Gangsterism on the Cape Flats:
A challenge to 'engage the powers'

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One of the most pressing issues in the urban ghettos of the Cape Flats is that of gangsterism and the discourse of power and powerlessness that is its lifeblood. Media coverage over the past two years was littered with news on gangsterism as the City of Cape Town struggles to contain what some labelled a pandemic. It is a pandemic that is closely tied to a deprivation trap of poverty, marginalisation, isolation, unemployment and, ultimately, powerlessness. The latter concept of powerlessness and its interplay with these factors constituted the main thrust of this article as it explores the concept of power (and powerlessness) as deeply relational with the economic, psycho-social and spiritual dimensions. It is proposed that Kingdom power challenges the status quo within such contexts and offers the church an alternative framework within which to engage prophetically.

Introduction

The issue of gangsterism[1] came close to home recently when a young mother was killed in a gang-related shooting on the corner of the road where my parents live in Retreat on the Cape Flats. In a news report of the same week it was reported that: 'Statements from police, emergency services and community police forums show that at least 17 people have been killed in just 16 days from 5 January until Tuesday, 21 January' 2014 on the Cape Flats (News24 2014). All these deaths were gang-related; it appears as if there is a full-scale gang war raging on the Cape Flats[2] in which children, youth and even the elderly are the victims. Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu recently mourned the violence on the Cape Flats and called on communities to make a concerted effort to 'create an earthly chorus of undeniable protest' (Tutu & Tutu 2014:15). Although gangsterism is a national phenomenon, Western Cape gangs are much more sophisticated and are believed to account for almost 70% of all crime in the Western Cape (Kinnes 2000:5). Well-known gangs on the Cape Flats include the Hard Livings, the Americans, Sexy Boys, Yuru Cats, Junky Funky Kids, Corner Boys and Naughty Boys.[3] Although it is hard to determine the exact membership of Cape Flats gangs, it has been estimated at between eighty thousand and one hundred thousand (McMaster 2007:279). The power wielded by these gangs often cripples communities in areas such as the Cape Flats, and it is evident that this power is multifaceted in nature. For the purpose of this article I will be focusing on the relatedness of issues of power and powerlessness within the context of gangsterism from three perspectives: its socio-historical roots, psychosocial understandings of power and powerlessness within this context, and the issue of power through a theological lens. This analysis will critically engage the work of the influential theologian Walter Wink. In the final part of the article, I will explore how theology and praxis[4] could meet in 'engaging the powers' within the context of gangsterism through the public witness of the church.

Gangsterism on the Cape Flats
The historic roots of gang activity on the Cape Flats

The roots of gang activity in the vast urban ghetto that is the Cape Flats are deeply rooted in socio-historical factors and highlight the contrasts of a socially and economically fragmented city. This urban wasteland had been earmarked as places of relocation for those forcibly removed by the

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1.Gangsterism may be defined in various ways. According to Mncube and Madikizela-Madiya (2014:43), gangs range from scavenger types (petty crimes) to territorial types (well organised with initiation rites) to corporate gangs (they are well structured, conduct illicit activities and have distinct names and symbols attached to said names).

2.Recently increased gang activity has occurred in Manenberg, Delft, Belhar, Hanover Park, Mitchells Plain, Lavender Hill and Athlone.

3.These are only a few of the existing gangs on the Cape Flats. It should also be noted that I have not referred here to the notorious prison gangs 'on the inside', which are often aligned to those on the 'outside'.

4.By 'praxis' I am not referring to the words 'practice' or 'action', but rather praxis as 'reflected-upon action and acted upon reflection' (Bevans 1992:65). Bevans (1992:70) notes that 'doing theology as a critical reflection on praxis makes theology capable of being a powerful expression of theology'.

