

*“It is better to build a bridge...” Using the praxis cycle of Holland and Henriot in discerning an African Reformed missional ecclesiology<sup>1</sup>*

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**ABSTRACT**

Reformed churches in Africa need bridge-building, uniting ecclesiologies. From the challenges on local congregational, but also at denominational level, it seems as if ecclesial apartheid (sadly) remains. From an (Southern) African Reformed perspective, I argue however that all is not lost. The question is how can our different theologies bridge these gaps? In this respect, the current conversations on “missional” and “emergent church” may be signs of hope. These notions can play a key role in bridging this gap between an ecclesiocentric, colonial ecclesiology and postcolonial ecclesiologies, which discern the *Missio Dei* afresh in the contemporary context. In my recent doctoral research I took up this challenge and used an adapted or what I prefer to call a “remixed” version of a praxis methodology to develop postcolonial (Southern) African missional ecclesiologies. I reflect on the usage of this methodology in order to make proposals on its relevance in the wider discourse on developing African missional ecclesiologies.

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1 This article has come a long way. It is based on my doctoral research in Missiology which was finally completed in 2013 (Nel 2013). An earlier version of this article was also presented at an international conference in Utrecht, The Netherlands, 21-25 June 2010, at the Protestant Theological University. The theme for the conference was, “Being surprised by God: Embodied Ecclesiology in Local Contexts”. Financial support from the Unisa, College of Human Sciences is acknowledged with gratitude.



## 1. ON BRIDGING THE GAP

Any African missional ecclesiology must engage one of the bitterest legacies of colonialism - ecclesial *apartheid*. In particular, a racially segregated (Southern) African Reformed church will continue to fail playing any meaningful role in the deep transformation of its contemporary and future contexts. This article contends that fundamental to our tolerance of this impotence, is the persistence of a colonial ecclesiology, which goes through as *gereformeerd* (“reformed”). The key question in this article is *how* we are to discern an appropriate African Reformed missional ecclesiology. The challenge for African Reformed churches is not about better marketing; it is about a way of doing theology, in particular postcolonial theology. It is about discernment.

Frans Weijssen (2005:129) argues convincingly that a different way of doing theology developed from the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EAWOT) in response to dissatisfaction with Eurocentric theological epistemology and methodology<sup>2</sup>. He surmises that the gap between the practitioners of two forms of theology, what he calls, the “academics” and “activists”, has widened over the past few decades. This dichotomy is an oversimplification. However, it does highlight a deepening of the divides. Is it possible to bridge these gaps?

One of the experiences in ministry that sparked my interest in this quest for discerning a specific missional, which I would qualify as a postcolonial<sup>3</sup>, African ecclesiology (Nel 2013:2-3), relates to a telephone call I received as a minister in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), in the urban context of Riverlea, Johannesburg. A secretary at a *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (NGK) (“Dutch Reformed Church”) congregation, in one of our neighbouring presbyteries, called me and explained that they met two families from different URCSA congregations who relocated from another province. These families wanted her now, to request their membership certificates, in order for them to join this NGK congregation - after all, she continued, they are now staying in “their” congregational boundaries.

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2 See also Torres and Fabella (1976); Bosch (1991:423-425; 432f).

3 The term “postcolonial” is used in a specific way in my work. I agree with various scholars (Sugirtharajah 2003:15-16; Kim 2007:162; McEwan 2009:17-26) who makes a useful distinction between “post-colonial” (with a hyphen) which indicate “a chronological moment when many of the West’s formerly colonised ‘nations’ became politically independent” (Kim 2007:163) and, on the other hand, “postcolonial” (without the hyphen) i.e., “continuity with the anticolonial movement ... a critical stance against colonialism in the past and its ideological rhetoric (colonial discourse) that is still operative in the present” (Ibid).

