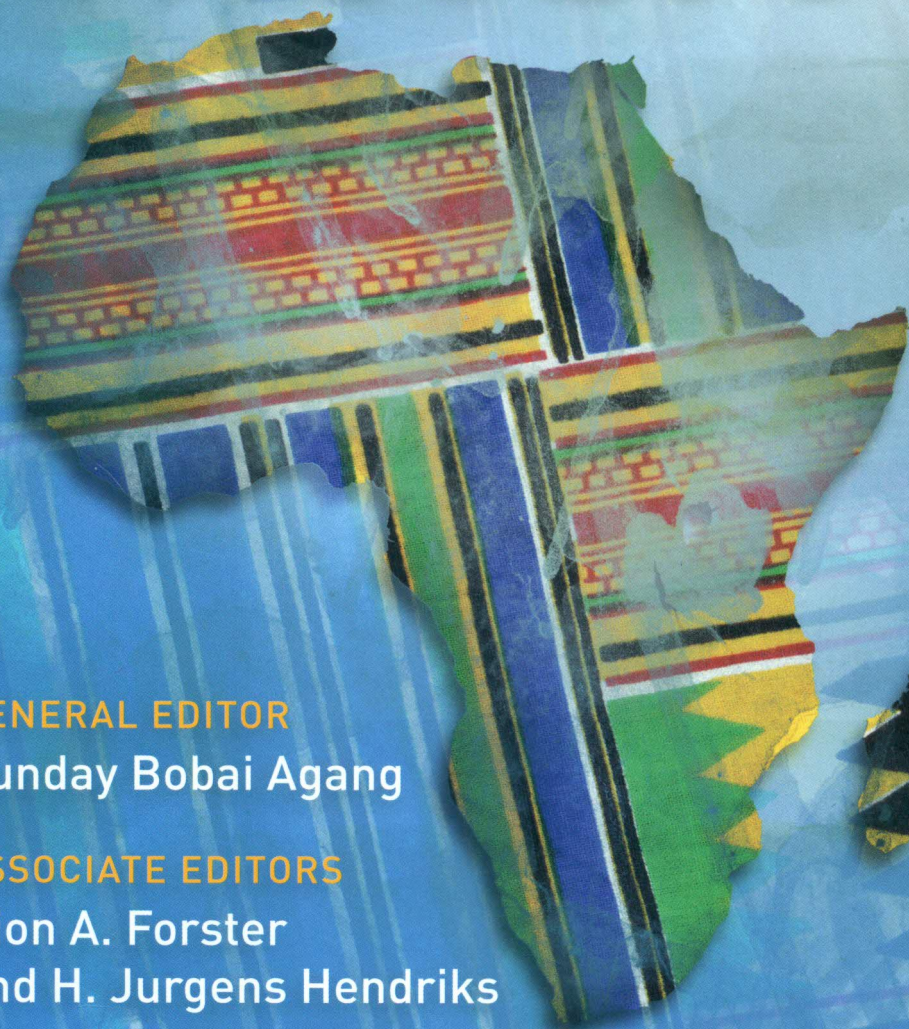


AFRICAN PUBLIC THEOLOGY



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Democracy, Citizenship and Civil Society

Jane Adhiambo Chiroma

Christians who want to contribute to civil society and combat corruption need to know more than just biblical theology and biblical ethics. They also need to understand what civil society is and to have a good grasp of the meaning of democracy and of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Public theology exists to help Christians understand these issues and become informed participants in democratic processes.

It is easy to be sceptical about democracy in Africa given the inequalities, violence, corruption, nepotism, poverty, xenophobia and ethnic politics that have characterized the postcolonial era. The constitutions of African nations may speak of democracy, but in many respects Africa seems to have turned its back on the possibility of a democracy that protects human rights, equality and participation. Yet we should not forget that it was a growing understanding of democratic values that led to the end of the exploitative colonial era and the re-emergence of independent nations in Africa. So we should not dismiss what democracy has to offer. Instead, we should apply ourselves to thinking about the potential of democracy to address Africa's societal ills. This may also involve us in rethinking our own understanding of what democracy means.

Democracy

Democracy is not simply a Western import to Africa. At its root, the word simply means "people power" and refers to the way members of a community

interact to reach agreement on how to handle a particular issue. In this sense, democracy is as old as humankind itself.¹ Forms of democracy have been present in African communities over the centuries, as can be seen in, for example, the *kgotla* system in Botswana, where all members of the community are allowed to speak and decisions are made by consensus.

