Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2026, Vol 12, No 1, 1–27
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2026.v12n1.a23
Online ISSN 2413-9467 | Print ISSN 2413-9459
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Research strategy for innovation – from theological reflection and design thinking to praxis communities and institutions

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Abstract

This article develops a renewed Research Strategy for Innovation by integrating missional theology with contemporary innovation theory and insights from the 2025 International Innovation Consultation. Building on the original Research Strategy for Missional Transformation, the study employs a qualitative, reflective methodology that draws on practitioner experience, consultation data, and interdisciplinary dialogue with design thinking, systems thinking, and appreciative inquiry. The research reconceptualises innovation as a participatory and theological process of discerning and joining the *missio Dei* within specific contexts. A central contribution is the articulation of interpretive lenses – narrative, financial, power, systems, asset-based, and metaphor – that shape how communities understand and respond to complex realities. The findings emphasise the importance of human-centred, asset-based, and iterative practices that enable locally grounded and sustainable transformation. The study further identifies key capacities for innovation, including collaboration, affordability,

and learning cultures. It offers a practical and theological framework for congregations and institutions seeking faithful, adaptive engagement in changing contexts.

Keywords

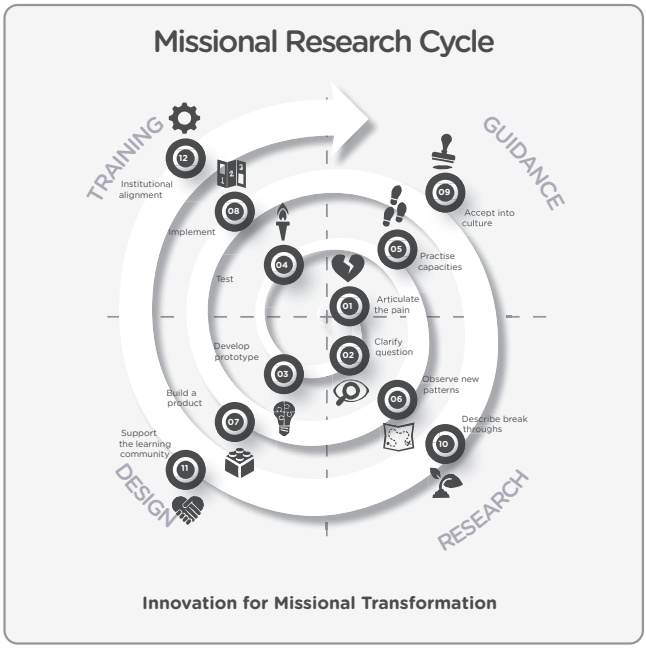
missional innovation; design thinking; appreciative inquiry; social innovation; hermeneutical lenses

1. Introduction

The development of the Research Strategy for Missional Transformation marked a significant contribution to the field of missional ecclesiology and practical theology in South Africa. Originally published in *Verbum et Ecclesia* (Niemandt et al. 2018) as "'n Navorsingstrategie vir missionale transformasie, and later expanded and translated as A Research Strategy for Missional Transformation (2021)" in *Missional Ecclesiology* (Burger, Marais & Van der Walt 2021), the study proposed an innovative, practice-oriented research methodology to serve faith communities as co-researchers and "problem owners" in their own transformation journeys.

The strategy was developed as a response to ecclesial transformation processes within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and other denominations rediscovering their missional identity. Missional transformation was understood as a process of "faith discernment" – a theological response to the question, "Where is the Holy Spirit at work, and how can the church align itself with the Spirit?" Grounded in the *missio Dei,* this research model integrated theological reflection and practical implementation within a participatory research design.

The Research Strategy for Missional Transformation proposed a comprehensive, systemic process consisting of three interrelated cycles, each unfolding through four quadrants – guidance, research, design, and training – thus linking theory and praxis. Across twelve iterative movements, communities of faith were guided through a process of (1) articulating pain, (2) clarifying questions, (3) developing prototypes, (4) testing innovations, (5) practising new capacities, (6) observing patterns, (7) building models, (8) implementing models, (9) embedding new practices in culture, (10) describing breakthroughs, (11) supporting learning communities, and (12) achieving institutional alignment.