She didn't know any contact details of the URCSA congregations where they were coming from and this was the reason why I was contacted. I thought of previous collegial conversations with the particular minister of this congregation, but also, with other colleagues from the NGK, in the context of the current re-unification process amongst the various racially segregated Reformed churches. In these conversations, we as black ministers from URCSA, related to our white colleagues in the NGK, the new (vulnerable) situation that many of our URCSA congregations now face in the aftermath of the well-known political system of Apartheid, which in our view, was a particular expression of colonialism<sup>4</sup>. In our experience, our younger professional members and especially their children, who now after the abolishing of apartheid rightfully have the means and freedom to relocate to the former all-white residential areas. This means that they move "out" of the existing URCSA congregational boundaries. In the mean time, however, our preliminary observations were that the white NGK members relocate elsewhere<sup>5</sup>. So, seemingly, on the one hand this white NGK (numerically shrinking) congregation was finally "open" to receive black members, yet on the other hand, though, it seems some, highly mobile URCSA members were discontinuing their church membership. Some, as my story indicates, opt to assimilate into the NGK<sup>6</sup> and it seems that, at least this white congregation welcomes this movement. For these receiving congregations often, this migration by the black members into the exclusively white church is indicative of it now being a successful *missional* church that has (thankfully!) transcended its racist past.

In the church re-unification conversations, we discussed the implications of this mobility, and dreamt of how, specifically on the basis of the Confession of Belhar, i.e.,

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4 In my thesis, I show how the system of apartheid is to be seen as a particular expression of internal colonialism (Nel 2013:26f.; 69-71).

5 Whilst one could see this migration as the ecclesial face of the "white-flight", this view however needs to be substantiated by more research. This was however not the focus of my project and therefore not of this article. My interest was with the impact of the migration of black members on the specific Reformed congregations, from black townships. My understanding of the term "black" (and "white") here is informed by the work of Biko (2006[1978]:96-108) and Boesak (2009:48-62) in an inclusive praxis sense, and is not simplistically, to be confused with the designations by the Population Registration Act No 30 of 1950 or recent post-apartheid legislation, like the Employment Equity Act No 55 of 1998.

6 Some members also migrate to Pentecostal and Charismatic churches (Hendriks 2003:10), whilst others simply leave the institutional church altogether. There isn't however any specific quantitative studies available currently, done by URCSA itself, on these shifts of membership. My (perhaps anecdotal) observations here are simply based on my ministry experience in the urban context of Johannesburg, Gauteng.

in the spirit of unity, reconciliation and justice different congregations, (including white NGK congregations in these suburbs), could partner with the congregations in the black townships to locate these members or possibly explore new expressions of bridge-building or *uniting* congregations in order to address this new situation<sup>7</sup>.

Upon receiving this telephone call, however, I was not sure whether I had to be hopeful or distraught. The questions kept haunting me. Is this what “missional church” is all about? Is a “new” missional ecclesiology to be discerned along the same (apartheid) boundaries, where white suburban congregations, now struggling for institutional survival, and therefore are under pressure to expand numerically, to be at the expense of the poor and black church, back in the townships? Did we transcend our ecclesial apartheid? It seemed as if another crucial set of questions needed to be asked together, in order to take the scholarly discourse about missional ecclesiology to be discerned further than the mere *angst* over institutional survival on both sides of the divide. It is also not merely about the transfer of membership certificates, almost exclusively from poor, black congregations in townships to rich, white congregations in the suburbs. A key question it seems was however how to bridge these gaps by probing the deeper reasons for these movements of families, in particular the younger, mobile generations. For the particular churches from the Dutch Reformed tradition in (Southern) Africa, this question needed to be engaged theologically by engaging the Confession of Belhar on the imperatives for ecclesial re-unification, reconciliation and justice, or what I simply call, building bridges in a new context. We needed to ask how is this physical mobility is tied to or influencing a deeper mobility, in terms of their understandings of faith, church and witness? Whilst from my immediate need as a minister, this was a critical moment of discernment for the congregations in the black townships and for re-unification of (Southern) African Reformed churches; it also raised the broader critical questions for an appropriate (Southern) African missional ecclesiology - beyond the colonial-shaped, church boundaries. The official system of apartheid was abolished in 1994, but ecclesially it seemed that a new expression of colonialism was still to be in place. This experience therefor called for a broader, *postcolonial* missional conversation.

