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"Into Africa": Contextual Research Methods for Theology and HIV and AIDS in Africa

by Diane B. Stinton

A true story is told about a missionary who went to a remote area in northern Tanzania to proclaim the Gospel among the Maasai, a famous warrior people:

> One day he was explaining to a group of adults the saving activity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He told how Jesus is the Saviour and Redeemer of all humankind. When he finished, a Maasai elder slowly stood up and said to the missionary, "You have spoken well, but I want to learn more about this great person Jesus Christ. I have three questions about him: First, did he ever kill a lion? Second, how many cows did he have? Third, how many wives and children did he have?"[1]

This story illustrates the critical need to proclaim the gospel here in Africa in light of the questions that *Africans* are asking. Whether we are ministering among Maasai elders in the village, or single moms living with HIV and AIDS in Kibera, or sheng-speaking youth in the city estates, our challenge is to invite Africans to discover Jesus in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their own worldview and experience.

The question is *how*? How do we gain those listening skills so that we truly hear the questions and issues that Africans are discussing? How do we discern the signs and symbols of authentic gospel witness in our midst? And how do we reflect, theologically, on the ministry in which we are involved? Given the central emphasis on *contextual* theologies in the Majority World today, that is, theologies that derive from and are addressed to a particular context, a key question for researching African theology is: how do we get *into* the context? How do we get "*into Africa*"?

The purpose of this article is to identify and encourage the use of selected research methods or strategies that can enhance theological research here in Africa. Within the present scope, attention is limited to two main aspects: first, a rationale for integrating qualitative research methods in theological studies; and second, an introduction to one recent methodological approach in the "pastoral circle" or "pastoral cycle," which holds great potential for conducting relevant research in the area of theology and HIV and AIDS.

The Use of Qualitative Research Methods in Theology

In 1981, mission scholar Harold Turner set forth a fundamental premise concerning methodology: "the nature of the field of study must provide the

[1] Joseph G. Healey, *African Stories for Preachers and Teachers* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2005), 33.

major control over the methods employed."[2] Turner asserted this priority in the context of seeking methodological advances in the study of African primal religions, yet the principle applies likewise to the study of Christianity in Africa. Since religion is a human activity that affects all aspects of life, Turner argues that the study of religion must be polymethodical, drawing upon all the human sciences. Various models employed in studying religion - cultural, anthropological, psychological, sociological and political - are valuable in elucidating aspects of any given religion in its milieu. However, Turner underlines that religion cannot be reduced to any of these particular categories, and therefore calls for "'interpretative depth' in the religious dimensions." He concludes, "We need therefore a religious model for the study of the 'religion' of African religions… ."[3]

If our field of study is African Christian theology, then two key questions emerge from Turner's observations: what *is* the nature of this field of study? And how can we strive for "interpretative depth" in analyzing African theology? While the field of African theology is very broad, a few key priorities have emerged over the past half-century that provide a summary description.

African Theologies are Contextual

As indicated above, a fundamental distinguishing mark of African, as well as other Majority World theologies, is that they are contextual. A landmark document in this regard is the "Final Communiqué" of the 1977 Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, held in Accra, Ghana. The concluding section entitled "Perspectives for the Future" sounds a clear call for how theology is to be done: "The African situation requires a new theological methodology that is different from the approaches of the dominant theologies of the West. … Our task as theologians is to create a theology that arises from and is accountable to African people."[4] This new way is termed "*contextual*" theology, or "accountable to the context people live in."[5]

Therefore, a widespread methodological presupposition is that genuine theological reflection cannot be separated from Africa's socio-political, religio-cultural and economic contexts. Indeed, these contexts shape the real and concrete everyday experiences within which theology must proceed.[6] The

[2] Harold W. Turner, "The Way Forward in the Religious Study of African Primal Religions," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 12, no. 1 (1981): 1.
[3] Turner, "The Way Forward in the Religious Study of African Primal Religions", 13.
[4] Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana, "Final Communiqué," in *African Theology en Route*, ed. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 192.
[5] "Final Communiqué," in *African Theology en Route*, 193.
[6] Akintunde E. Akinade, "'Who Do You Say That I Am?' - An Assessment of Some Christological Constructs in Africa," *Asia Journal of Theology* 9, no. 1 (April 1995): 184.