The concept of *ubuntu*, which was also widespread across Africa, presaged democracy in that it recognized that "I am because we are."² In other words, an individual's source of humanity came from synergy with the community of others. The individual had dignity, and so did the community. Each individual realized that there was a common humanity for which they existed, and that this humanity was defined by the community. This recognition made for a sense of belonging, collective participation, cooperative living and solidarity that captures the true heart of African democracy. It means that a diverse group acknowledges that they need each other to survive.

Today, however, democracy has become a more complicated political concept, open to different interpretations. Some understand democracy as meaning people power in the sense of the dictatorship of the people. In other words, they think that once a majority group has obtained power, it is free to exercise autocratic authority, including limiting the freedom of speech and religion of those not in power. The parliamentary system of government that was left to Africa as a colonial legacy has been seen as encouraging this model. Once a party wins an election, it feels free to govern without regard to the concerns of those who voted for other parties.

Others, however, interpret democracy more broadly and argue that democracy is not just about winning power in an election but is an approach to living in community that prioritizes reason, open-mindedness and fairness, and encourages moderation, cooperation, bargaining, compromise and accommodation. This more egalitarian understanding of democracy, rooted in respect for all, fits well with Christian theology, which holds that because all are created in the image of God, all are entitled to respect, regardless of their race, gender or ethnic origin.

Finally, democracy can be seen as a model in which power is exercised publicly in a cooperative way within the institutions of society or among

1. A. Mafeje, "Theory of Democracy and the African Discourse: Breaking Bread with Fellow Travellers," in *Democratisation Processes in Africa: Problems and Prospects*, eds. E. Chole and J. Ibrahim (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1995), 5–28.

2. John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 141.

particular groups of people.³ This style of democracy is deliberative in the sense that power is distributed equally among all the individuals within a particular institution, so that all stakeholders are also participants who can take part in the deliberation. All participants thus have an equal chance to speak, ask questions and probe during public debates. In this way, they can all work together for the common good and seek to promote economic welfare, cultural stability and institutional effectiveness.

Citizenship

Speaking about democracy as a way of living in community and involving all members of a society inevitably leads to the question of who counts as a member of a community with rights within that community. In other words, who is regarded as belonging to the community and so is entitled to take part in democratic processes. What are the boundaries of the community, and who is included and who is excluded? Who count as citizens?

In general terms, we tend to associate citizenship with location and identify someone as a citizen of a village, a town or a country. However, location is not the sole ground of citizenship, for citizenship also involves identification and emotional attachments. There are many examples of political exiles living in the West who insist that they are still citizens of their African homelands.

A sense of citizenship is also related to ethical and political value systems. Some identify strongly with the values of a particular region, whereas others see themselves as having a more national or even international vision. Some of those in the latter group define themselves as "citizens of the world" and focus on global issues rather than on regional issues.

One question that needs to be addressed here is whether people with different value systems to the majority in a community can still be regarded as citizens of the community. For example, can Muslims be regarded as citizens in a community where the majority are Christian? Our answer needs to be "yes," if they meet the requirements of location and identification with the community. We should not use definitions of citizenship as a way to exclude people who live in our community from participating in decision making in our community.

3. S. Benhabib, "Towards a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. S. Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 69.

Some scholars speak of citizenship as involving a type of abstract contract between an individual and the state. On this understanding, citizenship is basically a legal relationship of the kind expressed in the issuing of passports and identity documents. In other words, it involves entitlements and rights. Others, however, regard citizenship as participatory, involving the relationship of ruling and being ruled. This understanding of citizenship involves both rights and responsibilities. The responsibilities include working to uphold civil society and to hold the government accountable for what it does or does not do for the citizens of a village, town or country. On this understanding, citizenship may be seen as the association between our status and identities as individuals and the lives and concerns of others with whom we share a sense of community. It connotes identity, belonging and how each individual plays his or her part in building a democratic society. Citizenship, therefore, is the way in which we live together and organize our lives together despite our differences.