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7 See Esterhuizen & Marais (2007:116-121) and Z.Nel & Setshedi (2007:130-134) for reflections on the unification of congregations and presbyteries, within the struggles for unification, healing and reconciliation of the broader Dutch Reformed Church cluster of churches in Southern Africa.

## 2. A BROADER MISSIONAL CONVERSATION

These experiences (and unanswered questions) are neither unique to the urban context, the various reformed churches, nor to (Southern] Africa. A growing percentage of younger generations enthusiastically explore new, exciting possibilities that global and local transformations offer<sup>8</sup>. The phenomenon of members and more pertinent younger, mobile generations migrating within, between, or even out of congregations and denominations is not new<sup>9</sup> and could relate to many factors<sup>10</sup>. The concept “missional” therefore has gained currency, especially since the publication of *Missional Church: A Vision for sending the church in North America*

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- 8 From a North American context, Tony Jones (2008) and Kinnaman (Kinnaman & Lyons 2007) are some of the leading voices who also highlight this membership mobility and institutional decline in their context. Jones himself became one of the well-known personalities, alongside Brian McLaren, Tim Keel, Karin Ward, Doug Paggit and others, in what became known as the “Emerging Church Movement” (ECM). The initiative called Fresh Expressions, from the Anglican Church in the United Kingdom, as well as the work of theologians like Tobias Faix (2007) and Henk de Roest (2008; 2010) from Western Europe, should also be noted. Hence we see more discourses on the question of how to understand and address the challenges raised by newer (mobile) generations to the mission of the church.
- 9 Earlier quantitative studies, at least in the South African context, confirm a decisive transfer of membership from mainline churches to what they would call, “independent” churches (Froise 2000; Siaki 2002; Hendriks 2003). In 1998 already, Hendriks and Erasmus established the Unit for Religious Demographic Research, which aimed at tracing crucial demographic changes affecting communities as well as congregations (Hendriks 2003:5-6). They conclude that a key and typical feature is this numerical decline of mainline churches, parallel to the growth of African Independent churches and, what they call, “Pentecostal/Charismatic” churches. They predict: ‘We expect these trends to continue in South Africa with a rise in the typical America-oriented Independent Churches (the Pentecostal/Charismatic category)’ (Hendriks and Erasmus 2001:29-30).
- 10 A publication by the Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research (Kritzinger JJ 2002) identifies various relevant issues in the (Southern) African context, namely, the growing religious pluralism, declining official membership in mainline denominations over against rising membership in the African Initiated/Independent Churches (AIC’s), African Renaissance and the New Partnership for Africa’s development (NEPAD), the HIV/AIDS pandemic and, linked to this, the growth of Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC’s), ecological concerns, racial and cultural polarization, and crime. Missiologists and church leaders under the leadership of Hendriks within the Network for African Congregational Theology (NetACT), a network of theological institutions in sub-Saharan Africa, largely agree with this assessment (Hendriks 2004:15-17; 72-102; 2012:12-135; 2013:40-58).

(Guder 1998). After this we saw in South Africa too an upsurge of publications<sup>11</sup> and online sources<sup>12</sup> of reflection on “missional” ecclesiology or “emergent”<sup>13</sup> church.

No church community can ignore these realities. In his inaugural address, a little more than 10 years ago, as professor in Practical Theology at the University of Stellenbosch, Hendriks warned tellingly that the various Reformed churches in particular (!) are unaware of what he called the “gravity of their situation” (2003:10). The crucial question for this conversation is indeed: How do we, as a particular cluster (family) of African Reformed churches, respond to these shifts? The challenge is indeed not simplistically about how ministers can be better marketers - but whether these churches are able to understand, interpret and learn from the seemingly different ways in which these younger (mobile) generations re-imagine faith, church and witness. The aim of this *broader* conversation is to discern God’s redemptive presence for today, for a particular faith tradition, with a particular history, faced with pertinent challenges in (Southern] Africa. This conversation is broader than a repeat of the Northern and Western focus, on postmodern questions. This new reality unfolding today is a particular post-colonial<sup>14</sup> context, and it poses important questions to the prevailing missiological understandings of what it means

