

Trauma and conflict as prerequisites for identity transformation – lessons from the South African Partnership for Missional Churches

ABSTRACT

This paper researches the process of identity transformation that is taking place in mainline congregations in post-apartheid South Africa. It is a descriptive study of the growth in the South African Partnership for Missional¹ Churches and describes the transformation by making use of the pattern found in the Psalms: orientation-disorientation-reorientation transition,

The research will test the following hypotheses that are viewed as prerequisites for identity transformation:

- Trauma and conflict caused by new power structures in society were the necessary disorientating forces that led to a theologically-based reorientation in churches;
- The change in theological epistemology led to a new culture of doing theology (including the way church meetings are held);
- Other prerequisites for a change in identity within the Southern African scenario are: leadership, the crossing of boundaries, the art of listening to “the other” and the mystery and motivation of the movement of the Spirit of God.

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2008 theme of the Religious Research Association on “Conflict and Renewal” (<http://rra.hartsem.edu/conf2008call.htm> - downloaded 09-18-2008) prompted this article. From a global perspective (Schreiter 1998:12; Friedman 2007:420-426), the Christian Church of the Western world is in decline, which leads to penetrating analyses on the reasons for the decline.² This phenomenon is juxtaposed by the growth of the non-Western church. Christianity’s centre of gravity is undeniably shifting southwards. Typically, mainline congregations are in decline in the West.³

1 Roxburg’s definition (2005:12) of the word missional is describing well how it is seen and used in South Africa also: “The word *missional* was coined to express the conviction that North America and Europe are now primarily ‘mission fields’ themselves. *Missional* also expresses that *God’s mission* ... is that which shapes and defines all that the church is and does, as opposed to expecting church to be the ultimate self-help group for meeting our own needs and finding fulfilment in our individual lives. ... the focus of this *mission* must be upon placing the God who has encountered us in Jesus Christ back in the center of our communities of faith that shape and give meaning to our lives.”

2 A plethora of books deal with this issue, e.g. *World Christian encyclopedia* (Barrett *et al.* 2001), as well as those by many other authorities: Cox 1995; Jenkins 2002, 2006; Walls 2002:85; Sanneh 2003; Hendriks 2007; World Christian Database. <http://wordchristiandatabase.org/wcd/>

3 There are numerous books and articles on religious growth and decline in mainline churches in the West: Dekker 1995; Dekker & Noordegraaf 2000; Brierley & Sangster 1999; Brierley 2000; Finke & Stark 1992; Roozen & Hadaway 1994; Hoge, Johnson; & Luidens 1994.

In South Africa, the Christian Church has been growing ever since records were kept. However, whether viewed from a perspective on market-share or numerical figures, the trends indicate growth in the African Initiated Churches as well as in new, mostly Independent and Pentecostal-charismatic Churches. Mainline churches are in decline (Hendriks 2005:88-111).

The contextual situation of mainline churches in typical Western countries differs from those in South Africa. When typical mainline denominations in South Africa interpret the decline phenomenon they do so from a situation where trauma and conflict are very real entities and where power balances have shifted, placing the typical member of these churches in a vastly different position than that of their Western brothers and sisters. One example: most churches were racially divided and still are, but, especially in mainline congregations, there is a deliberate urge towards unification processes and multicultural congregations. Currently, the business and socio-political worlds are integrating racial groups by means of affirmative action that is supported and driven by legislation. Unemployment remains high and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening even after the new dispensation came about in 1994 (<http://www.csae.ox.ac.uk/resprogs/usam/default.html> downloaded 09-18-2008). Thus, crime stays unacceptably high and skilled people are emigrating. Against the backdrop of this scenario, the natural tendency for a typical traditional Afrikaans white congregation is to keep their laager tightly closed in order to have at least one place "where you can be at home with your own people, language and friends." The fact that quite a substantial number of congregations are moving away from this "natural" but theologically unacceptable position, begs investigation. The hypothesis is that a profound theological transition process is taking place and is resulting in an identity transformation of the congregations involved. How can this be explained?