When it comes to public theology, we should be concerned both with issues of local and regional citizenship and with the wider global political and social realities that face society today. Such engagement is in accordance with the nature of the church, which is both local – “the church at Antioch,” for example – and universal as the physical manifestation of the global kingdom of God. As citizens of local communities, church members should be involved in local initiatives, and as members of the kingdom of God, they should also be involved with global ecological concerns.

Civil Society and the Common Good

When we talk of democracy and society, we often tend to think solely in terms of the government and those governed. But there is another element that we need to consider, and that is the entire network of non-government organizations and community initiatives that constitute civil society. In areas where government is weak, civil society may actually have more power to change situations than any external authority. Examples of the types of organizations involved in civil society are schools, hospitals and public libraries, which are all intended to benefit all members of society, rather than just particular groups within the society. Anti-corruption organizations also have a place in civil society, for they too benefit a whole community.

For a church to be involved in civil society, its members must be prepared to work alongside members of the community who are not church members, and may even represent different religious affiliations such as African Traditional Religion or Islam. In coming together in civil society, the goal is not to debate religious differences but to work together to combat an evil like corruption,

or to accomplish something that will promote the common good, that is, the welfare of the entire community. For example in parts of Nigeria, Christian and Muslim leaders have worked together to calm the hostility spawned by interreligious violence and to create opportunities for Christian and Muslim youth to meet regularly on friendly terms in, say, a sports club. Christian churches have set up refugee camps that offer shelter to Muslim families displaced by religious violence. In South Africa, groups with very different values joined together as co-belligerents to fight apartheid.

Such acts are examples of the church working in civil society in times of crisis. However, it is important that the church also be involved in such activities on a day-to-day basis if we are to demonstrate to our fellow citizens that we are truly concerned for their welfare. Given that public welfare is undermined by corruption, the church has strong reasons to be involved in anti-corruption and social justice initiatives.

Theological Grounds for Involvement in Civil Society

Earlier it was pointed out that democracy is not alien to Africa. It is important to mention that it is also not alien to Scripture and Christian theology, for a number of basic theological themes point to the importance of democratic citizenship.

The first theme is the basic Christian understanding that God is personal and relational. God exists in community, as evidenced by the relationships within the Trinity,⁴ and he reaches out beyond himself to care for all creation. This same attitude should inform Christians' sense of citizenship. We should not be like Cain who denied his responsibility for his brother, but should obey Christ and love our neighbours as ourselves. In doing this, we will build human community (relationships) and see them not as an optional extra but as part of what it means to be like God.

The second theme is that all human beings bear God's image and are endowed with rights and responsibilities at creation. This implies that the human dignity of all should be respected. Democracy is in harmony with this theme, for it values the input of all members of society. As Christians, we should acknowledge that God created our fellow citizens and should object strongly when anyone speaks insultingly of a fellow human being or refers to them as a "cockroach" or an "animal."

Third, Scripture explicitly addresses the question of how we treat those who are different from us, which is a key issue when it comes to democracy and

4. See chapter 4, "The Trinity and Public Theology."

citizenship. In contrast to the acceptance of ethnic violence and xenophobia in many parts of Africa, the Old Testament commands God's people not to "mistreat or oppress a foreigner" (Exod 22:21) but to show love to strangers. This point is further emphasized in the New Testament concept of the truly global community of the church, where people of diverse nations and cultures can live together in peace and find their unity in Christ, who transcends all. Recognition that we are to care for those who are different from us implies that even where Christians are in a majority, they must show consideration for the minorities among them. Following Christ's example, Christians should demonstrate care for the poor, the marginalized and the stranger. If a society is judged by how it cares for its weakest citizens, then Christians should be in the forefront of those caring for them.

Fourth, the Old Testament concept of *shalom*, the Hebrew word for "peace," embraces notions of healing, wholeness and unity of relationships. *Shalom* is threatened by sin and evil. In Africa this threat often comes in the form of corruption that works against the common good of the whole society. As Christians, we proclaim the life, death and resurrection of Christ, which makes redemption and restored harmony possible, and we should be working to accomplish it.

Fifth, Christians are called to be salt and light in every human society that they are part of (Matt 5:13–14). As such, they must be good citizens, coming together with those who are not Christians to work for justice, peace and the common good of all. As good citizens, Christians will live out their values, expressing their future hope of the kingdom of God, and in so doing they will also be working in ways that will help them to accomplish the Great Commission.