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11 See amongst others Hendriks 2004; Dames 2007:34-53; Wepener 2008:206-219, Müller 2008:53-65; Niemandt 2007, 2010:397-413; M.Nel 2011; M.Nel & Ungerer 2011

12 Various prominent South African blogs (<http://mycontemplations.wordpress.com>, <http://allaboutcori.blogspot.com>, <http://www.futurechurch.co.za>, [www.emergentafrica.com](http://www.emergentafrica.com), [www.nextchurch.wordpress.com](http://www.nextchurch.wordpress.com), etc) also focus on discussing and defining missional ecclesiology, whilst others like, <http://www.spirituality.org.za/blogger.html>, <http://khanya.wordpress.com>, <http://stephenmurray.wordpress.com> are broader in scope, but they also deal at various points, on this topic.

13 It however need to be noted that the concept “emergent” or “emerging” is not new and preceded this predominantly North American usage. The first EATWOT publication, edited by Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella, was initially entitled, *The Emergent Gospel* (1978), whilst the publication of Johann Baptist Metz, *Jenseits bürgerlicher Religion. Reden über die Zukunft des Christentums* (1980), was translated in English and published as *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois world* (1981). Bosch also spoke of “an emerging missionary ecclesiology” (1991:372) or sometimes simply refers to “emerging ecclesiology”.

14 Whilst I simply use the term “post-colonial” here, I concede that the current transformations also intersect with what others would name “post-modern”, “post-Christendom” or “post-racial”. Detweiler and Taylor (2003:31-58), speak of a ‘post-national, post-literal, post-scientific, post-technological, post-sexual, post-racial, post-human, post-traumatic, post-therapeutic, post-ethical, post-institutional, and post-Christian era.’ This is overstating the point. The meanings and context of the usage “post”, in these various concepts, are not the same and cannot be used interchangeably.

to be church. How are we, as particular, uniting African Reformed churches then to understand and respond meaningfully, but more pertinently, missiologically, to these transformations? This question is therefore both missiological and ecclesiological and touches on matters of ecclesial transformation in a particular way.

### 3. ECCLESIAL TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS *MISSIONAL* CHURCH?

From a missiological perspective, inspired by Bosch's notion of an "emerging, ecumenical paradigm in mission" (Bosch 1991:368f.) and challenged by my ministry experience, I share this agenda and passion for ecclesial transformation towards a missional church. However, the key challenge is to clarify the meaning of the concepts we use, within a specific African context. After presenting an overview of the key quantitative data on the movements of church members, Hendriks also argues convincingly that this situation calls for "transformation" and what he calls "transformation management" (Hendriks 2003:11-12) if churches want to be reckoned with as a "church of the future"<sup>15</sup>.

Hendriks is explicit that "transformation" is to be understood in terms of seven priority areas that, as he notes, correspond with the broader literature from the "Western Established Churches" and the "Gospel and Our Culture" movement<sup>16</sup> in the USA and other continents. What is of interest is referred to in one of his priority areas, which in my view gives perspective to his other priority areas. This perspective holds the promise to address the challenges raised in my opening story. In describing this priority area for ecclesial transformation, Hendriks explains,

The church of the future focuses on the community's needs. In other words, this is where a *missional* ecclesiology, a mission-oriented church concept, redirects the church's focus away from its devotion to self-maintenance to the need around it, the need of its neighbour (2003:12-emphasis added).

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Yet, the discourses that they represent are central to the questions I ask within a specific context.

- 15 The notion of *The future of the church, the church of the future*, was appropriately the title of the inaugural lecture of Hendriks as professor in Practical Theology (2003).
- 16 See his footnotes 7 & 8. The "Gospel and Our Culture Network" was started formally in 1992 in the United Kingdom, inspired by the work of missiologist and Bishop Leslie Newbigin. The aim of this movement, which spread rapidly over the Western world, was to reflect critically on the witness of the gospel in a predominantly Western cultural context.