2. THEORY

About the Psalms, Walter Brueggemann (1986:24) says they, "...are not used in a vacuum, but in a history where we are dying and rising, and in a history where God is at work, ending our lives and making gracious new beginnings for us." He proposes (16):

I suggest, in a simple schematic fashion, that our life of faith consists in moving with God in terms of (a) being securely *oriented*, (b) being painfully *disoriented*, and (c) being surprisingly *reoriented*.

This schematic design is most helpful when explaining some of the differences between North and South with regard to mainline churches and what is happening in, and to, them. The first hypothesis of this article applies:

- Trauma and conflict caused by new power structures in society were the necessary disorientating forces that led to a theologically based re-orientation in these churches.

One could mention "Nelson Mandela" and "1994" to describe the context of what we are discussing. The country and all its peoples experienced a relatively peaceful transition of political power. However, this transition changed everything. The equilibrium, power and stability experienced by most white mainline people have disappeared and disorientation has set in. Brueggemann again (1986:22):

... the lament Psalm, for all its preoccupation with the hard issue at hand, invariably calls God by name and expects a response. At this crucial point, the Psalm parts company with our newspaper evidence and most of our experience, for it is disorientation

addressed to God. And in that address, something happens to the disorientation ... The other movement of human life is the surprising move from disorientation to a new orientation, which is quite unlike the status quo.

We believe that this is what is happening in the hearts and lives of many South African Christians. The context has changed and has led to *disorientation*. In their disorientation people once again turned to God, trusted God, and experienced the strange sensation that their hearts had changed and their eyes had begun to perceive life from a new perspective. Now “the other” is viewed differently and is found to be a brother or sister. For many a profound shift in orientation is taking place. Previously, for the privileged, everything was bent on preserving the status quo. After the revelations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Tutu 1999; Krog 1998) nobody could dispute the rotten ideology on which the previous dispensation was based. This *disorientation* has taken the form of both confession as well as shock, because of the realities of the new dispensation that, 14 years down the road, is also very far from perfect. For many who longed for a just and peaceful society, this was the nadir of disappointment and despair. Where do we turn to now? Those who turn to God experience a mysterious new beginning, a reorientation. They are profoundly aware of their status as broken vessels, but rediscover the treasure that God, in his mercy, puts in clay jars (2 Cor 4; Barrett 2004).

Perhaps one of the most unknown realities of the difference between the West and Africa is the fact that God is a more theoretic concept in the West, while Africa’s realities force one to abandon all hope in human solutions and turn to the resources of faith that escape reason and manipulation. In Africa, faith is no theory - it’s a love affair. Although this is an extremely general statement, it is true that, by and large, God is still “feared” in Africa. For Africans, God is a reality to be reckoned with (Nürnberg 2007). This makes a difference. The West has not (not yet?) experienced the type of disorientation that so many in Africa know so well.

In South Africa, there are congregations where people live with a new attitude, a new vision and hope. These (mainline) congregations have experienced a complete change of identity. How did this happen?

3. THE PROCESS

3.1 The wells from which we drank

This article focuses on the work and growth of the South African Partnership of Missional Churches (SAPMC - <http://www.comunitas.co.za/>).⁴ The initiators of the SAPMC mostly worked and studied at Stellenbosch University’s Faculty of Theology and the church-related centres.⁵ From the very outset, the leaders followed and attended the Gospel and Our Culture Movement’s work (<http://www.gospel-culture.org.uk/resources.htm>). Other institutions, such as Church Innovations (<http://www.churchinnovations.org/>) and Allelon (<http://www.allelon.org/main.cfm>) are regarded as close partners with whom the SAPMC cooperate, learn from, and share research. A loose partnership exists between proponents of missional church movements on all continents.

During a 2002 sabbatical Prof Pat Keifert of the Luther Seminary / Church Innovations

⁴ The author has access to all the SAPMC records.

⁵ A new generation of church leaders in the DRC has been searching for practical theological alternatives in ministry. The work of the Alban Institute, for example, had been widely read and Loren Mead’s trilogy (1991, 1995, 1996) on the *once and future church*, had influenced the younger generation, setting a process in motion that are continuously reforming.