This methodology reflected key values of practice-oriented research: partnership between researchers and practitioners; growing ownership among participants; and a cyclical, adaptive process open to contextual discernment. It drew on theological sources (Word and Spirit), organisational learning theory (Senge 1990), appreciative inquiry (Branson 2004), and innovation theory (Rogers 1983; Scharmer 2009). The strategy offered a theological and methodological framework for adaptive change – moving beyond technical problem-solving toward transformational innovation guided by faith and participation.

The significance of this contribution was recognised in academic circles. In 2020, the South African Academy for Science and Arts (SA Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns) awarded *'n Navorsingstrategie vir missionale transformasie* one of its prestigious ATKV-SA Akademiepryse for the best peer-reviewed Afrikaans academic articles published in 2018, affirming its relevance for both theology and innovation studies.

Since publication, the methodology has been successfully utilised and tested in several doctoral research projects within the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria. These include:

- Niemandt, D., 2020, *Theological Education as the Formation of Missional Leaders*;
- Smith, T.J., 2021, *Designing and Developing a "Rhythm of Life" as a Pedagogy for Missional Spiritual Formation*; and
- Venter, N., 2023, *Little Seeds: A Prototype of Collaborative Integrated Diaconal Praxis*.

Each of these studies adapted the research cycle to unique contexts, illustrating the model's capacity to integrate discernment, innovation, and praxis in theological education and community transformation.

Beyond academia, the research cycle has been widely implemented in church consultation and innovation processes. This includes, amongst others, a poor community in rural Southern Cape where it was utilised to find a frame to support parenting challenges of farmworkers; and with a group of pastors from the Great Commission Network based in Khayelitsha, a marginal community on the outskirts of Cape Town.

These applications have provided extensive field validation, demonstrating the model's capacity to facilitate transformation in complex systems.

A recent milestone in this ongoing trajectory was the International Innovation Consultation, held in Wellington, South Africa (19 – 20 June 2025). The consultation brought together 21 participants from diverse backgrounds, denominations, charities and countries. Some of the practitioners serve very poor rural communities in South Africa, others work in education for marginalised children, some do consulting work in the United States of America, and others work with childcare centres for poor parents. The participants were requested to critically engage the research cycle and share insights on data gathering, interpretive frameworks, design processes, and capacity building. Their reflections offered invaluable perspectives on how the methodology functions in cross-cultural innovation ecosystems.

The continued development of this research stands on three pillars: (1) its theoretical and methodological foundations articulated in earlier

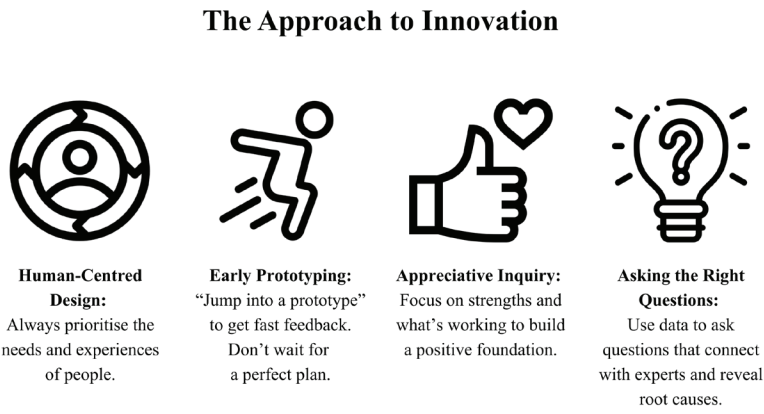
publications; (2) the successful use and adaptation by PhD researchers and practitioners; and (3) the collective insights gained through practical application and international dialogue.