priority of contextual theology is likewise well established among other Majority World theologies.[7]

African Theologies are Communal

With daily, concrete experience a vital component of African theology, the concept of community, so central to African experience, is integral to theological formulation. John Pobee and Samuel Amirtham put it succinctly: "People need theology and, more particularly, theology needs people. Theology needs the reflection of people committed to Christian practice to preserve its vitality and wholeness."[8]

One prime example of theologising in community is found in Jean-Marc Ela. Ela's theological reflections are clearly rooted in his experience as a parish priest in rural northern Cameroon. He describes the role of the theologian graphically as follows:

> A theologian must stay within earshot of what is happening within the community so that community life can become the subject of meditation and prayer. In the end, a theologian is perhaps simply a witness and a travelling companion, alert for signs of God and willing to get dirty in the precarious conditions of village life. Reflection crystallises only if it is confined to specific questions.[9]

Although theology entails reflecting upon specific issues of faith in a particular community, Ela notes that it must also be related to what is happening elsewhere. J.N.K. Mugambi concurs, stressing the historical dimension of theological discourse unfolding as theologians respond to ideas from previous and contemporary generations and in turn influence future generations of theologians.[10] Thus the "community of faith" extends beyond that of one particular context to encompass other times and places of theological expression. For this reason, Kwame Bediako underlines the following methodological presupposition:

> The study of Christianity in Africa should not be isolated from the study of Christian presence elsewhere in history. In other words, one must guard against making the African field (or any non-Western field of reference) so unique in the features it presents that it ceases to have any relation to what happens to Christianity elsewhere. Rather the African phenomenon must be

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[7] For example, see R.S. Sugirtharajah, "Prologue and Perspective," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (London: SCM Press, 1993), ix; C.R. Padilla, "Toward a Contextual Christology from Latin America," in *Conflict and Context: Hermeneutics in the Americas*, ed. M.L. Branson and C.R. Padilla (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 81.

[8] S. Amirtham and J.S. Pobee, "Introduction," in *Theology By the People: Reflections on Doing Theology in Community*, ed. S. Amirtham and J.S. Pobee (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), ix.

[9] Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*, trans. J.P. Brown, S. Perry (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 11. See also Ela's discussion on "Ending the Tyranny of the Clergy," 56 ff.

[10] J.N.K. Mugambi, *The Biblical Basis for Evangelization: Theological Reflections Based on An African Experience* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 36.

seen within the wider setting of the general history of the transformations of Christianity.[11]

African Theologies Include Women's Perspectives

Further with respect to theology and community, it is common knowledge that women form a very significant sector within African Christianity. Not only do they make up the strong majority of many Christian communities, they also carry out a great deal of the pastoral work in their respective churches. Despite this reality, women's perspectives have not featured prominently in African theology until recent times. Two leading African women theologians, Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi Kanyoro, express the dilemma as follows:

> African women theologians have come to realize that as long as men and foreign researchers remain the authorities on culture, rituals, and religion, African women will continue to be spoken of as if they were dead. … Until women's views are listened to and their participation allowed and ensured, the truth will remain hidden, and the call to live the values of the Reign of God will be unheeded.[12]

Given this longstanding gap within theological publications, it is crucial to integrate women's perspectives in the study of African Christianity.

African Theologies have Formal and Informal Expressions

Christians in Africa have always theologized, if not formally, at least informally, in singing, praying and preaching. As Kwesi Dickson emphasizes,

> This is a point which cannot be made forcefully enough, for with the blossoming of theological exposition in recent years, particularly in the so-called Third World, there is the possibility - yea, a real danger - that Christians in Africa, and elsewhere, might come to associate theology solely with a systematic articulation of Christian belief.[13]

Pobee likewise emphasizes that the propositional style of expression is only one cultural mode of theological formulation, and on the basis of his in-depth study of martyrdom in the New Testament, he concludes that "[theology] may sometimes have to be gleaned from the being and doing of people."[14] For example, Henry Okullu observes,

> [W]hen we are looking for African theology we should go first to the fields, to the village church, to Christian homes to listen to those spontaneously uttered

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[11] Kwame Bediako, "The Significance of Modern African Christianity - A Manifesto," *Studies in World Christianity* 1, Part 1 (1995): 59.