legislation of the Group Areas Act (1950) from what were then declared 'white areas' such as Lower Claremont, Windermere, Newlands, Plumstead, Simon's Town, Tramway Road and District Six (Field 2001:13; Naidoo & Dreyer 1984:9).[5] Perhaps one of the most devastating and long-lasting of the social costs of forced removals on the communities that now form the Cape Flats is that of gangsterism, which is accounted for by several researchers as a legacy of the forced removals during the apartheid era (Cooper 2009:2; Daniels & Adams 2010:46–47; Dixon & Johns 2001:3; Kinnes 1996). Kinnes (1996:17) argues that one of the reasons for the high incidence of gangsterism on the Cape Flats 'is the sheer misery of the environment into which families and whole communities were forcibly relocated from inner city areas during the apartheid era'. Sources attest to the presence of gangsters or 'skollies' in areas such as Lower Claremont and District Six before the Group Areas Act removals, but it appears that these individuals and groups were regarded as 'street gangs' and as part of the communities (Bickford-Smith 2001:110; Kinnes 2000:2; Swanson & Harries 2001:80).[6]

In fact, in describing the extent of crime on the Cape Flats and the causes of it, it has been noted that the 'Group Areas removals fragmented extended families and family networks and dissolved the social glue which existed before the removals' (Lombard in Bowers 2005:147). Calix (2013:32) cites Pinnock in stating that before the forced removals 'youth involvement in gangs was largely controlled by a strong degree of informal social control, that is, active engagement and strong neighbour relationships resulted in a strong sense of collective identity, cooperation, purpose and pride'. These rough and ready street gangs have now metamorphosed into sophisticated crime syndicates, which Kinnes (1996:18) believes to be a result of high levels of unemployment, poverty and overcrowding that 'exacerbate the problem, and criminality and violence easily emerge as a response to the experienced violence of a heartless system'.[7]

Poverty, powerlessness and gangsterism on the Cape Flats

This heartless system perpetuated patterns of poverty and inequality in areas such as the Cape Flats and although, as

highlighted by McMaster (2010:61), every social ill cannot be blamed on apartheid, it is fair to state that gangsterism found a fertile 'breeding ground' within the 'socio-economic issues created by apartheid on the Cape Flats'.[8] Clark (2012:80), in exploring the causes of youth violence in South Africa, cites Galtung's differentiation between what he termed 'direct violence' and 'structural violence'. While direct violence entails the 'infliction of physical violence ... the general formula for structural violence is inequality, above all in the distribution of power … ' (Clark 2012:80). Clark (2012:80) argues that the prevalence of structural violence in the form of poverty and inequality 'helps to explain the country's high levels of direct violence'. Clark (2012:81) further states that poverty, unemployment and other socio-economic issues, therefore, form a 'backdrop' to youth violence.

The aforementioned 'street gangs' of the pre-apartheid era have now evolved into sophisticated and violent criminal fraternities which have grown in numbers post-1994 and have set up powerful empires which preside over drug running, extortion, money laundering, robbery and prostitution rings, amongst others (Kinnes 2000:8–12). Kinnes (2000:8) notes that the economics of poverty and power are at the heart of the development of organised criminal gangs on the Cape Flats as Coloured communities remain socio-economically vulnerable (and often powerless) in the post-apartheid era. Wilson and Ramphele (1989:152) and Chambers (1995:21) agree that at the heart of powerlessness, whether it be social, economic or political, lies the constant struggle of the poor as they seek to access resources that will enable them to better their situation. This makes the poor both vulnerable to exploitation by the powerful and to feelings of anxiety and despair when they are not able to overcome their circumstances.

Kinnes (2000:10) highlights the fact that, as a result, gangs in the Western Cape have used the act of providing for members of communities as a 'stepping stone in gaining control of the community'. This is supported by Bowers' study (2005) on Lavender Hill which indicated that one of the most devastating effects of a low skilled populous with a high unemployment rate is that it results in the economic power lying largely in the hands of the gangs in the area. This has devastating social effects, as described by a social worker in the area:

> They exploit the situation and where they would offer people money to buy electricity, to pay rent and in favour they will … just innocently ask the person 'Listen this is not everybody's business, but can you keep this parcel for me?' And that is how gangs get that kind of hold. It's also about making money without much effort. You don't have to walk that far, you don't have to spend taxi fare and train fare and you can earn quite an amount … I think that it creates the impression that 'Listen here, if you need to work; you can become rich very easily', that it's not a big deal really to make money and sell drugs. (Bowers 2005:149)