Contemporary notions of democracy and citizenship are thus clearly reconcilable with Christianity, and Christians living in Africa can benefit from living as democratic citizens.

Living as Democratic Citizens

Living as a democratic citizen involves listening. This too is biblical virtue (Jas 1:19). Democratic citizens engage with others on the basis of listening before making judgments about particular issues.⁵ They recognize the need to

5. Y. Waghid, "On the Relevance of a Theory of Democratic Citizenship Education for Africa," in *African Democratic Citizenship Education Revisited*, eds. Y. Waghid and N. David (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1–12.

hear what other people have to say and are prepared to do the work required to develop persuasive arguments in favour of or against some action. They seek to apply wisdom gained from experience and to be able to justify their opinions and beliefs to themselves as well as to others. Careful, responsible, loving thought precedes their calls to action. They would agree with Walzer that democracy involves argumentation by citizens to persuade the largest number of their fellow citizens when making decisions.⁶

Democratic citizens do not infringe on other's rights to freedom of expression and being. In other words, they do not coerce others into agreeing with them. They are willing to work alongside others without having to be forced to do so. And they communicate their beliefs in language that is readily understood by other members of the community.

The Church and Democracy

The church in Africa has a mixed record as regards its democratic responsibilities. It has made major contributions to civil society through its provision of education and health care. However, there are also many examples of its failure to uphold democratic values. For example, in apartheid South Africa, some parts of the church failed in their responsibility to listen to all. Instead, they listened to only one voice, the voice of the state, and offered theological justifications for apartheid. Thankfully, this was not true of all South African churches. But even those that joined the South African Council of Churches (SACC) that opposed apartheid seem to have lost their way after apartheid was overthrown.

Prior to 1994, the SACC was an incredibly strong organisation which boasted clarity of vision and theological grounding in its work. It had a strong sense of purpose and direction embedded in an authentic prophetic voice of the oppressed and voiceless. It provided a space for worship and home for the oppressed. It was seen as an instrument and beacon of hope. It enjoyed the support of the grassroots and many ordinary people wanted to be involved in the work of the SACC in different ways. It had a high international profile and was extremely well supported by foreign donors. It had a unifying force for the communities

6. M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 304.

and the churches. After the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, the SACC seemed to lack a clear vision and corporate identity. Its strong and clear theological rationale and ecumenical vision dwindled. It lacked a pastoral plan to deal with new and emerging moral, social, political and economic challenges.⁷

This example is a reminder that we cannot rest on our laurels when it comes to our role as democratic citizens. There is a constant need to adapt to new challenges in our societies and communities.

For a long time, many churches in Africa stood apart from politics, treating it as “worldly” and alien to the church. However, more church leaders now see politics as a space to exercise their citizenship rights and influence society, thus serving as salt and light. This group includes Ugandans like Bishop David Zac Niringiye and Kenyans like Bishop Okullu, who was an outspoken critic of the Kenyan government of his day. In his sermons and publications, Bishop Okullu called for justice and human rights and a multiparty system of governance.⁸ He served on many national and international committees, started a financial company to provide loans for the poor and initiated development projects including educational institutions and agricultural and health programmes. Nor is the role of Christian leaders limited to criticism from outside the government. In 2007, a prominent leader in National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) resigned his church position and won election to a parliamentary seat.

Other examples of Kenyan Christians exercising their democratic rights include the Pentecostal churches calling on their members to exercise their civic right to reject practices that undermine human dignity and exclusion by rejecting the draft Bomas Constitution that provided for abortion and Islamic Kadhi courts. In 2009, a committee of experts again drafted a new constitution for Kenya, and the NCCCK and the Catholic Church again called for the removal of clauses allowing abortion and Kadhi courts and insisted that all religions be treated equally. Christian denominations formed the Kenyan Christian Leaders Constitutional Forum (KCLFC) to hold rallies to oppose the draft constitution.

But not all Christian involvement in politics is praiseworthy. In the 2007 general elections in Kenya, many churches were openly biased along ethnic

7. J. Pillay, “Faith and Reality: The Role and Contributions of the Ecumenical Church to the Realities and Development of South Africa since the Advent of Democracy in 1994,” *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2017): 2.