[12] Mercy Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, "Introduction," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 1.

[13] Kwesi A. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 109. See also Bénézet Bujo, "African Theology: Which Direction to Take and What Methodology to Use?" *African Christian Studies* Occasional Paper No. 3 and 4 (Nov./Dec. 1985): 9.

[14] John S. Pobee, "In Search of Christology in Africa: Some Considerations for Today," in *Exploring Afro-Christology*, ed. John S. Pobee (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), 11.

> prayers before people go to bed. … We must listen to the throbbing drumbeats and the clapping of hands accompanying the impromptu singing in the independent churches. We must look at the way in which Christianity is being planted in Africa through music, drama, songs, dances, art, paintings. We must listen to the preaching of a sophisticated pastor as well as to that of the simple village vicar. … Can it be that all this is an empty show? It is impossible. This then is African theology.[15]

The search for African theologies thus extends beyond formal written expressions to include informal expressions, for example in worship, prayer, preaching, artwork, drama, gestures and symbols.[16] In view of these two dimensions of African theology, the formal and the informal, or the written and the oral, Kwame Bediako makes an important call for African Christianity itself to be distinguished from the scholarly literature on it. He proceeds on John Mbiti's distinction between oral theology that already exists in "the living experience of Christians," and the academic theology that can only arise afterwards in an attempt to "examine the features retrospectively in order to understand them."[17] Looking to the origins of theology in the New Testament, Bediako argues that "an authentic tradition of literary Christian scholarship" cannot exist apart from the "spontaneous or implicit theology" located in "a *substratum* of vital Christian experience and consciousness."[18] While the two elements of theology are not to be confused, Bediako underlines, the informal theology must be granted due significance.

Consequently, in order to seek interpretative depth in the scholarly penetration of African Christianity – the second challenge noted above from Harold Turner – serious attention must be given to "the observation and study of the actual life of African Christian communities."[19] Bediako explains that the intention is not to set the study of the "lived" theology off against the written theology, since both are obviously important. Rather, it is because the informal expressions of theology cannot be fully circumscribed within the formal expressions that the former warrant particular attention. He thus asserts the following crucial directive for African Christian scholarship:

> If it retains and maintains a vital link with the Christian presence in Africa, and with the spontaneous and often *oral* articulation of Christian faith and experience that goes on, it will be in a position to contribute significantly to understanding, as well as shaping Christian thought generally for the coming century.[20]

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[15] Henry Okullu, *Church and Politics in East Africa* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1974), 54.
[16] See Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 45-50; Ela, *My Faith as an African*, 5.
[17] John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 229; quoted in Bediako, "Significance of Modern African Christianity," 52.
[18] Bediako, "Significance of Modern African Christianity", 53.
[19] Bediako, "Significance of Modern African Christianity", 58.
[20] Bediako, "Significance of Modern African Christianity", 58.

With this broad-stroke portrait of the *nature* of the field of study – that African theologies are contextual, the community of faith is crucial in their formulation with particular reference to the need for women's perspectives, and their dual dimensions of formal and informal expressions – and with this directive for scholarship to maintain a vital link with "the actual life of Christian communities," we return to the question of *how*? What are the implications for research methodology? Again, the second question that emerges from Turner's assertion about religious methodology is: How can we strive for "interpretative depth" in the study of African Christianity?