The aim of the present research is to expand and deepen the insights gained from the original research methodology by integrating experiences from practice, doctoral research, and the 2025 Innovation Consultation. By doing so, the study seeks to develop a renewed Research Strategy for Innovation – one that bridges theological reflection and design thinking.

2. The approach to innovation for missional transformation

The development of the research strategy sought to equip faith communities and social partners to participate actively in their own discernment and renewal processes. The research process is not seen as an external, analytical enterprise, but as a participatory, theological act.

As the methodology developed, its resonance with broader innovation studies became increasingly evident. The following section explores this under four key aspects that define the approach to innovation. The themes demonstrate how the research strategy integrates theological reflection and practical design.



(Figure 1: The approach to innovation)

At its core, the research strategy embodies a form of human-centred design. In classical design thinking, human-centred design refers to an empathetic approach that starts with the experiences, needs, and aspirations of people, and co-creates solutions through iterative engagement (Brown 2009:4). In the missional framework, this orientation invites attention to human participation in God's mission.

The faith community is not an object of research but a co-researcher. At the "centre" of research is the community as a relational being called to reflect God's love in a particular context. The research process begins by listening empathetically to the lived experiences of congregations and naming their pain, loss, dislocation, stuckness, and discomfort.

Congregations are not passive subjects but act as "problem owners". The community is not merely dependent on external expertise but becomes both the site and agent of innovation. Within this move towards "research with communities," the relationship between theology, research, and practice is redefined.

Secondly, the research strategy uses an iterative methodology, oriented towards prototyping and action. The missional transformation cycle parallels the logic of design iteration found in innovation theory. Each movement invites communities to experiment, reflect, and adapt. The community learns through cycles of action and reflection.

The work of Otto Scharmer (2009) is invaluable. In his well-known Theory U framework, prototyping is the moment when insight from deep reflection and shared sensing becomes embodied in action. Prototyping is not only designing something; it is the practice of bringing the future into the present, of connecting to the emerging future possibilities and co-creating tangible experiments that embody that emerging future. Prototyping is a "social laboratory" – a process of enacting the future rather than predicting it. It allows groups to move from abstract ideas to embodied learning, discovering through experience (Scharmer 2009:327-330). Branson and Roxburgh (2021:293) refer to this as a strategy where the "road is made by walking" it: "… the road is discovered (discerned) as we start walking with the recognition we are in an 'unnameable present,' a place where we don't know where we're treading." Prototypes are not blueprints, which need the support of "everyone", but are significant innovations, tests with a few

"innovators" ready for action. In this regard, the research cycle is designed to experiment with the "innovators" and alternate in a second and third round to involve the "early adopters and early majority" (Rogers 1962).

The missional research cycle adopts this stance by guiding communities to develop and test early expressions of new practices, relationships, or structures emerging from discernment. These prototypes are not seen as final solutions, but rather as acts of faithful imagination and alignment with the *missio Dei*. Innovation is seen as a disciplined rhythm of discernment, experimentation, and embodiment, grounded in the conviction that the Spirit continually makes all things new.

Thirdly, the missional research cycle does not begin with diagnosing problems but with appreciative inquiry. Sources of vitality, for example, the formative narratives of the community's tradition, stories of faithfulness and core values are integrated into the process of transformation (Branson 2004). In the missional research cycle, the approach of appreciative inquiry is specifically emphasised within the "guidance" quadrant of each cycle, where learning communities, through experimenting with prototypes, develop new capacities for missional faithfulness. The key to the appreciative approach in human-centred design is to develop a profile of someone in the community who embodies the preferred future to the challenges that the congregation faces.

The appreciative stance seeks eschatological hope. It lives from the conviction that God's future is already breaking into the present (Marais 2021:266–267). By naming what is already life-giving, a bridge is formed between gratitude for God's past work and openness to God's new possibilities. In the context of innovation, this posture of appreciation counteracts the anxiety often associated with change. It also replaces a problem-fixing mentality with a spirit of curiosity.