In such contexts gangsters become powerful role models as they propagate the message that there is money and, therefore, social power vested in such activities. It is also important

to note that gangs exert two types of social power, namely 'coercive power' (which refers to the threat of violence and force) and the 'power to pay, buy, or impress and to delegate status and rank to its members' (Knox in Wood & Allayne 2010:106). Daniels and Adams (2010:47) state emphatically that the 'high levels of unemployment and poverty amongst township families have created the opportunity for gangs to exploit the vulnerable and unemployed'. Power is deeply relational and dependence on power-holders (such as gang leaders) reduces opportunities for the powerful to resist. Ajulu (2001:115) notes that as a result of this form of relationship as 'power over', community members 'develop a sense of inferiority and acquiescence'. Gangs are also 'more likely to target youths whose vulnerability is enhanced by economically unstable family backgrounds' (Daniels & Adams 2010:10). Such arguments are supported by theories from the field of Criminology, such as the 'theory of cultural transmission'. This theory posits that in 'socially disorganised neighbourhoods' in poor inner-city areas (which is what one may term these neighbourhoods post forced removals), gangs provide a social support system (Wood & Allyne 2010:102). Wood and Alleyne (2010:102) add that in addition to the family, other social institutions such as schools, church and state all play a role in the formation of gangs, should they fail 'to provide adequately for young people'.

Gangsterism is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained by means of a single theory. In fact, Wood and Alleyne (2010) argue in their literature review on gang theory that the phenomenon is indeed a combination of deteriorating social structure and bonds, low economic status and inequality of opportunity, and status frustration that may lead to gang membership.[9] From a psychosocial perspective, it may be argued then that young people are at risk merely by virtue of being human and displaying the need for identity, status and companionship (Wood & Alleyne 2010:106). NICRO[10] (1990:4), however, argues that while this indeed plays a role, it is complicated by the struggle of youth in poor inner-city areas to break out of the cycle of poverty. This cycle keeps them entrapped, which engenders further feelings of failure and rejection leading to low self-esteem, which in turn makes them vulnerable to searching for power and social recognition within a gang[11] (Daniels & Adams 2010:54). A recent journal article states that children as young as 13 are being recruited into gangs (Maphalala & Mabunda 2014:64).

Although the perspective of this section focuses largely on structural violence, direct violence cannot and must not be discounted when reflecting on power and powerlessness within the context of gangsterism. Coercive power is real within such contexts as many children and young people live in constant

fear for their lives. A recent newspaper article, which gives voice to a teenage girl in Manenberg, attests to this:

> It is a scary place. We are not safe here. We have to constantly watch out for stray bullets and we can't even hang out the washing. You just get caught in the crossfire. (Underhill 2013:2)[12]

This vulnerability and powerlessness is compounded by the fact that the police have often been accused of complicity with the gangs and many communities appear to have lost faith in them (Kinnes 2000:23). The state is viewed as powerless; another news report mentions that even city officials lay the blame at the feet of what they regard as an inadequate justice system which appears to offer no deterrent to such crimes (*eNCA* 2013).[13]

Power through alternative lenses

It was World War I and II that brought the language of 'the powers' back into mainstream theological discourse. Dawn (2001:5; cf. Yoder 1994:139) notes that in trying to find 'language for the horrors of the times' many theologians returned to the concept of the 'principalities and powers to express what went beyond modern psychological explanations'. Gangsterism may surely be viewed as the 'horror of our times' in contexts of urban marginalisation, such as the Cape Flats, and it is clear that powers wielded by this group are complex and cannot be confined to the social, economic or psychological dimension as previously discussed.