(St Paul's MN, USA) introduced their work to South African pastors. A group of ten South African pastors then visited the USA to learn from the USA's Partnership for Missional Churches (PMC). Subsequently, the SAPMC was formed with Keifert present at the first training sessions, which the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa (URCSA), and Anglican ministers attended. Members financed the movement. It grew rapidly and developed South African material and leadership. Lay leaders play an important role in both leadership and research. Prof Pat Taylor-Ellison of Church Innovations helped the SAPMC to develop research methodology, especially the practical aspects of ethnographic research and the coaching of the reading teams. In 2006, Stellenbosch University started an MTh program on *Ministry: Missional transformation*. From its inception, it was extremely popular and supported the process with research at both Master's and Doctoral levels. The PMC movement's leaders play an important role in the program and research.

The two most influential theologians who influenced these movements are Lesslie Newbigin (1978, 1984, 1986, 1989, 1995, 2003), the erstwhile Anglican Bishop in India who, upon his retirement in his home country, discovered that Britain was a more difficult mission field than India! He profoundly questioned the epistemological parameters of Western Theology. The missional church movement's second father-figure is the South African missiologist, David Bosch, whose *magna carta* work, *Transforming mission* (1991), is an introductory work for Missiology scholars worldwide.

3.2 Statistics

Towards the end of 2008, 139 congregations were paying their dues of about R6000 a year to be guided through a process of missional transformation. Of these, 80% are DRC congregations with predominantly white Afrikaans speaking members; 85% of these DRC congregations are urban with only 16 in small rural towns with a single DRC congregation. The most conservative communities are rural. The remainder are 20 congregations from eight denominations. These 139 congregations who are involved in the PMC, by and large, are trendsetters and cooperate in 15 clusters spread quite evenly through South Africa and Namibia.

3.3 The discernment⁶ journey

Significant transformation has taken place in most of the congregations that departed on the missional transformation journey. The Partnership for Missional Churches started operations in 2004. Working in close cooperation with the Church Innovation Institute from St Paul's Minneapolis, USA, it used and adapted a methodology that helped congregations to escape from the mould of the Christendom paradigm. In this section, the process that guided the congregations will be described.⁷

Congregations seeking a new way forward form a cluster after obtaining their respective church councils' permission. They appoint leaders to guide them through the process. Laity play a key role, but not without their clergy's integral involvement. The cluster of congregations then departs on a missional discernment journey of approximately three years. This journey has four phases during which they seek to build five capacities:

6 "Discernment" is a key theological term in the SAPMC. Literature on discernment has led to a new way of conducting meetings, management and decision-making procedures. See: Banks 1999; Van Gelder 2007; Dawn 2001; Farnham *et al* 1991; Marais 2007; Morris *et al* 1997; Mueller 1996; Niebuhr 1963; Olsen 2000; Smit 2001; Stevens *et al* 2001; Sweet 2004; and Wolff 2003.

7 See the webpage of Communitas: <http://www.communitas.co.za/> The process summarized here is outlined in the SAPMC's *Congregational guide for their journey of spiritual discernment* (2007), an unpublished document that is continually updated and adapted. Those who attend the training receive the guide.

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| 1. Discovery | building the capacity to listen. |
| 2. Engagement | building the capacity to take risks. |
| 3. Visioning | building the capacity to focus. |
| 4. Practice and growth | building the capacity to learn and grow. |
- The fifth capacity, that of sharing and mentoring, is built throughout the process.

Clusters meet nine times over the three-year period and these meetings have the following set of activities that form the agenda of each meeting:

- Dwelling in the Word.
- Reflection on what was learned.
- Learning from one another.
- Function-orientated teaching.
- Practising the teaching.