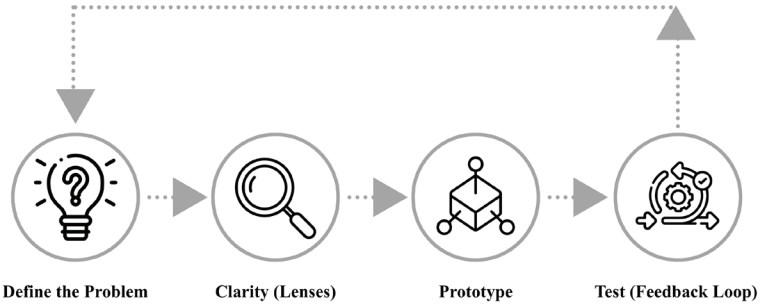
Fourthly, the research strategy contributes to innovation by modelling the art of asking the right questions. The questions we ask determine the realities we can perceive. The research strategy begins with a basic theological question: Where is the Holy Spirit at work, and how can we align with that movement? This question reorients the entire innovation process from human initiative to participation in God's mission. It is about discerning how God is present as an agent in the process of calling into

being the kingdom (Branson & Roxburgh 2021:18). Within the research cycle, the community moves from questions of pain ("What breaks our hearts?") to questions of purpose ("What is God calling us to become?").

The research strategy operationalises Patrick Keifert's definition of spiritual discernment. According to Keifert (2017:193), "Christian innovation can give birth to new life in the life of God" when leaders stop denying the atrophy process and reality of death and create time and space for "truth-seeking and truth-telling" about their dying.

African theological scholarship sharpens the communal and critical dimensions of this approach. Resane (2022) brings theology into dialogue with *botho/ubuntu* around relational personhood and social cohesion, while Kobe (2021) locates Ubuntu within a spirituality of liberation responding to racism and colonialism. Read alongside these perspectives, participation requires attention to whose knowledge carries authority and whose conditions of life are changed. Community knowledge must be able to reshape the questions and criteria of innovation, rather than merely supply information for an externally designed process. This dialogue does not assume a single African epistemology or an inherently consensual community.

In summary, missional innovation is about reshaping habits of attention, conversation, and imagination. The research cycle takes the form of a dynamic feedback loop:



(Figure 2: Define the problem)

Defining the problem is about developing an empathetic understanding of the lived experiences of the community. It is about becoming vulnerable and entering incarnationally into the narratives of others' challenges and pain, also to get a clearer view of the systemic root causes of the pain. Clarity in this sense emerges through dialogue between Word, Spirit, and community. The problem is seen in the light of the vocation and purpose that comes with participation in the *missio Dei*. It often happens that problems are reinterpreted as opportunities for renewal. Or, as in the above-mentioned terms of Keifert, "God's preferred and promised future" breaks through and the possibility of "passage from one way of being in the world to another" arises. Prototyping in the light of this clarity is always intentionally temporary, and not a final solution. The knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits that correspond with a missional imagination take shape within iterative cycles of doing and reflecting. Failure is never the end of the road but rather an invitation to deeper discernment with an attitude of openness. Feedback sessions become spaces for communal spiritual discernment: What worked? What surprised us? How did we sense God's presence? Each round of testing feeds into the next iteration of defining the problem, creating a reinforcing loop of learning, adaptation, and growth. The feedback loop is formative rather than corrective.

3. Research methodology

The success of the research cycle necessitated a broader reflection of the process and a consultation with South African and international partners was organised to enrich the process. The Innovation Consultation took place 19 – 20 June 2025 at the Andrew Murray Centre for Spirituality, Wellington, South Africa. The consultation included participants from South Africa, Australia, Britain and Europe. Most of the participants are from the social and public sector. The consultation agreed to utilise the Missional Research Cycle (Niemandt et al. 2018) as a "motherboard" to compare their efforts and experiences in social innovation.