Interpretative Depth Through Qualitative Research

While there is no simple, or single answer, in view of many valid approaches to constructive research, this section argues that qualitative methods can make an important contribution. Since qualitative research is not commonly associated with theological studies, a brief introduction and rationale is in order. While "qualitative research" is used as an umbrella term for a variety of research strategies, such as interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and other ethnographic methods, certain characteristics are shared which make this approach very conducive for exploring African theology.[21]

In brief, Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen outline these characteristics as follows.[22] First, qualitative research is especially concerned with context, so that the researcher enters the natural setting of the subjects to collect data and he or she is the key instrument for data collection. Second, it is descriptive, with more emphasis on words than numbers, both in recording the data and disseminating the findings. That is, more attention goes to capturing the respondents' experiences and interpretations than to measuring the statistical frequency of responses. Third, qualitative research is concerned with process over products or outcomes. In other words, it allows room for probing the underlying perceptions and reasons rather than simply the stated conclusions. Fourth, analysis of data proceeds inductively, which is summarised as follows: "[Qualitative researchers] do not search out data or evidence to prove or disprove hypotheses they hold before entering the study; rather, the abstractions are built as the particulars that have been gathered are grouped together."[23] Finally, qualitative research is fundamentally concerned with "meaning," or the way in which people make sense out of their lives. Hence the researcher is interested in "*participant perspectives,*" and seeks to

[21] For an example of the use of qualitative methods in theological research, see Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004; Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2004).
[22] Robert C. Bogdan and Sari Knopp Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods* (Boston: Ally and Bacon, Inc., 1982), 27-30.
[23] Bogdan and Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education*, 29.

discover "what *they* are experiencing, how *they* interpret their experiences, and how *they* themselves structure the social world in which they live."[24]

These characteristics of qualitative research together contribute to its chief strength, namely, the depth of understanding it allows.[25] In addition, one of the three most common and useful purposes of qualitative methods is exploration. Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman advocate this approach when there is need "to investigate little-understood phenomena, to identify/discover important variables, to generate hypotheses for further research."[26] They give an example of a research question as follows: "What are the salient themes, patterns, categories in participants' meaning structures?"[27] Earl Babbie concurs that such an approach is typical "when the subject of study is itself relatively new and unstudied," and he concludes that, "exploratory studies … are essential whenever a researcher is breaking new ground, and they can almost always yield new insights into a topic for research."[28]

Given the unprecedented growth of African Christianity over the past decades, there are many new issues in need of serious investigation and qualitative methods can contribute significantly to this research process. If indeed, Africa is a "living laboratory" for 21st century Christianity, as Andrew Walls contends, then it is imperative that theological studies in Africa move beyond textual methods of research alone to credibly investigate the actual life of Christian communities. Walls underlines,

> The laboratory space for theology is not in the study or the library; the major theological laboratory – workshop might be a more appropriate term – lies in the life situations of believers or of the Church. Theological activity arises out of Christian mission and Christian living, from the need for Christians to make Christian choices, and to think in a Christian way.[29]

Elsewhere, Walls charges African theologians with a special responsibility for constructing new theologies in response to the social, political and economic issues arising across the continent. He explains,

> One reason is simply that the situations which theology must address are starker and more convulsive in Africa than elsewhere. … African Christianity has daily experience of famine, drought, war, displacement of populations; of a scourge like AIDS, not as a problem of marginal people but as a pandemic

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[24] Bogdan and Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education*, 30, quoting G. Psathas, *Phenomenological Sociology* (New York: Wiley, 1973); emphasis original.

[25] Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1989), 285.

[26] Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research* (London: Sage Publications, 1989), 78.

[27] Marshall and Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research, 78*.

[28] Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 81.

[29] Andrew Walls, "The Rise of Global Theologies," in *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 19.

> affecting populations; and because African Christianity experiences these, African Christian theology needs to confront them.[30]

In view of Walls' clarion call for serious scholarship on the actual life situations of contemporary African Christianity, this first section has developed the rationale for one means of doing so, namely, integrating qualitative methods into theological research. The remainder of the article introduces one particular approach for investigating and responding to particular issues in African Christianity which theology must confront. While it is little known among evangelical circles, the pastoral circle or pastoral cycle offers a viable and valuable resource for getting "into Africa" to research contextual issues. For example, among the many issues that warrant urgent attention, the HIV and AIDS pandemic, as noted by Walls above, affects entire populations of people. Aylward Shorter points out,

> As the HIV/AIDS pandemic spreads, it is clear that it is both an infection and an affliction. The disease infects individuals, but it also affects them and their families spiritually, emotionally, socially and materially. … AIDS … does it in a particularly devastating and far-reaching way … because it is incurable and because it is transmitted through the very processes of human life-giving, the sexual relations of men and women, and the procreation of children. AIDS therefore strikes at the very fabric of human society and at its basic institutions of marriage and family.[31]

Since the pandemic affects virtually every dimension of life, it calls for comprehensive, multi-disciplinary research including theological perspectives and responses. Therefore the holistic approach of the pastoral circle is especially conducive for researching theology and HIV and AIDS.