A few remarks to highlight key aspects of the journey:

- After each cluster event a protocol exists for getting things done and communicating / integrating what was learned into the congregational way of life.
- Throughout the journey “dwelling in the Word” plays a key role. In all the SAPMC meetings Luke 10:1-12 was repeatedly read, reflected upon and discussed. It becomes a well-trodden path that challenges one to “step out” in faith on a journey across new frontiers, being guided by scriptural / spiritual principles.
- Community plays a central role in the process. Not only do the different teams in a congregation together experience an exhilarating spiritual journey that usually has a contagious effect in a congregation, but the stories of the various congregations told at the cluster meetings lead to meaningful growth and learning, as well as the formation of strong bonds and the intensification of vocation.
- In small steps people of faith venture out of their laagers and break through cultural, class, racial, gender and language barriers. The Gospel is, and brings, good news. The experience of both this and the fact that people “on the other side” can be brothers and sisters is most enriching and fulfilling. Suddenly the “others” are no longer strangers but partners who face the same contextual realities, problems and challenges of any given society.
- Lives (and congregations), immersed in the self-indulgence of Western individualism on the one hand but, on the other, also in the trauma and conflict (insecurity) of intense socio-political transformation processes, discover community coupled with a vision of a better reality (the Kingdom of God). Love, faith and hope erupt in new experiences that lead to a transformation process.
- There is more to this journey than simply sociologically describing a process. In Africa, people are less secularised; they believe in the Triune God’s involvement and the power of the Holy Spirit (Nürnberg 2007:212-258).

A brief outline of the journey, examining what happens during the nine cluster events, will be helpful. Before the first cluster event, the leadership of the participating congregations appoint a number of committees who are entrusted with doing basic research and administrative work. The second hypothesis explains what now happens: by doing theology in a new epistemological key, transformation takes place. Theological knowledge is not simply gained by studying texts, dogmatics or listening to sermons. A shift in focus takes place. A praxis based process focuses on the triune God. Both the Word and systematic theological teaching is drawn into a discernment

process that is action based and continually reflected on. The nine cluster events illustrate this process.

3.4 The nine cluster events of the journey

Cluster event 1

This meeting focuses on how we discover God, his essence and character.⁸ To become a missional congregation means taking part in God's mission of redemption, restoration and reconciliation. The group discusses what God is doing or wants done, juxtaposed by the question: What is the church and its purpose? Church models are critically analysed and methods of analysing current church practices and culture are discussed. The Christendom and post-Christendom theological paradigms, as well as the role of leadership and the PMC in transition processes, are explained. In this process, discernment and innovation play crucial roles, which are also clarified. Louis Barrett's (*et al* 2004) eight patterns of missional faithfulness are discussed and form a basic theological platform for all of the nine cluster meetings. Keifert (2006) describes and discusses the basic methodology. The skills of reflective listening and open, boundary-crossing discussion are fostered in this and all subsequent meetings. Reading and listening / observational tasks are given based on what was discussed at the first cluster. This will be reported on in the second cluster - a set pattern for all cluster meetings.

Two very important "research" or listening activities take place in the discovery phase. A listening team of three to six persons is appointed and trained to ask 24 people eight questions about the congregation. Eight must be active and influential "family members"; eight "inside members" - people who attend regularly but who are not very involved; and eight "outside members" who basically only use the church and its various services when required. The purpose of the ethnographic research is to understand the identity of the congregation. This is formulated in a "reading report" that, in a way, summarizes the message of the 24 ethnographic interviews. The second research team does a community analysis. A missional God sends his people as servants to take care of "the problems and challenges" of this world. But, what are they? What gifts are present in the community that are addressing these problems and challenges? Where do things happen in either the congregation (first listening exercise) or in the community, in which the congregation can participate and make a difference?

Cluster event 2

This is the second discovery phase event. The reading report and feedback on tasks received

8 The essence of the PMC movement can be found in its focus on the triune God and the mission Dei. It has crucial implications for the identity of the church and its members. Bosch's description of the emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm and the realization that it is primarily God's mission, a *missio Dei* (1991:389-393), summarizes this best. *Missional church* (Guder [ed] 1998) is one of the best overviews of the movement. Miroslav Volf's work, *After our likeness: The church as the image of the Trinity* (1998), played a key role in defining the new emphasis on the Trinity. The work and input of the Canadian systematic theologian, Douglas John Hall (1991, 1993, 1996), played a major role in PMC circles. These and other theological works assisted the movement in starting to escape from the influence of modernism in its theology. It goes without saying that, in the works already quoted, Newbigin literally shepherded this process. Based on the theological premises of these works, a host of literature on the missional church "erupted" (e.g. Guder 2000; Van Gelder [ed] 1999; Van Gelder 2000). Congregations were guided to understand transition processes (Roxburgh 2005; Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006). In South Africa, the work of sociologist Manuel Castells (1996, 2000, 2004) plays an important role in helping us to interpret the global shifts from a sociological point of view. The emergent church literature is widely read. Brian McLaren (2000, 2002, 2006, 2007) and Rob Bell (2005) are familiar figures amongst a host of others whose works are prescribed at seminaries and read by laity.