The consultation was structured in terms of the following methodology: During each discussion session, manual notes were made by Aletta Simpson. These manual notes were summarised by a Large Language Model, Gemini 2.5 Pro (Version available for 19 – 20 June 2025), with the

prompt: "Neaten and summarise the following text: [text inserted here]". These summaries were presented at the beginning of the following session for revision and for the participants to review and approve. After each session, a Google Form was sent out with a question regarding the session. Here is an example of the Google Form question for the introduction or session 1: "What questions came up whilst you were listening to the introductions that you would like us to attend to?"

The unedited submissions were given to Gemini to be categorised into different themes with a prompt such as: "Identify key trends within the questions below: [unedited submissions added here]." The categorised questions were documented and shared with the group at the beginning of the next session. This was done to set the tone for the session to follow, but also for the participants to review and approve the AI-identified trends.

Each session followed the same pattern. The following has been documented for each of the five sessions:

- The unedited notes
- The summary of the notes (Generated by Gemini)
- The unedited submission
- The key trends in the submissions (Generated by Gemini)

For the final (6th) session, only a summary has been documented.

The result of the consultation is reflected in the broadening of the research process and the insights garnered from the participants in terms of the methodology described above.

With regards to the safe utilisation of AI tools, we turn to OWASP (2024) (Open Web Application Security Project). It is an international non-profit organisation focusing on web application security. Of the top ten risks for LLM use that OWASP identified, the following are definitely applicable to this study and how we mitigated these risks:

No	Risk	Description	Mitigation
2	Sensitive Information Disclosure	Exposing personal or sensitive information when interacting with LLMs (OWASP, 2024:7).	The researchers used a tenant version of Gemini that did not allow the model to train on any of the data we provided to it. We also took care not to share any sensitive data.
5	Improper Output Handling	When the output of the LLM is not sufficiently processed before passing it on to another system (OWASP, 2024:19).	This is mostly with regard to automated workflows, but during the study the LLM outputs were both reviewed by the group and the researchers cross-referenced the LLM outputs with the original transcripts.
9	Misinformation	When the model produces information that is false, but appears credible (OWASP, 2024:32).	The LLM output was reviewed by the participants. After the workshop, the researchers cross-referenced the outputs with the original transcripts.

The researchers are aware that AI-assisted synthesis may flatten local idioms, theological meanings and minority perspectives, even where summaries appear coherent. Participant review provided an opportunity to challenge these interpretations but could not establish that every nuance or disagreement had been preserved. The initial selection of material through note-taking also shaped what the model could analyse. AI outputs should therefore be treated as provisional interpretive aids requiring contextual judgement rather than as independent confirmation of the findings.

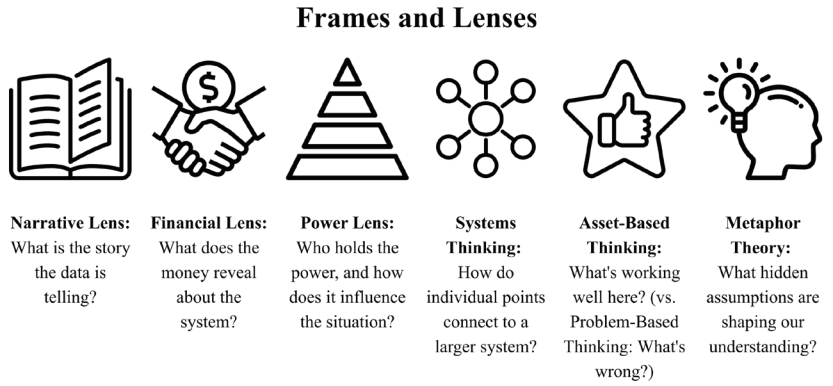
4. The role of lenses and frameworks (hermeneutical approach)

One of the first observations from the consultation was the importance of the various steps described in the original strategy, and the utilisation of lenses and frameworks in the research, especially pertaining to "listening empathetically to the lived experiences of congregations and naming their pain, loss, dislocation, stuckness, and discomfort." The

consultation suggested that a hermeneutical approach working with lenses and frameworks will support the **movement 1** – articulation of the pain, **movement 2** – clarifying the question, **movement 6** – observing new patterns, and the broader process.