8. K. Omollo, “Bishop Okullu: A Man of God with a Heart for Justice,” *Standard Media Digital* (13 Feb. 2014).

lines determined by their leaders' ethnic backgrounds. Prominent church leaders gave conflicting prophecies on who would emerge victorious in the elections and even publically anointed candidates to signify that God had chosen them for the presidency. This type of involvement by the church did not make for listening to the voices of others. Nor did it make for peace: instead it contributed to post-election violence, as also did socio-economic grievances and unaddressed historical injustices.⁹ Consequently, several church buildings were burned down, and the church's efforts to step in to mediate the conflict were largely ineffective as the public no longer regarded them as unbiased intermediaries.

The next Kenyan government attempted to regulate religious practices with the aim of monitoring the activities of "preachers who abuse the freedom of worship provided for in the constitution." Currently, all religious organizations in Kenya must be registered and declare their sources of income.¹⁰

It is important that the church does not forfeit its prophetic voice when it becomes involved with issues of democracy and citizenship, as has also happened in Kenya where mainstream churches have been reluctant to criticize corruption in governance. It appeared that things were improving when "the secretary general for National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK) was appointed the head of the steering Committee on Anti-Corruption," but in reality his position made it difficult for him to "point out massive corruption in government independently."¹¹ It could be said that in this case, the voice of the church was co-opted by the state.

These developments point to the fact that churches in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa have gained public recognition and have seen the need to contend against injustice and corrupt practices in the public sphere. However, they also indicate that the church needs to seek a clear understanding of its role when it comes to involvement in national democratic governance. It needs a solid grasp of the principles of democracy and citizenship if it is to function as salt and light in the world and not be seen merely as another political group promoting the interests of its own members rather than of the whole society.

9. C. Kenga, "The Role of Religion in Politics and Governance in Kenya" (Thesis submitted to the University of Nairobi for an MA in International Studies, 2014), 6.

10. Kenga, "Role of Religion in Politics," 7.

11. Kenga, 6.

Promoting an Understanding of Democracy

It seems that our concern at present should not be whether democratic citizenship is needed in Africa (it undoubtedly is) but whether it is possible to expedite its development on the African continent so that the distracting language used by supposedly democratic Christian leaders does not undermine it.

It is simplistic to assume that speaking about democracy is enough to reform the authoritarian and repressive culture that has established itself in Africa. To make this assumption is to discount the fact that the only political reality many African Christians have known is one where there is no such thing as multiparty democracy, but instead rule by autocrats and rigged elections. For many in Africa, the main interest of an election is the bribes and free food handed out by those who are courting their votes. The only way to actually change leaders or end corruption seems to be yet another coup – even though the new leaders may prove to be as corrupt as the old.

The emergence of democratic citizenship in Africa must thus be linked to learning to think differently about authoritarian politics and oppressive practices. Church leaders across Africa need to speak out against political elites who manipulate religion and Africans' sense of community (*ubuntu*) by seeking to imply that people of other religions or of other ethnic groups have no voice in local or national politics. We need to be actively refuting wrong understandings of belonging and instead proclaim that civil society requires that everyone in the community be accepted as a member of the community, and that everyone is entitled to the same democratic rights as every other member. In other words, we need to teach what democratic citizenship entails.

Where can this much needed citizenship education be provided? I would argue that it can be provided in our schools, in our churches and in our communities.

In our schools

One step towards promoting a greater understanding of democracy as defined in this chapter is to look at its applications outside the political sphere. One key place where the young can learn about democratic values is in the education system. There democratic values should be taught by example. Teachers imbued with such values would not seek to exercise dictatorial authority but would treat children and their parents with respect. Rather than expecting students to do no more than memorize and repeat what they are told, they would seek to inculcate critical thinking skills so as to enable future citizens to weigh public policies and the arguments put forward by various groups in society.

A democratic approach to schooling would teach students to work together for common goals while also showing respect for those whose ways of life are different from their own, thus preparing them to work together in civil society. Such participation of all members of a community on equal terms is an essential element of democracy. Students should be encouraged to have a commitment to meaningful communication with others and develop an interest in learning from all those they meet. Democracy can neither operate nor develop if people from different groups live in separate worlds and never interact. Where this is the case, people hear only the views of those who agree with them and remain ignorant of the wisdom, and the needs, of those in other groups.

