

“To Win Them, We Must Be With Them:” Church Planting and Social Interface Theory in Gauteng Province Townships

Turing Scheme Funding Summary

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With the support of the Turing Fund, this summer I spent six weeks conducting field research in Pretoria, South Africa to fulfil the degree requirements for an MA in Anthropology of Development and Social Transformation (ADST). The ADST program at the University of Sussex encourages critical analysis of current development thinking and the role of anthropology in furthering the movement toward “progress.” However, you choose to define it. To best contribute to these areas of study, my dissertation explored the role of religion in development through a research placement with an organization called JLPC. JLPC is a church planting organization that seeks to empower and resource pastors to plant more churches. Church plants, or churches that are planted by pastors with the distinct aim to evangelize new populations, interact and engage with the community through the provision of community services. These services can include early childhood education, food and clothing provision, and counselling. My research sought to contribute to the current critical debates around religious organizations providing development and community services and the potential ethical quandary that comes with the church’s desire to evangelize. I gathered the data for my study through extensive interviews with church planting pastors, JLPC staff, and others that engage with the church plant. I also conducted participant observation during JLPC meetings and Sunday church services at a nearby church plant.

This research would not have happened without the support of the Turing Fund. With its support, I was able to rent a car for the entire duration of the research period. Public transport in South Africa is often unpredictable and not always the safest. I was also conducting research in areas where I was very obviously an outsider. As a white American woman, I worked hard to earn the trust of my informants and endeavoured to ensure they felt safe while participating in my research. Most of the interviews took place in township church plants. Therefore, it was imperative I had reliable and safe transportation. Having my own rental car allowed me to travel safely to and from interviews with pastors and ensured I always had a way to get home. The funds from the Turing Fund also supplemented by own savings during a time of growing inflation and expensive cost of living.

My research found that JLPC and the pastors it supports create and sustain unique relationships driven by diverse power dynamics and varied motivations. Given this study was only six weeks, it was only able to begin to explore the complex and dynamic relationships that govern JLPC’s relationships with pastors and church plants. It also did not explore the perspective of beneficiaries of the churches’ community services; this could be an interesting area of further study. I utilized a social interface methodology to analyze how JLPC uses church plants as their social interface to evangelize and convert others as they do not actively evangelize themselves. Therefore, they needed an intermediary, in this case church plants, to achieve their mission. Meanwhile, the pastors supported by JLPC are legitimized by their engagement with JLPC and receive the resources to grow and expand their mission. Within the context of the townships around Pretoria, the church plants studied often provided much needed community services. This form of community engagement was encouraged by JLPC as a form of “evangelism by invitation.” Much of the literature around the role of religion in development hinges on the work of the traditional faith-based organizations (FBOs) and the concern that they proselytize through their services. This study found that while the church plant does not meet the definition of FBO, it does engage in similar types of activities and the concern over proselytization remains. However, given the evidence gained through interviews and participant observation, I argued that pastors do not proselytize and the desperate community need for the services they provide creates

a complex moral and ethical environment that does not fit neatly within the exiting literature. At least within this context, I concluded there needs to be an expansion within the existing literature (and a lot more research) to make space to fully situate and understand the church plant and its services. I found my time in South Africa to be very special. I am deeply appreciative to the staff of JLPC for making me feel so welcome as well as grateful to the pastors I interviewed. All of this would not have been possible without the funding from the Turing Scheme.