The discussion within theological circles regarding the notion of power and the powers, however, is a much contested one and several scholars have criticised the 'standard political conception of power as domination' (Pasewark 1993:4; cf. Dawn 2001:5; cf. Garrett 2003:378). Walter Wink's work, although criticised for its limited understanding of power as purely relating to institutional evil, is nevertheless helpful in analysing contexts of domination and violence.[14] In Wink's understanding (1992:49), the '[p]owers are merely the individual institutions and structures' deployed under what he terms the 'Domination System'. This reality is commonly referred to as 'the world' or *kosmos,* which he defines as 'the human sociological realm that exists in estrangement from God' (Wink 1992:51). Although Wink writes mainly about the Domination System in terms of power and violence, his observation that domination is 'always more than a power relation', and therefore more of a spiritual state of being, is well worth pursuing (Wink 1992:101). Wink argues that the 'principalities and powers' spoken of in the Bible are both the inner (the spirituality of

corporate or government structures and systems) and outer (organisation of power) aspects of organisations:

> Every Power tends to have a visible pole, an outer form – be it a church, nation, or an economy – and an invisible pole, an inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates, and regulates its physical manifestation in the world. (Wink 1984:5)

These structures or systems, therefore, begin to take on a character of their own with 'their own laws, their own trends and tendencies, quite independent of the human agents involved in them' (Wink 1992:78).[15] The latter characteristics are clear in the previous section's discussion of the interrelationship between poverty, power and gangsterism. Gangs appear to wield not only social power, but also appear to entrap and oppress the community's most vulnerable members in ways that render them powerless. This powerlessness is so complete that it allows for their co-option into the power system that is gangsterism. The latter is deeply linked to the relationship between powerlessness and hopelessness, which leads to an acceptance of the status quo, miring the poor of such communities further and further. We are not, therefore, 'contending against mere human beings, but against supra-human systems and forces, against the spirituality of the evil Powers in the invisible order' (Wink 1992:81).

The gangs, as they operate on the Cape Flats, have an insidiously evil institutional character of their own, which reaches beyond the actions of individual gang members and appears to spawn a range of other illicit activities which prey on the most vulnerable in society. The inner spirituality, if you will, of the outer manifestation of gangsterism is one which appears to be driven beyond the surface spoils of economic and social power. Erickson (1993:643) notes that Scripture teaches that evil 'has a status apart from and independent of any individual human will, a subsistence of its own, an organised or structured basis'. This reality is not merely supernatural, albeit nevertheless supernatural[16] – since the *kosmos* is under the control of Satan: 'The whole world is under the power of the evil one' – 1 John 5:19.[17] Garret (2003) highlights the fact that while the New Testament is filled with a

> [V]ocabulary for the powers at work in this world … the terms for power or the powers can refer to heavenly, spiritual realities; to earthly officeholders or structures of power; or typically to both at once.[18] (p. 371)

15. Wink's analysis at the time focused by and large on macro-economic and social systems. However, it is my contention that this framework may be used in an analysis of the issue of gangsterism. Elliot (1987:126), who draws heavily on some of Wink's understandings of power in relationship to poverty, notes that the 'New Testament reminds us that what is ultimately significant is less the power of an institution or system or corporation in an outward sense – what it can do to others; more its inner wells of motivation or consciousness which make it use its power in a given (egocentric) way'.

16. Lest we either fall into the trap of depersonalising the powers to such an extent that they are nothing more than institutional evil, Dawn (2001:21) reminds us that Karl Barth himself rejected the notion that the 'principalities and powers' should be demythologised. Instead, Barth insisted that we take them seriously and rejected the notion that the worldview of the authors of the New Testament was 'magical'.

17. Wink (1992:57) qualifies this text as meaning that the Domination System is 'inspired, sustained and presided over by Satan'.

18. In this article, although I lean heavily on Wink who has a more structural approach to power, I do attempt to intimate that power should be reduced to the structural alone or wholly demythologised.

When these powers become idolatrous and place themselves above God and the whole, they are labelled as demonic.

