotion and maintenance of order, peace, and righteousness, assisting in the reduction of corruption, theft, ethnic ego, and other social evils (Math 5:13).

Demonstrate the path given by God

The Christian communities on the other hand are yearning for change in the classical and traditional impulses of the church. The church seems not to see the need to adjust to the changing history resulting into a clash of values. The nominalism and crucial impact of secularism have shaken the foundations of the church. Ouma, talking about the impact of secularism, contends that “in Kenya secularism has offered individual freedom and self autonomy on moral decisions...”⁵³ Hence secularism has destroyed the sacredness of all moral values important for positive impact.

Embracing God’s will, communicated through the cross of Jesus Christ and enabled by the Holy Spirit, is an enormous challenge to the church. This challenge of inability to embrace God’s will in essence has frustrated God’s mission to bless the world as found in Genesis 12.

VII. Conclusion: Toward impactful leadership

The critical problem of poverty, social disintegration, political aggression, and infra-structural destruction calls for more than preaching. It calls for action. The concern for the needy and the poor is the duty of the church. Nehemiah presents to the African church a challenge to feel with the desolate and work out a plan to restore order and protection for the people. The church as the agent of transformation has a role in reconciliation and building bridges between people (Matt. 13:33; 1 Cor. 5:6). This is the mission of Jesus humbling himself to transform social structures from within.

In the achievement of this noble task of reform, the underlying issues and systemic challenges must be addressed rather than treating the symptoms. This divine mission of Christ

⁵³ George O. Ouma, "Impact of secularism on Christianity in Kenya," a paper submitted to NEGST (Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology) as a partial fulfillment of the course HS/TH 800 2009.

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is ultimately advancing in healing, reconciling, and transforming in its overlapping relational dimensions. The church therefore participates and finds her meaning as a transforming and reconciling community who strives to live like Christ, a true *ecclesia*. This is the noble task of the Church of the Nazarene in Africa. In this context, the church needs a revival that would shape her values and impulses to becoming relevant, impacting community today through the type of leadership exemplified by Nehemiah.

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