at the first meeting form a substantial part of the second cluster – a pattern followed in all subsequent clusters. The congregations now discover patterns and partners – or a lack thereof – within their congregations and communities. Barrett’s (*et al* 2004) eight patterns of missional faithfulness are discussed against the background of the realities exposed by the listening team who interviewed the 24 people and read the scriptural passage of Luke 10:1-12. As such, the PMC is an example of corporate spiritual discernment. The concept and practice are explained and applied throughout the journey. The congregational guide summarises: *Spiritual discernment is therefore a practice of belief or a way of thinking. When we think about matters we go to the Scripture again to align with Christ and choose for the cross and make it true in our lives.* By listening to both the Word and their world, the cluster practises (by doing the exercise) and thus prepares for a congregational meeting where the same exercise will be repeated.

Cluster event 3

The steering team invites the church council to attend this discovery phase event at a retreat. The basic activities of listening to (i) the Word (Luke 10:1-12), (ii) the eight patterns of missional faithfulness and (iii) the World, the feedbacks of the listening research task teams take place. At this stage, a larger group is on board and more people revise the information. Now, at least three missional challenges should be identified as issues that the congregation feels God is putting on their agenda for their attention. Theoretical input on the difference between adaptive and technical change is discussed, emphasizing the captivity caused by setting up boundaries in the Christendom paradigm’s way of being church. This destroys a church spiritually because it no longer is true to its basic identity of being the missional body of Christ. Escaping this captivity opens the door to new missional challenges for which engagement teams are needed. The work and method of these teams are discussed and they are formed, trained and mentored. The cluster then works on planning a church council retreat where the question: What is God’s preferred and promised future for us as a congregation? is addressed. The process of discerning what the needs of the local community are is once again addressed. This spiral-like process of innovative listening, reflection and then moving towards engagement is, in itself, a discernment process into which more and more members of the congregation are drawn.

During the discovery phase, the process of evaluation about what a congregation has learnt is continuous. Congregations share their insight with the cluster, as well as with congregations in the community. This is called *Sharing and mentorship*. This phase takes about one year.

Cluster 4

This cluster is the first in the engagement phase. Feedback from congregational meetings and the church council retreat are discussed and the three missional challenges of each congregation in the cluster are shared. This cluster focuses on the engagement spiral and the plunge technique.⁹ Now, the congregations must learn more about the people to whom they will reach out. These people have different views on life and different customs. Contact with people outside the traditional laager means involvement in a culture that could be alien to the missional congregation. They discover invisible walls between themselves and the “others” and learn how to build relationships with them. The listening plunge is then carefully planned and the engagement teams (maximum 2) are selected and trained. The first plunges are carefully

⁹ In this context, “plunge” is a word that refers to the crossing of a boundary. It is an institutionalized church’s first deliberate step to step out of the laager to reach out to “the other” – a setting-out on a missional journey.

reported and reflected upon. With the church council's support, a mentor plays an important role in this. Communication with the congregation remains an essential element of this process.

Cluster 5

This cluster is the second meeting in the engagement phase. The missional challenges have been prioritised and engagement teams have been formed who reached out (plunged) to where the congregation believes God is sending them. Once these first plunges have taken place, the events are reported and reflected upon. What has been discovered and what are the reactions? Has a bridge community been established? If indeed so, the engagement spiral requires some low risk experimental work to be done, such as becoming involved in a community project. Communication and planning remain a vital part of the process.