The Pastoral Circle / Cycle

By way of brief introduction, the pastoral circle is a recent methodological approach in use around the globe by those working in parishes, in justice and peace ministries, in development, and in the academy. Essentially it provides a flexible framework that can be been used for pastoral planning, community action, or academic theology.[32] Its origins are usually traced to Monsignor Cardjin, the founder of the Young Christian Workers in Belgium, who proposed

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[30] Andrew Walls, "Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect," *Journal of African Christian Thought* 1, no. 1 (June 1998): 13.

[31] Aylward Shorter and Edwin Onyancha, *The Church and AIDS in Africa – A Case Study: Nairobi City* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1998), 46.

[32] For an insightful examination of the Pastoral Circle in relation to European theological epistemology and methodology, see Frans Wijsen, "The Practical-Theological Spiral: Bridging Theology in the West and the Rest of the World," in *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, 129-147 (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2006). While it has a longer history of use in Catholic universities and seminaries (e.g., the Catholic University of East Africa), it has recently been introduced as one viable approach for academic research at Daystar University, Nairobi, and at the Africa International University, Karen, Kenya.

the simple method of *See, Judge and Act* as an attempt to integrate action with reflection.[33] In 1980 this basic approach was developed further by the Center of Concern, a Catholic social justice think tank in Washington DC, which sought to devise a methodological tool for enhancing analysis of critical social issues. The new approach was coined "the pastoral circle" and elaborated in a seminal work by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*.[34]

The rationale for this new methodological approach is in line with the growing discontent over the past half century with those traditional theological methods that did not adequately integrate theology with life, or theological reflection with praxis, a legacy of Latin American liberation theology. For example, Rodrigo Mejía points out that Anselm's classic definition of theology of "faith seeking understanding" certainly sets forth a central purpose of theology in cultivating a deeper understanding of the Christian faith. However, the risk inherent in this definition is that of pursuing theology as a purely theoretical science that seeks to enhance human comprehension without necessarily inspiring faithfulness to the gospel in our daily living. He explains,

> It is possible, indeed, to have a correct understanding of the Bible and not to be aware of the link between the truth of the Bible and the historical and social situation in which one is living. Theology as a science has to be theoretical, but as a whole project it has to be a service for the people of God in order to improve not only their understanding but also the practice of their faith in their concrete historical situation.[35]

Hence Holland and Henriot proposed the pastoral circle essentially as a means of analyzing reality in the light of God's Word, on the fundamental assumption that one is *affected* by reality through appropriate processes. Jon Sobrino elaborates further, outlining three dimensions to this human activity, with obvious relevance to our consideration of the AIDS pandemic:

> The first is "getting a grip on reality," which requires us *to be truly and actively involved* in reality, affected by things as they are [i.e., not simply intellectually aware] …. The second is "taking on the burden of reality," that is, taking charge of reality in order to transform it [i.e. the *praxic dimension*] …. The third is "taking responsibility for reality," that is, accepting the demands of reality and bearing its hardships [i.e. the *ethical dimension*].[36]

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[33] Rodrigo Mejía, "Pastoral Theology and the Pastoral Circle: The Methodology and Dynamics of the Pastoral Circle," in *New Strategies for a New Evangelization in Africa,* ed. Patrick Ryan (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2002), 125.

[34] Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983). This work has been reprinted in multiple editions, translated into numerous languages, and disseminated to faith-based communities around the world.

[35] Mejía, "Pastoral Theology and the Pastoral Circle," 122.