In my mind, the challenge he raises here and which he links to “recent” Northern and Western ecclesiological discourses, is however rooted much deeper back and would therefore, point in a different direction. These processes indeed draw inspiration from the wells of the earlier works of Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, but also missiologists like Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch, who served in India and South Africa respectively. JNJ Kritzing (2007) also makes the critical point that the concept “missional” itself is not so new. The journal of the Southern African Missiological Society (SAMS), started by Bosch in 1968, was first called “Missionaria”, but changed in 1973 to “Missionalia” (JNJ Kritzing and Saayman 2011:110). However, the theological implications of this term were not discussed at the time, although concepts like *sending* (“mission”), *sendeling* (“missionary”), etc., were already hotly contested and vigorously debated in the South African context and Bosch himself was evidently aware of these contestations (Bosch 1991:226-230; 302-313). Why and how would I then continue to use the term “missional”, given this contestation and the fact that the church in which I serve as a minister, formerly known as the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), and now the URCSA, stopped using concepts like *sending* and *sendeling* in the late 1970s and replaced them with *getuienis* (“witness”) (Botha 1986:35)?

I agree with this shift within the former DRMC. It came as a result of the deep scars left by colonial mission and social crusades, but more so, the fundamental theological flaws inherent in its usage (Bosch 1979:12-21; Saayman 2010:6-8). The question raised by my introductory story is however, whether the concept or the notion of *getuienis* (as introduced) in the DRMC and URCSA, is still able to articulate God’s liberating presence and movement in the face of a post-apartheid, but neo-colonial context, and whether, since the introduction of this new term, it was able to do so at all on a local, congregational level? It would seem that the sound Barthian theology behind the shift in the concepts (Bosch 1979:170; 1991:389-393), in particular the shift from an ecclesiocentric towards a Trinitarian missiology (Bosch 1979:240), has largely been missed at a local congregational level in the former DRMC and later URCSA<sup>17</sup>. Despite the efforts from the various denominational functionaries and

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17 In this respect see Botha (1986:38f), who serves for many years as full time secretary of the Witness Commission of the DRMC and now URCSA and stated this reality in 1986, but also suggests the reasons for it, as fundamentally related to the missionary ecclesiology of the NGK. I agree with Botha, but my observation is that not much has changed since 1986. I also refer in my thesis (Nel 2013:298-306) to the work of the Commission for Restructuring within the former DRMC and URCSA, where it was in particular Dames who played a key role. However the assessment of this commission’s work is not the focus of this article.

structures<sup>18</sup>, fit seems to me that most of the ordinary members in congregations the popular meaning of the word *getuïenis* has remained confined to individual storytelling, traditional evangelism programmes and outreach campaigns organised by enthusiastic individuals and committees, within congregations. The underlying colonial edifice has remained intact. In the URCSA context, *getuïenis* has largely remains the verbal witnessing of individuals, not the transformation of congregations or the reshaping of congregational or social boundaries. In the history of the various Dutch Reformed churches, it remained the well-known and vocal prophetic witness of individual personalities, but also a small, yet influential dissident movements, influenced largely by South African Black Theology, within and beyond the church, that have embodied the shift. Officially, the particular tradition within church meetings led to the writing and “acceptance” of various faith statements or even confessions<sup>19</sup>. These important influences were correctly expressed as a “prophetic voice” or, a “prophetic church”, however, the question remains whether these initiatives did flow self-consciously from congregational transformation or from influential individual members – often professional theologians or articulate ministers – as well as from dissident movements, functioning mostly independent of and sometimes in opposition, to the institutional churches.

It is within this context then that the notion of ecclesial transformation towards “missional church” – focusing on the local context – was introduced<sup>20</sup> in Southern

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18 Cf Skema van Werksaamhede van die NGSK (1986:452-453; 455; 489-490) and (1990:473-478; 504-531), which shows, amongst other study reports, how the Synod of this church also initiated in 1986, an *Ad Hoc Kommissie vir Bedieningsstrukture* (“Ad Hoc Commission for Ministry Structures”), which were to study the restructuring within the context of unification. JJ Kritzinger’s *’n Missionêre Bediening-op weg na strukture vir ’n jong kerk* (JJ Kritzinger 1979), although still steeped in an older missionary paradigm, also shows the earlier search within the NGKA for a different expression of ministry at congregational level. The question however remains whether these efforts prepared us for the challenges today.