In practice, these lenses can be explored through ordinary questions, local-language storytelling, drawings and collective discussion. Facilitators need not introduce the academic terminology. Neither AI nor digital platforms are prerequisites: paper-based records and community review can support the same process, with local co-facilitators gradually assuming responsibility for convening and interpretation.

The following frames and lenses were identified:



(Figure 3: Frames and lenses)

4.1 Narrative lens: What is the story the data is telling?

The approach is to establish the story behind the data. In a group session at one of the participants' congregations, a young man started telling a story about a woman who raised her son as a single mother despite many difficulties. He explained all the sacrifices she had to make. As he tells the story, he becomes emotional, revealing that the story is about his mother. He is the child. That moment changed the whole process. As the participant explains: "Storytelling is something that we must admit the value of."

In social innovation, narrating the numbers empowers participants to connect with the data as actors in a narrative "plot". Especially when the story wall methodology is utilised, the story is collaboratively constructed with hundreds of memories. They own the story as their own. A skilled facilitator can confirm storylines unfolding in the story wall. By linking the "dots", recurring themes start to become apparent. Experience shows that the so-called "problem-story" first emerges. The alternative story is initially almost invisible. If the group are guided to discover these two storylines and the dissonance between the two, the logic of the problem story starts to unravel, and the participants are liberated from the slavery of the problem story and invited into the possibilities of the alternative story.

A participant from Church Innovation explained, "We are working with congregations who are just trying to find a way forward. Many of them are in some state of decline. Almost always, we start with community. I've been amazed by the method of getting the community together and telling the story of the congregation. Delighted by how emotional [the discussion is]. People know they love their church; they just don't know why. People are proud of their story, even if just on butcher paper. […] The theology behind it was always: if you are trying to discern God's future, you ask the question, what has God been doing here up until this point?"

One participant shared the story of a "totally despondent congregation." They constructed a story together to lament and grieve what they had lost. "We did a whole week of prayers. A decade per evening. They could also sense God's presence. Every evening, there were more young people. The last evening, I arrived, and there was a meeting, and I thought, Did I miss something? Then 22 young students walked into the room, and they joined the session. And then at the end, one who attended the whole week said she was so taken away by the story that she invited all her friends in the area to the church, and she told them the story, and they asked if they could join." The narrative of a community, narrative therapists explain, normally includes both a problem story and an alternative story. Innovation is built on the alternative story.

4.2 Financial lens: What does the money reveal about the system?

Funding for innovation plays a catalytic but double-edged role in innovation. Adequate financing enables experimentation, reduces early-stage risk, supports prototyping, and accelerates time-to-market. It also attracts talent and creates organisational stability for long-term research and development. However, funding can distort innovation by pushing projects toward funder expectations, discouraging radical ideas, or creating dependency. Excessive funding may reduce efficiency, while competitive grants can shift focus from creativity to compliance. Overall, funding is essential but must be balanced with autonomy, flexibility, and mission-driven decision-making.

One of the participants (Church Innovation) told the story of a failure: "We made one mistake. A bishop gave us funding as seed funding, and it mucked up the whole thing. People were thinking about the money." This was counter to the actual goal of the experiment: "The experiment has to be grounded in listening, and it has to be investing presence and relationships in neighbours." The participant is of the opinion that if you want real innovation, you need to focus on "things that are simple, repeatable, affordable." Although sufficient funding is essential because it allows teams to explore uncertain directions without pressure for returns, it holds some risks.

Communities should agree on the purpose and criteria of an experiment before seeking funding, communicate these priorities to funders and begin with an affordable prototype. Regular community review should assess whether reporting requirements or funding conditions are displacing the original purpose. Facilitators and funders remain accountable to these locally negotiated priorities.

4.3 Power lens: Who holds the power, and how does it influence the situation?

Ideas about power, authority, and leadership are deeply influential in shaping social dynamics and social structures. Understanding the dynamics of power is therefore essential for any process of social innovation and change. Power determines whose voices are heard, which data is deemed legitimate, and what possibilities are opened or closed before the work even begins.