[36] Jon Sobrino, "Foreword: Faith, Justice, and Injustice," in *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, ed. Frans Wijsen, Peter Henriot, and Rodrigo Mejía (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2006), 9; emphasis original.

This affectedness is prior to methodology, according to Sobrino: "Reality speaks, and the analyst listens."[37] Rooted in Ignatian spirituality, with its emphasis on attending to the world around us and seeking to discern God's loving presence and involvement in the details of everyday life, the pastoral circle helps us to "read" the signs of the times. Henriot explains,

> But this "reading" is not simply *cognitive*, an intellectual exercise leading to understanding. It is also *affective* and *effective*: *Affective* in the sense of touching the deepest of our values and strongly motivating our responses. *Effective* in the sense of organizing our responses with planning, execution, and evaluation.[38]

Significantly, therefore, human experience forms the heart of the process as a fundamental condition and the central core around which the pastoral circle operates. Also termed "the hermeneutical circle," "the circle of praxis," or "the pastoral cycle," it advocates four key moments or dimensions: insertion, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning.

Insertion: What is happening?

First, *Insertion* (also Contact, Encounter, Experience, or Immersion) seeks to establish "*what* is happening here?"[39] Through personal immersion in a particular human situation, the researcher gathers data, descriptions, or stories of what is going on in the situation, paying particular attention to the lived experience of the people affected. More specifically, stemming from the "preferential option for the poor" advocated by Latin American liberation theologians, priority is given to "the experiences, views, needs, feelings, and stance of the poor and most vulnerable in a community."[40]

Various methodological approaches can be employed in this initial step, whether quantitative, a range of qualitative methods, or a mixed method approach, whatever is considered most feasible and conducive within the selected context. Since the aim is to "come to grips with" the reality, there is need to collect both objective data and subjective feelings. A distinction is made between the "empirical," the highly rational collection of information and statistics, and the "experiential," or the personal, subjective feelings gained through, for example, story-telling, drama, poetry, or artistic creations. For instance, one method of insertion is a "listening survey" which helps to discover the "burning issues" affecting local communities:

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[37] Sobrino, "Foreword: Faith, Justice, and Injustice", 10.

[38] Peter Henriot, "Social Discernment and the Pastoral Circle," in *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, ed. Frans Wijsen, Peter Henriot, and Rodrigo Mejía (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006), 38.

[39] F. Wijsen, P. Henriot, and Rodrigo Mejía, eds., "Appendix I: Steps in the Pastoral Circle," in *The Pastoral Circle Revisited*, 251.

[40] Henriot, "Social Discernment and the Pastoral Circle," 44.

> It involves not simply the collecting of objective statistical data (e.g., the number of people in a village, the health and education profiles), but also identifying the strongly felt needs, fears, expectations, etc.
>
> The team conducting this kind of listening survey contacts these feelings by listening to what people talk about in local gatherings at markets, beer halls, funerals, churches, transport facilities, etc. What is frequently repeated, what is spoken of with emotion, what is voiced by influential persons: this can vividly tell us what is happening in people's lives.[41]

Finally, the sensitive nature of investigating HIV and AIDS calls for added discernment and attention to research ethics. For example, Christine Bodewes provides a detailed account of employing the pastoral circle to develop a pastoral plan in Christ the King Catholic Church, Kibera, Nairobi.[42] In the context of meeting with sub-parish groups to discuss socio-economic problems, Bodewes records that her research team

> observed early on that the mere mention of HIV/AIDS "shut down" the group and ended the discussion. People simply refused to discuss this topic. HIV/AIDS is still highly stigmatized because it is associated with sexual promiscuity. The stigma is so great that many people are embarrassed and ashamed to even say the word aloud. And yet, it is the most serious problem facing the parish. Thus, the team insisted that AIDS be included as a possible priority issue.[43]

In sum, this first step of the pastoral circle demonstrates the incarnational approach to research and ministry which requires us to enter into life within a particular local context in attempt to spiritually discern what is happening.

Social Analysis: Why is it happening?