19 In this regard I refer to the Belhar Confession and the Accra Declaration that, although influenced by various movements within the institutional churches, were in their final form drafted and adopted by ecclesial meetings. This particular process stands in the European confessing tradition, which hails from the 16th century onwards. Whilst I remain part of a church which subscribes to this tradition, my question here is not the process, but whether the shift in the terminology has fundamentally shaped our ecclesiology and praxis, expressed also as congregations.

20 Whilst the notion of “missional church” was introduced as a new phase in the focus of Practical Theology on congregations, formerly known as *gemeentebou* (“Congregational upbuilding”), this new emphasis also drew selectively on the insights from Missiology and, to a lesser degree, from Systematic Theology. Through the influences of those

Africa, as a possible answer to the transformation of the local faith community (or congregation) in the new context (Hendriks 2004; Dames 2007; Van der Watt 2010; Niemandt 2010, 2012). However, as Saayman (2010:13) shows, this new “church conversation”<sup>21</sup> remained a Northern affair. It remained a movement of diverse conversations, primarily via various informal gatherings, social networking platforms and publications, but also to what they call, “church experiments” that address questions of church, theology and culture, especially in what is framed as the postmodern context<sup>22</sup>.

I agree in this respect with Saayman’s (2010:5-16) basic argument and his warning that the term *missional* relates in this usage specifically to what he calls its ‘very introverted countenance’ (:14) and, as indicated, an explicit ‘postmodern North Atlantic culture.’ (:15) This argument, in my view, however does not totally disqualify the usage of the term. Saayman is not against the usage of terms, which include the Latin root “*missio*”, or “sending” (in Afrikaans), irrespective of its ambiguous origins and usage. Like Bosch (1979:239-240; 1991:289-293), he argues that the term “*missio*”, in spite of its defective colonial usage later, is rooted in Trinitarian relations, where the Father sent the Son, and the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit to continue the work of caring, healing, saving and loving the world. The Latin notion of *missio Dei* (God’s mission), used since the 1950s, invokes this meaning to indicate the triune God’s movement to and on behalf of His world, and this has been expressed ever-since, especially in ecumenical documents. I would therefore opt for a critical, constructive engagement with our colleagues from Practical Theology, while pointing out (with Saayman) that the meaning and the concept itself is certainly not new within ecumenical discourse. In speaking of *missional* church, then, I use it as a bridge which can connect the developments in missionary ecclesiology, influenced by the various emerging theologies, specifically now to the theory and practice of

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practical theologians who focussed on *gemeentebou*, South African congregations within the white, Afrikaans Dutch Reformed churches, quickly accepted these developments and were vigorously calling other congregations, including black ones to follow suit. The assumption seems to be that these theological frameworks, contextual analyses and their practical implications can seamlessly be applied to an African context.

- 21 Gibbs and Bolger (2005:29) show that most participants in these developments prefer to be known as a “conversation”, instead of a movement, church or denomination. This is because of the inherent diversity of expressions, but also of contexts and views.
- 22 See [www.emergentvillage.com](http://www.emergentvillage.com). Gibbs and Bolger simply state, “Emerging churches embody their way of life within postmodern culture” (2005:44). Within the South African context, the subtitle of Niemandt’s publication on dreaming for a new reality of being church is, *Geloofsgemeenskappe in pas met ’n postmoderne wêreld* (“Faith communities in step with a postmodern world”) (2007).

local congregations. That will be how I use this term. Whilst the use of the term *getuienis* represented in my own URCSA context, an important and necessary break with the (now largely defunct) Afrikaans term *sending* (“mission”), as argued for, it simply did not connect to the stories and journeys, i.e., the praxis of congregations, as they tried to discern their calling collectively in new contexts. I understand and critically utilise the concept “missional” then, to be the adjective which qualifies that the church, and specifically a congregation, is by its very nature, i.e., at the core of its identity, to be conceptualised, structured and continuously transformed by the fact that it exists by virtue of the triune God’s mission towards, in and with the world. In this respect, I argue that this concept can expand and deepen the understanding of a concept like *getuienis* to suggest fundamentally more than verbal storytelling, evangelistic or social action campaigns or church programmes initiated by individuals, activists or certain groups, commissions and agencies, even when these are called “ministries” within the church. This denotes a particular qualifying self-understanding or identity, an overall intention that permeates the very being of the church in all its different expressions.