Branson and Roxburgh emphasise that to be human is often understood as "to be in control, with the capacity to make and manage the world into the projects we desire" (Branson & Roxburgh 2021:61).

As one participant in the consultation warned, the assumption that data is neutral can obscure deeper questions about who is listening to whom, who decides what counts as evidence, and whose pain is recognised or ignored. In ecclesial settings, these dynamics are often intensified: attempts to introduce new practices may threaten established liturgical cultures, while leaders can experience profound fears of losing authority or control. Such fears reveal how deeply power, identity, and leadership are intertwined.

Several issues surfaced that indicate the importance of power – one participant flagged the risks of a purely data-driven approach: "I'm a little bit stuck on who's paying [attention] or listening [to who]. Who's asking for what data? I am stuck on what happens before that. The starting position: what data am I looking for? Towards what purpose? Who is being included, who's being excluded? [There is a] balance between looking for data, what is my mission, mandate, calling, agenda, and how to determine what data to look for. Even the data pyramid feels to me like it assumes the data is neutral and the funnel purifies it. Maybe in my echo chamber. Which data is being ignored? What's the weight (crying vs not crying during testimony)? Who's listening to whose pain, because that will determine what data I will get."

One participant is a leader in the Anglican Church. He explained that when taking on the project of designing an intervention, anything that interferes with the liturgical culture of the church is met with resistance. "Our biggest struggle is not so much the theological interference. It is the training of the priest/pastor to function as a spiritual leader, someone who really knows how to nurture and listen. [As well as] the championing. Having a balcony view of what's going on. To be on the dance floor without controlling. It is so counter to the notion of leadership. I am charged with leading this community. They fear losing their power. It is about power, control, risks, and leadership."

The group identified one of the ways to navigate obstructive power: Have the decider in the room: "When you have a problem to solve. [For example:] 'Empower the mothers in the community', turn to the decider and ask: Do you agree? This is the problem we hand over to the design team." Another

participant then told the story of solving a problem within the DRC. They had identified a problem, generated three possible solutions and had the decider pick the solution. This initiated a process of changing the church law.

In conclusion: the workshop showed that innovation becomes possible when power is named honestly and engaged constructively – such as by ensuring that decision-makers participate directly in discernment processes. Whether redesigning ministry roles in the Anglican Church or navigating law-changing decisions in the DRC, the presence of the "decider in the room" can transform obstructive power into a catalyst for collaborative action. Recognising and engaging these power systems is therefore not peripheral but foundational to any meaningful process of missional innovation.

4.4 Systems thinking: How do individual points connect to a larger system?

Systems thinking is helpful to elevate data into wisdom. It helps to distinguish between source and symptoms. Innovation that addresses symptoms will have a bigger impact than those built on the symptoms. When data is understood as narratives and converted into reinforcing or balancing loops, the understanding deepens and it becomes clear where the innovation should focus to make a sustainable impact. According to Senge (1990:79-83), these reinforcing loops are driven by "mental models" that need to be understood to break paradigms.

One participant explains that his church has purchased all the available data on who lives in their congregation and how they think; however, "that does not necessarily help you if you do not know what to do with that." Another participant told the story of his congregation's involvement in Melkbos and Tableview in Milnerton. The congregation decided to go to the community and find out what their problems were. They spent time with the police. According to the participant report, Tableview, Milnerton, is the second-highest child abduction area in South Africa. The principal of Seamount Primary School in Milnerton explains that the street running past the school is the highest hotspot. When the participant visited the school, the principal explained that "two weeks before that, two girls got picked up." The participant explains,

> When I heard this, I thought I must have heard wrong. These are the stats we sit with. We stay in that community, and I would have put money on the table that this is not the case. It is unbelievable how many stats we have publicly available in support of our communities as soon as you get involved in ward discussions. It is there, but we try to reinvent everything. We had discussions with the people who do the development. Some of the data is old (5 years), not updated. The money is not spent in that direction. If the community does not get involved, the data does not get updated.