The system of domination in fact 'teaches us to value power' and Wink (1992:54) further argues that it 'teaches us what to see'. What some community members see in gangsters is often only the surface spoils of social and economic power – they are blinded from the real destructive nature of the power they hold. The phenomenon of gangsterism certainly exercises a hold over communities that may be termed 'demonic' as it is characterised by the kind of fear and violence which prevents the community from enjoying a dignified existence and seeks to unravel the bonds of social trust so needed for its healthy functioning. Christian (2001:128) notes that 'when power encounters poverty, community comes under attack'. Communities on the Cape Flats have already been shaped by an apartheid history that destroyed the social bonds of community and created a fertile breeding ground for this scourge. This is evident both in the history of these communities, as well as in the current context, where community members become co-opted into the gang's ecosystem; therefore they no longer stand in solidarity with the community. Migliore (2008:7) states that in this way '… the condition of powerlessness is also destructive to full human life: our humanity is corrupted when we abuse power; our humanity is diminished when we are rendered powerless'.

The church engaging the powers

Wink's explanation of the Domination System provides us with a theological challenge to recognise systemic evil and engage the powers from this perspective. The situation of powerlessness within which communities find themselves is not ordained by God, it is the powers who are fallen. These systems, when distorted by broken unjust relationships, display the kind of violence, domination, oppression, lack of access, exploitation and moral poverty that is so evident in our communities on the Cape Flats (Myers 1999:87).

This section explores how theology and praxis could meet in engaging the powers in such contexts through the public witness of the church.

Engaging the systems

According to Wink (1992:82), Christ came to proclaim to the powers the advent of the kingdom of God, which 'would transform every aspect of reality, even the social framework of existence' – even the 'powers' of gangsterism. Through the person of Jesus Christ, the coming of the new dispensation of the kingdom of God breaks through and this heralds changed and restored relationships on all levels:

> Through him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood upon the cross – to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, through him alone. (Col 1:20)

Jesus' ministry was centred on proclaiming shalom, a fullness of life which heralds peace, health, wholeness, prosperity,

justice and well-being. In essence, it is peace within all our relationships: with God, with self, with others and with nature.[19] In this way we see that Christ brought a kind of cosmic salvation, not just an individualistic salvation of souls or a reconciliation of enemies (Wink 1994:83).

Christ's incarnation and cross brings the hope of a changed reality for communities such as those on the Cape Flats – not just for individual 'souls'. Bowers Du Toit's findings (2010:441) indicate that when churches in such contexts have a dualistic understanding of salvation and appear to regard salvation in individualistic, personal terms alone these churches show a reluctance to partner with community organisations and initiatives that seek to engage the gangs through public protest or negotiation. Yet, the church can play a key role in such initiatives. Linthicum (2003:132) in fact argues that it was Jesus himself who saw the value of building relational power for the kingdom – relationships and partnerships within communities that could bring about transformational change through organising for community action. In 2012 in Lavender Hill, it was in front of church leaders at a prayer service for peace that gangs were to sign a peace agreement. One of the local ministers noted that:

> [T]hey want the signing to be on the terms of what the people want in their communities and that is why church leaders have organised a prayer service for peace. (SABC 2012)[20]

Subverting the powers

According to Wink (1992:84), unjust social systems can be changed, but only by strategies that address the socio-spiritual nature of institutions. As the church, we therefore need to discern and engage the structures and spirituality of the systems within which our relationships function. In the communities of the Cape Flats this may mean engaging the police and even fellow Christians who are complicit in gang activities. To this end the powers must be subverted. There are many churches on the Cape Flats who have become enthralled by the so-called Gospel of Prosperity. One aspect of this 'gospel' is that it proclaims a message which is built on the elevation of the person of the minister as the ultimate holder of power in a congregation. Ministers are treated like celebrities and this preys on a community in need of an alternative power base to that of gangsterism, yet it engages in similar domination style 'power play' that in turn develops the same feelings of acquiescence and inferiority evidence in relation to gangsters. Some of these pastors have even been rumoured to have been co-opted into gang activities such as smuggling (Underhill 2013). Migliore (2008:51) notes that 'true power is not in domination, but in service of others' – it is power through servanthood (Mk 10:42–45; Lk 22:27). The cross of Christ depicts the greatest subversion of the powers in

a 'free choice of powerlessness that broke the stranglehold of the principalities and powers, and empowered us to love and to bear one another's burdens' (Tillman 2011:513). Churches cannot be seen as being co-opted if they are to subvert the powers of this world;[21] this will only be possible if the dominant understandings of power are subverted through the proclamation of the servant Christ and the unmasking of dominant power discourses.