In doing this, we should therefore identify at least two interfaces of this discourse. *Firstly*, it seems that this discourse takes place between or better, bridge the gaps between two (or more) distinct – but seemingly convergent – theological disciplines or theological orientations. Within the discipline of Practical Theology in South Africa, since the timely challenge from Hendriks, there has therefore been a welcome flourishing of output related to “missional church” and “missional ecclesiology”. I referred to these in earlier sections. However, I would suggest that the work from Systematic Theology (Mofokeng 1983; Durand 2002; Phiri & Nadar 2005; Jonker 2008), but also black and African theologians, which in the EATWOT usage of the term, continue to remain critical for a study of any (Southern) African ecclesiology. *Secondly*, the flourishing of output, specifically in Practical Theology, relates on another level to the many high profile and newer ecclesial formations, “church experiments”, research bodies, as well as networks. A key consideration, taking serious the challenge by Saayman, is however whether the new challenges we face and the responses to it are related and coherent in terms of the aforementioned scholarly discourses that have been and are (still) taking place amongst related disciplines. Further, I would ask, whether it is relevant to address the challenges raised in my (our) stories, i.e., serving the on-going post-colonial transformations impacting our communities, in relation to God’s action. What is needed is therefore to push through to a postcolonial theological practice in order to discern a (Southern) African missional ecclesiology.

#### 4. TOWARDS AN (SOUTHERN) AFRICAN POSTCOLONIAL THEOLOGICAL PRACTICE OF DISCERNMENT

In the previous section, I identified three key considerations, namely firstly the bridge between different theological disciplines, secondly, to respect the body of knowledge build up over many decades of discourse and thirdly the crucial challenge of understanding our current transformations, impacting local communities in relation to God's own action, or *Missio Dei*. One may in this respect also identify the interface between what Hendriks calls the Northern or Western discourses – which I call “Western” – and those from the global South – which Saayman (2000) and I call the “South”. My interest here is self-consciously focussed on an African missional ecclesiology, in other words it is done consciously from a *Southern* (and) *African* context and perspective, which contributes to the broader conversation. This is a geographical, but also ideological qualification. We are practicing theology consciously from the perspective of the question: What has been happening in the faith communities of the South? As we indicated however, our theological practice comes from somewhere.

In the history of *gereformeerde* church formation, in the (Southern] African context, a particular theological method has shaped the church's response to the unique challenges. The development of ecclesiology followed a particular trajectory, especially within Systematic Theology. For the well-known South African systematic theologian, the late WD Jonker, this was a European based theology (1991:120). Jonker conceded that his own theological struggle was informed by European theology. For him it was focussed against the *volkskerk* (“people's church”] idea of his own church, the NGK, which in his view seriously threatened the identity of the church as church of Christ. This colonial ecclesiology, propagated as a pristine *gereformeerde* ecclesiology was for him, the focus of his theological task, i.e., to give clarity on the Reformed understanding of the word of salvation and the vision of the church. Jonker reflects on his own role,

Ek het teologies probeer om die religieus-gekleurde id e van 'n besondere geroepenheid van die Afrikaner te ontmitologiseer en die Christelike identiteit van die kerk op die voorgrond te stel (:121).