Given that students may live in communities where they are not exposed to great diversity, it can be helpful to promote a curriculum that exposes students to the histories and cultures of various groups of people, including major religious and cultural groups as well as marginalized ethnic, racial, gendered and social minorities. Such teaching can contribute to a sense of respect for others who are different from them and yet occupy the same citizenship space as they do. Students can be encouraged to use their imagination to understand others' feelings, experiences, despair, suffering and oppression, and so to develop compassion that can lead to civic reconciliation.

A democratic approach to schooling would also take pains to ensure that students learn about their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Education should prepare the young to participate in public debate about issues like corruption and ways to counter it. They should also learn about the key political institutions and systems within their country and develop a respect for law and justice and what it means to seek the common good of all citizens.

This education in democracy should continue at all levels, from the primary school through high school and on to university. It should ensure that all students in the education system have a sense of belonging as regards how they learn, why they learn and what they learn. As they learn how they as citizens can work together to address societal ills in their own communities, they will also develop an awareness of their potential influence in the region, the nation and the world.

In our churches

It should not be forgotten that education does not only take place in schools and universities. It also takes place in the home and in our churches. Thus parents and churches too should teach the democratic and Christian values of respect for others and of cooperation for the common good. Those who speak

out against corruption should be supported, for to stay mute is to become part of the society that encourages corruption.

At the same time, churches should not be run like dictatorships, as is sadly often the case. A church cannot teach democracy if the leader is unwilling to listen to others. So churches need to work to encourage communication and cooperation between their leaders and their members, between their members in the church, and between church members and other members of society in pursuit of the common good. Churches are places where people can learn that the democratic value of respect means we can work with people with whom we do not agree about everything.

While it is true that the purpose of the church is personal and societal transformation, we need to note that God does not coerce people into living the way he wants them to live. Instead, he reaches out to them in love, hears their cries and seeks to persuade them to follow him. If we are to be like God, we must do the same. We must respect the right of others to disagree with us and not dehumanize those who disagree with us. This position fits with that of Dewey, who says that democracy requires "a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder."¹²

One other function that churches may fulfil in a democratic system is seeking to provide true information to counteract the propaganda put out by governments and the fake news distributed by both governments and their opponents. Church leaders have networks of information outside the traditional media that are controlled by politicians, and they can use church networks and media to share details about the actual state of affairs. However, in doing this church leaders must exercise great care. On the one hand they must maintain independence of the government, and on the other they must not simply become voices for the opposition. Christian leaders need to exercise great discernment and caution when distinguishing true facts from the fake news that is so widely spread.¹³

12. J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

13. For more on fake news, see chapter 23, "The Media."

In our communities

Friendship is an important element in promoting democratic citizenship. When people are bound by ties of friendship, they will interact more freely and be more willing to communicate their own opinions and to hear the views of others, even if they disagree with them. Friendship is thus an important basis for dialogue.

In civil society, we should thus endeavour to create civic spaces where similarities rather than differences are emphasized. For example, in Nigeria some Christians established sports clubs for youth. Young peoples shared love of sport drew them together, and ethnic and religious differences were no longer the focus. By creating this type of civic space, the differences of others who might be considered threatening are relativized, and opportunities for dialogue are created. The participants learn how to coexist in civic spaces, which is a basic prerequisite for democracy.

Note that this is not the same thing as trying to force everyone to assimilate and adopt the same identity. The participants in these interactions retain their own identities and their own cultures and religions. But they learn to work together for the common good.

Conclusion

In this chapter, democratic citizenship has been discussed in terms of relationships and associations, and not simply as a method of counting votes and determining whose vote matters. The type of democracy that will transform Africa values relationships, communication, listening, partnership and support and does not dismiss those who are different from us.

Democracy and citizenship are closely related to active citizenship in plural African culture and involve respect for human dignity and the rule of law. These should be of concern not only to political theorists but also to theologians, churches, educational professionals and ordinary Christians, for all have a role to play in management and decision making in their communities and in the wider society.

Public theology with democratic lenses can help the church to engage in deliberation about social inequalities such as poverty and corruption. Such engagement will become a culture that encourages equality among all people regardless of their colour, gender, sex and ethnic background.

Questions

1. How does understanding democracy and citizenship guide Christian involvement in public concerns like corruption?
2. How are democracy and citizenship embedded in the Bible?
3. Identify ways in which democratic citizenship can counter societal ills you are aware of.
4. Explain, giving examples, what your church can do to promote democracy.

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