Proclaiming the 'fallenness' of the powers

A creative tension exists between the subversion of the powers and victory over the powers on the cross. The proclamation of God's power through the cross as overcoming the powers, as displayed in his victory over the principalities and powers, is one which often empowers believers in their daily lives. Wink (1992:141) notes that 'on the cross Jesus took upon himself the violence of the entire system'. In this way 'the cross is the ultimate paradigm of non-violence' and also 'God's victory over the powers' (Wink 1992:143).[22] It is at the cross that Christ disarmed the principalities and powers (Col 2:15):

> If, as it is widely assumed, the principalities and powers in Paul's thought are both supernatural, fallen spiritual beings and also present socio-political, economic and political structures of society, then this passage means that at the cross, Christ in some important way has already begun his victory over the corrupt, unjust structures of human society. Certainly the victory will be completed only at his return, but it has begun at the cross. Since this crucial victory happened at the cross, it must be linked with redemption and salvation. (Sider & Parker 1985:99)

We live within the eschatological tension of the 'already' and the 'not yet' of God's kingdom. Christians are 'to live in the light of the future shalom of God, while taking steps together in humility to display the meaning of God's peace' (Sider & Parker 1985:99). To proclaim the values of God's kingdom over and against the values of the Domination System from the pulpit in such contexts, it becomes necessary to activate the prophetic imagination of the congregation. While local congregations often serve as places of refuge for community members fleeing the constant barrage of violence and social disorder, churches that have been so entrenched in such communities for many years may at times forget that God's intended reality is far different from the ones they find themselves in. Yet, there are those who see things differently. A community worker with a faith-based organisation in the community of Manenberg calls it 'the Lord's special possession'. He notes that 'it's not the place that makes people bad. You can live in Manenberg and be a good and useful person' (Ebersohn 2013:14). God's will for communities on the Cape Flats is that they experience peace, health, wholeness, prosperity, justice and well-being.

The biblical vision of shalom challenges us to 'discern God's vision of how the world should be and that we mean to live towards that vision' within our current contexts' (Brueggemann 1982:39). The eschatological future makes

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19. It should be noted that these relationships exist within the wider political, economic, religious and local/global social systems, all of which were originally ordained by God to protect human life, but are now distorted by the Fall and have become idolatrous and unjust, subordinating 'the people they exist to serve to ends not ordained by God' (Wink 1992:77).

20. The relationship between gangs and community members and even between the community and members of those communities co-opted by the gangs may then bear the possibilities of restoration if processes of restorative justice are entered in to. This will demand time, effort and confession by all parties.

21. This refers rather to Wink's understanding of 'world' as *kosmos* or domination system.

22. Elliot (1987:128) highlights that it is on the cross that we view love absorbing 'the abuses of power'.

demands on the present and calls us to be agents of hope in contexts of hopelessness and powerlessness – it helps us to even reframe narratives of how communities see themselves. The latter is certainly what the aforementioned community worker is doing in affirming the community of Manenberg as 'the Lord's special possession'.

Modelling Kingdom ethics to children and youth

To model and proclaim an ethics of love, peace, freedom and justice that may even address the Powers' hold on the youth in communities gripped by gangsterism is key in mitigating the vulnerability of youth and children in such communities. Dawn (2001:151) argues in this regard that 'one crucial aspect of wielding faithfulness against the powers of our times … is the great sacrifice of caring for children, mentoring them and raising them in the faith'. The church has much to offer if older members of the congregation begin to journey with youth and children who lack healthy familial social support. Such congregation members may even serve the purpose of providing an alternative family where children and youth can receive the kind of love, support and guidance they need to take a safer journey to adulthood (cf. Nel 2000:23). The need for recognition, identity and love are powerful needs, which can be met in faith contexts that are filled with love, grace and an understanding that each child is created in God's image. One of the most powerful messages of the gospel is that people:

> [A]re made in God's image (identity) and are valuable enough to God to warrant the death of the Son in order to restore that relationship (dignity) and to give gifts that contribute to the wellbeing of themselves and their community (vocation). (Myers 1999:115)

This message becomes all the more powerful when children and youth understand that they are created and called for a higher purpose. They are already 'someone'.