He then argues, in response to the challenge that his theology was not African enough. For him, what is needed for the broader faith community (for the future church) is for younger scholars, perhaps African scholars themselves (:121), to take up the responsibility and develop new theologies in response to the challenges facing South Africa. Jonker echoes here the challenge of postcolonial thinker-activist, Steve

Bantu Biko, almost twenty years earlier, as he addressed black ministers in 1973 (2006:58-65). Biko's challenge was,

These are the topics that black ministers of religion must begin to talk about seriously if they are to save Christianity from falling foul with black people particularly young people. The time has come for our theologians to take up the cudgels of the fight by restoring meaning and direction in the black man's understanding of God ... Finally, I would like to remind the black ministry, and indeed all black people that God is not in the habit of coming down from heaven to solve people's problems on earth' (:64-65)

For Biko, this response came at the time, in the form of South African Black Theology of Liberation. Christianity must have meaning for people in their situations. Hence for him, "Black Theology is a situational interpretation of Christianity" (:64). For some scholars, like Wijzen, however this is a practice-oriented theology, i.e., a theology that is focussed on "practical ministry". His concern is that this focus or perhaps obsession, leads not to "academic" research, which is theory based and theory driven. This assessment however doesn't take into account the specific context within which these theologies of liberation emerged. It emerged as a response to a form of "academic" theology, which didn't bridge the gap between the reality of the faith community and the biblical gospel. Whilst all theology, and therefore also Missiology, is contextual, I agree with Maluleke (2001: 366), though, who warns that the notion of contextual theology could become another, what he calls, "grand narrative paradigm", that "can and has been experienced as a new theological hegemony gently sneaking in to blur the painful and deadly practices of theological marginalization"(Ibid). Maluleke continues his analysis, stating, "The positioning of an umbrella paradigm of Contextual Theology may serve to obscure rather than to reveal situations of injustice and inequality. Hence, it does not necessarily follow that contextual theology is concerned with the injustice suffered by marginalised and oppressed peoples." (2001:366-367) He quotes Mosala who states, "The real question is not whether theology is contextual, but what is the socio-political context out of which it serves. Is it a theology of the context of the oppressors or is it a theology of the context of the oppressed?" In this vein, he therefore rejects the notion of a universal, "umbrella paradigm for all Black and African theology" (2001:371) and suggest that we should rather speak of Black and African theologies.

## 5. BRIDGING THE GAP

This is the place where I find myself, theoretically, proposing a critical African theological methodology where the local context of oppression, as it manifest itself in new ways, is the starting point, but also the space where we find concrete new

creative expressions of the *Missio Dei*. This methodology is a circle of discernment to bridge the gaps identified. The pastoral circle has been introduced by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot (1983) initially as a pastoral approach in this context, and in my mind, this approach takes up these challenges also as a concrete theological practice to bridge the gaps as indicated earlier; it addresses the false dichotomy between an “activist” vs. “academic approach”. Whilst an “academic approach” (:7), for Holland and Henriot connotes study “in a detached, fairly abstract manner”, the notion of a circle or spiral also bridge the gap as it “looks at reality from an involved, historically committed stance, discerning the situation for the purpose of action” (:7), but also reflecting on the theories behind these. An activist approach, which is simply trapped in an essentialised ideological *volkskerk* (“people’s church”) ecclesiology, is also not enough. In my estimation, therefore, the “pastoral circle”, initially developed by Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, as adapted for the South African situation (Cochrane, de Gruchy and Petersen 1990: 13), as well as appropriated as a missiological hermeneutical tool (Karecki (ed.) 2002:138-141; 2005:159-173) as a spiral, offers a valuable starting point, route and practice in this methodology. This is not a mechanical step-by-step process or recipe to be followed. The mixing of, or the creative tensions between a conscious awareness of where we come from as a community of practitioners and scholars (“insertion”), with a deepening of our understanding of the current transformations (“contextual analysis”), in the light of the *Missio Dei* (“theological reflection”), as a hermeneutical community, is a spiritual practice of discernment.

Wijsen (2005:129-147) is correct then when he argues that in bridging the gap between, what he calls theology in the “West” and the “Rest (of the World]”, this approach indeed “helps to develop grounded theories in theology” (:130). This approach is also appropriate in order to better collaborate on addressing issues like globalisation and marginalization within a neo-colonial context. It is indeed here, in bridging these gaps, where the possibility of bridge-building ecclesiologies can be discerned; it is here where ecclesial apartheid can be confronted and overcome, as African Reformed faith communities.

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## KEY WORDS

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