Second, *Social Analysis* addresses the crucial question, "*why* is it happening?"[44] The aim is to move beyond the anecdotal to in-depth analysis, probing the root causes, connections and consequences of what is taking place. Critical analysis considers key factors such as history, including both a "scientific" history of the past (e.g., main stages of development, key turning points, significant persons and movements) and an "intuitive" history of the

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[41] Jesuit Communications, "The Pastoral Circle and the Role of Social Analysis," http://www.jescom.co.zw/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=175&Itemid=53 (accessed June 9, 2011).

[42] Christine Bodewes, "Can the Pastoral Circle Transform a Parish?," in *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*, 77-93 (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2006). She introduces the context of this parish by noting that "Kibera has the notorious distinction of being the largest and most densely populated slum in all of sub-Saharan Africa, with over 700,000 people squeezed onto less than 550 acres," p. 77. For a full-length account of this pastoral project, see Christine Bodewes, *Parish Transformation in Urban Slums: Voices of Kibera, Kenya* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2005).

[43] Bodewes, "Can the Pastoral Circle Transform a Parish?," 84-85.

[44] Wijsen, Henriot, and Mejía, eds., "Appendix I: Steps in the Pastoral Circle," 251.

future (e.g., projections, trends, extrapolations: "what will things be like ten years from now if nothing in the current situation changes?").[45]

Another crucial aspect of social analysis is a critical examination of any structures that contribute to the existing situation, for example:

> a. Economic Structures (production, labor, access to capital, marketing, technology, corporations, tax structures, interest rates, consumption, distribution, Environmental and economic policies etc.)
>
> b. Political Structures (Decision makers and their processes, public transparency and accountability, Constitutional laws, courts, political parties, lobbying and finance, etc.)
>
> c. Cultural Structures (Religion and religious institutions, family, neighborhood, education, symbols, media, communications, music, lifestyle, art, local traditions and values, etc.)[46]

Other socio-cultural structures worth highlighting include gender relations and ecological factors. In addition, social analysis examines the values and cultural norms that influence the situation, either positively (e.g., sharing, community bonding) or negatively (e.g., dominance, selfishness).[47]

Lastly, social analysis considers the key interrelationships between the history, structures and values before drawing conclusions regarding the most important influences in creating and sustaining the situation. Henriot notes, "The question of why such conditions exist will be guided by those whose *rights* are being violated and whose *responsibilities* are called upon to change the situation."[48] He acknowledges that the language of "rights and responsibilities" is rooted in "the human dignity of each person in community." Thus he makes explicit his own framework of values in undertaking social analysis, and rightly concludes:

> No analysis is value free – we are prompted to ask certain questions, to look for answers in certain places, and to be open to consequences of these answers by the value framework within which we do our analysis. Yes, we must be objective in pursuing answers, but we must not be so naïve as to imagine that social research is totally value free.[49]

Theological Reflection: How do we evaluate what is happening?

The first two steps or "moments" in the pastoral circle have been elaborated at greater length, since they are less familiar in conventional theological methods. However, both steps are decisive in fostering deeper understanding of the issue in context, before moving to the third step:

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[45] Jesuit Communications, "The Pastoral Circle and the Role of Social Analysis."
[46] John Gonzalez, "The Pastoral Circle," http://www.passionistjpic.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/The-Pastoral-Circle.pdf (accessed June 9, 2011).
[47] Jesuit Communications, "The Pastoral Circle and the Role of Social Analysis."
[48] Henriot, "Social Discernment and the Pastoral Circle," 45.
[49] Henriot, "Social Discernment and the Pastoral Circle," 45.

Theological Reflection, which questions, "*How* do we evaluate it?"[50] Scripture is fundamental to the process, as Holland and Henriot urge prayerful reflection upon the issue, particularly in light of the social analysis, followed by the identification and explication of scriptural passages of relevance to the issue. The aim is not superficial proof-texting, but rather in-depth consideration of appropriate biblical passages and overarching biblical and theological reflections. Not only Scripture, but also the wealth of Christian tradition can be mined for insight into the present situation. For example, Gerry Whelan recommends Christological reflection on the issue by selecting a passage from the New Testament in which the teaching of Jesus is brought to bear on the issue. In addition, drawing upon Bernard Lonergan's theology, he advocates Ecclesiastical reflection as follows:

> [T]he three functions of the Church are, first, to assist religious conversion in individuals and communities (the priestly function). Next it is the mission of the Church to promote ideas, values and symbols that promote the common good (the prophetic function). Finally, the Church should involve itself directly in works of mercy, including running institutions such as schools and hospitals as a model for social structures in society over which it has no control (the kingly function).[51]

On this basis, he urges critical reflection on the extent to which the Church within the selected context is upholding its priestly, prophetic and kingly functions, and whether appropriate balance exists among the three functions or whether there is relative neglect in any of these dimensions. He then concludes, "This ecclesiological reflection is key to theological reflection in the pastoral circle. It is scientific and rigorous."[52]

Pastoral Planning: How do we respond to what is happening?

The fourth dimension of the pastoral circle is *Pastoral Planning*, which asks, "*How* do we respond?"[53] It considers the role of individuals, parishes, agencies, institutions, and the wider church in planning action and evaluation in order to effect the desired change in the situation. Specific, viable strategies are sought, with attention to setting short-term and long-term goals. Consequently, as Wijsen points out, the pastoral circle is a form of action research which he explains as follows:

> Action research as a research strategy developed on the margins of academic studies; it became a hallmark of much third-world or liberation theology, where theologizing serves as a means of empowering the people – especially the

[50] Wijsen, Henriot, and Mejía, eds., "Appendix I: Steps in the Pastoral Circle," 251.
[51] Gerry Whelan, "Theological Reflection and the Slums of Nairobi," in *The Slums: A Challenge to Evangelization*, ed. Francesco Pierli and Yago Abeledo (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2002), 90.
[52] Whelan, "Theological Reflection and the Slums of Nairobi", 91. Whelan then provides a helpful account of his application of the pastoral circle in his ministry at St. Joseph the Worker Parish, Kangemi, Nairobi.
[53] Wijsen, Henriot, and Mejía, eds., "Appendix I: Steps in the Pastoral Circle," 251.

> most marginalized – through adult education and community development. Here the methodological principles of learning by doing and doing before knowing are applied in their purest form. The presupposition is that the best knowledge comes from below and from within.[54]

Finally, despite the pastoral cycle being outlined in separate steps, it must be stressed that this is not an orderly sequence of stages but rather a process in which various dimensions occur simultaneously or in fluid motion among the elements of the circle. Holland and Henriot explain, "None of these parts can be totally isolated; theology is not restricted to that moment explicitly called 'theological reflection.' In a wider sense, all the moments of the circle are part of an expanded definition of theology. All are linked and overlap."[55] Furthermore, the circle is better conceived as a 'spiral,' akin to the hermeneutical spiral, because the process never returns to the same starting point. Rather, after evaluating the planned pastoral action, a new process begins, starting from the insertion in a new human situation.

Conclusion

This article has sought to "expand the borders of our tent" in theological research in Africa, particularly in relation to urgent contextual issues such as HIV and AIDS. Without diminishing the need or the value of traditional evangelical biblical and theological research methods, the argument is for enhancing these approaches by integrating new research methods that enable rigorous investigation into particular African contexts. More specifically, two approaches have been advocated: the wide range of qualitative methods developed over the past few decades, that now flourish in the academy and in industry, and the pastoral circle or cycle. As we diligently employ these and other methods to get "into Africa," for the sake of serious contextual research in theology, we will contribute more effectively to the growing scholarship on African Christianity. In the process, significance will emerge not only for the Church in Africa, but also for this present "second age of world Christianity, … indeed an age of global Christianity," in which there is "possibility not just of contact but of communion, fellowship in the body of Christ, between Christians of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds" from every continent. For as Walls rightly concludes and appeals concerning this new multi-centric context of world Christianity, "theological interaction becomes possible on a scale previously inconceivable."[56] May we truly heed this call for the sake of God's kingdom in Africa and across the world.

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[54] Wijsen, "The Practical-Theological Spiral," 141-142.
[55] Holland and Henriot, *Social Analysis*, 13.
[56] Walls, "The Rise of Global Theologies," 33.