Prayer as resistance

Yoder Neufeld (1997:122) points out that 'the powers are vanquished, though the exercise of truth, justice, peace, and liberation, just as they are through the exercise of the word and prayer'. Prayer is certainly advocated for by Wink (1992) who argues that:

> The act of praying is itself one of the indispensable means by which we engage the Powers. It is in fact, that engagement at its most fundamental level, where their secret spell over us is broken and we are re-established in a bit more of that freedom which is our birth right and potential. (p. 297)

Prayer has been used through the ages (and more recently during the struggle against apartheid) to engage the powers. The reason for this is highlighted by Nico Koopman (2014:59) in a recent journal article regarding prayer and the transformation of public life in South Africa: 'The practices of prayer forms our vision for a new society. Prayer also enables us to offer courageous criticism of the wrongs in society.' During an intense time of gang warfare Bowers (2005:186) found that many residents in Lavender Hill drew strength from interdenominational prayer vigils for the community

held during this time. Perhaps it is because these united prayers stood against the power forces of the fragmentation of community and social bonds that they held such power. But perhaps it is also because of the power of the great Comforter, the Spirit, which reminded the community that the powers are overcome (cf. Koopman 2014:61).
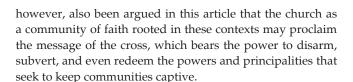
The power of solidarity and hospitality

It is in the death and suffering of Christ that we find a God who identifies with communities experiencing pain and trauma. Ebersohn (2013:21) notes that 'the people of Manenberg feel the need for God. A surprising number of residents attend church regularly'. McMaster (2010:263) in turn lauds the many churches on the Cape Flats who have stood in solidarity with communities by offering hospitality and social support to them in traumatic circumstances. In this way faith communities have communicated the solidarity of Christ with those who suffer, the poor and the marginalised. This hospitality may even confront the powers through its weakness by welcoming the ones most in need of their hospitality and Christ's salvific power – gang members themselves.

Daniels and Adams (2010), in a journal article that gives a significant voice to stories of reformed gangsters, illustrate the fact that religion is often one of the main motivators and sources of support for gangsters abandoning the gang. One gangster recounts that before his conversion, while walking past churches 'he would pause to listen, and would silently ask that churchgoers pray for him too' (Daniels & Adams 2010:52–53). McMaster (2007:288) notes that in interviews with both former gang members and those working with gangs, the willingness of pastors and the church to 'walk with' a gangster is essential in assisting them to 'appreciate or re-appreciate their God-given gift of personhood'.

Conclusion

Gangsterism on the Cape Flats is a complex phenomenon which finds its roots in the sad legacy of apartheid; in a post-apartheid South Africa it has extended its tentacles of power to become a 'power player' in the lives of many communities. In such contexts an urban public theology and the communities of faith it wants to serve, therefore, have an indissoluble task to engage such 'powers' and the dynamic between power and powerlessness. This dynamic has been shown to be complex and exists at multiple levels: psychological, social, economic and spiritual. Walter Wink's analysis of 'power as domination' has been particularly helpful in this analysis as it seeks to explain the inner spirituality of the outward manifestations of the kind of power we find embedded in deviant social organisations such as gangs. In this analysis, the power displayed by gangsterism has even been labelled as 'demonic' in its thirst for domination and exploitation and victimisation of the powerless in such communities. It is, therefore, not an easy task to be a community of faith that actively witnesses against the powers in an urban context as it calls on the church to 'engage the powers' directly. It has,

however, also been argued in this article that the church as a community of faith rooted in these contexts may proclaim the message of the cross, which bears the power to disarm, subvert, and even redeem the powers and principalities that seek to keep communities captive.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

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