Cluster 6

This cluster is the first cluster that deals with the visioning phase. A very thorough discernment-motivated feedback is undertaken to reflect on the plunges and experiments. The congregations are growing in their understanding of God's missional character through their sustained contact with the Word of God. Their contact with the world (through plunges where boundaries are crossed) helps them to discover the walls that have been erected between themselves and the community over the years. These walls made them deaf and blind to their responsibility of being a sign, foretaste and instrument of God's reign in the community. They now realize that the church is not a kingdom on its own, but a sign of the coming kingdom and, as such, a dream / vision is born of being used by God's Spirit to erect signs of this coming kingdom in their midst. This vision appears in a process of constant deliberations and communication between all involved - the congregation, as well as the partners in the cluster.

Cluster 7

This cluster (the visioning phase) finalises the experiments and works towards consensus of the missional tasks / challenges that the congregation is addressing. Communication with the congregation and information on the experiments, what happened and what was learned receive focused attention. At the cluster meeting, this is accompanied by juxtapositioning it with systematic theology on congregational vocation, identity and purpose. The central question: Who is God? is once again asked, coupled with questions such as: What is God doing in our church? and: What is God doing in our community? etc. Each congregation is challenged to phrase a clear congregational calling based on this dialogue between the Word and the world, both of which have been speaking to them.

Cluster 8

The report on cluster 7's conclusions to the church council is evaluated. The church council must approve the report before it is shared with the congregation. Now, the vision can be spelled out in a tangible form. Cluster 8 is applied to do the detailed planning of reorganising or realigning the congregation's staff and structures towards being missional and towards achieving the vision and goals. This must be covenanted with the staff of each congregation in the cluster. Usually, the SAPMC supplies a consultant who leads the process in every congregation. Thereafter, a detailed long-term ministry plan (from the immediate first steps to a dream about what must be achieved 4 to 5 years hence) is documented. In this process, the eight missional patterns serve as a valuable theological grid. Once all involved in the teams - staff as well as those of the bridge community - agree to the long-term plan, the church council approves it. Now, it must be shared with the cluster-partners.

Cluster 9

This cluster takes place towards the end of a three-year journey and deals with phase four: “Exercise and grow.” At this stage, there should be consensus in each congregation on which of the eight missional patterns are basic strengths, as well as specifically focused upon, in the congregation. The missional challenges resulted in bridging communities and specific ministries. The congregation has gone through a “wake-up” experience during which it was realigned away from institutional self-care towards missional outreach, away from a focus on the self towards a focus on God and his agenda, which leads congregations out of their laagers. The last cluster not only revisits the theological parameters on being a missional church, but deliberately plans to establish a missional culture to broaden the church’s missional capacity.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The process described above indicates the point made by the third hypothesis. The importance of taking a congregation through a series of small discernment steps and exposing them to the realities of a broken world where people are suffering is undergirded and, in a sense, propelled by the mysterious work of the triune God. People change and congregations experience transition. The first hypothesis stated the context that, in a way, put enough pressure (in the form of risk and insecurity of specific communities) to reach out and do something in the environment in which they live. The second hypothesis formulated the importance that transition can happen only if the set patterns of thought and theological moulds of the Christendom paradigm are dismantled. Thus, a new church culture emerges.

Two remarks in closure: transition can take place only if there are leaders who dream of an alternative future. The core of the PMC leadership group was from theological seminaries and was, in a way, “fine tuned” through Master’s and Doctoral programs that addressed the issues under discussion. The case study of the SAPMC describes one such group. There are other similar groups (<http://etd.rau.ac.za/theses/available/etd-06082005-124417/restricted/BylaeFinaal.pdf> - downloaded 09-18-2008).

The SAPMC is about to start a research project to acquire more direct information on the questions: what, where and how much? concerning the transformation processes in these congregations and communities. What has been achieved? What must be learned if the phenomenon is scrutinized?

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KEY WORDS

Missional church
Identity
Culture
Transformation
Trauma
Conflict

TREFWOORDE

Missionale kerk
Identiteit
Kultuur
Transformasie
Trauma
Konflik

Kontakbesonderhede

Prof HJ Hendriks
Fakulteit Teologie
Privaatsak X1
STELLENBOSCH 7602
E-pos: hjh@sun.ac.za