Systems thinking also assists the innovation process to discern between symptoms and root causes. Innovation that addresses the root cause will be more effective and sustainable.

4.5 Asset-based thinking: What's working well here?

Appreciative inquiry invites communities to recognise existing strengths rather than beginning with deficits, and this posture reveals that the seeds of innovation already exist. By asking what is working well, new possibilities emerge – such as discovering that key mothers in a community were already modelling strong parenting skills, or recognising untapped leadership capacity among elders and youth workers in rural congregations. Asset-based thinking shifts attention from scarcity to abundance, enabling solutions that are locally grounded, sustainable, and empowering.

A participant shared the story of a congregation that wanted to enhance the parenting skills of the community and originally identified the need for an auxiliary social worker to assist in this endeavour. They could only afford one social worker. When they reached out to the Centre for Social Innovation, the approach was to ask the community: Why do you ask this? The community explained that they were involved in the local school and were seeing good results. The education was getting better, but the parenting skills in the community were not keeping up. Finally, as a solution, key mothers who were keeping up were identified. These mothers had a track record in the community. They were utilised as mentors to improve the parenting skills throughout the community.

According to a participant, an important design issue in the DRC was the challenge to "break out of the mould in terms of the theological

understanding of the offices of the church." Theologians [are seen as] the only leaders. "In remote rural towns, we need to train the elders as preaching elders. [We] went through the church policy commission. Later [we] realised it was not sustainable to do theological training as we currently do it. A 100 years ago, the church decided to rather let people go without the word than have a layman preach. The innovation was to broaden this." The last innovation was to solve the problem of youth workers in the church. They were doing the work of pastors, but they were not ordained. The idea was to give them affordable theological training. People who are already in that kind of ministry cannot afford full training, so they also introduced part-time distance learning.

Asset-based thinking shifts attention from what communities lack to the gifts, wisdom, and capacities already present among them. This posture was evident in the story of the DRC, where innovation required recognising previously overlooked assets – elders capable of preaching in rural congregations, and youth workers already exercising pastoral gifts. These examples show that transformative solutions often arise not from importing expertise but from uncovering and empowering the people already contributing to the life of the community. Branson (2004) emphasises that appreciative inquiry helps communities name these hidden strengths by "paying attention to what gives life" and by trusting that God's grace is already at work within their stories. In this sense, asset-based thinking becomes a theological act: it affirms that the Spirit equips communities with the resources they need, and that renewal begins by attending to the life-giving practices and people already present.

4.6 Metaphor theory: What hidden assumptions are shaping our understanding?

The way we understand problems and make decisions is shaped by the language and imagery we use, or the "metaphors we live by". This imagery influences which aspects of a challenge are highlighted within our analysis and which are obscured. As Krüger (2019:15) explains: "So metaphors can tell us something about how we see the world. They can bring deep-seated convictions to the surface; convictions that we might not even be aware we hold. Metaphors can show how we view and define the reality around us."

By acknowledging this role of metaphors, those involved in the innovation process are enabled to surface the assumptions that quietly influence their choices. They succeed better in questioning their own framing; they discover blind spots and develop more nuanced understandings.

Applied to our imagination of the innovation process itself, it makes a difference whether we see innovation, on the one hand, as a "pipeline", suggesting linearity and control, or, on the other, as an "ecosystem", emphasising the relational, interdependent, emerging, adaptive nature of the process, or a "spiral", assuming learning through repetition and increasing refinement whilst revisiting earlier stages.

A participant told the story of how his congregation utilised ethnographic research. They had the assumption that the younger members of the congregation did not want to go to church, that they were "not interested in what we do". After listening to the community, it sparked a whole debate that led to the resignation of a pastor. He was so sure of his idea of what was going on that the pressure to change that idea prompted him to leave.

When thinking about research and innovation in terms of the "pipeline" metaphor, the process is linear and quite predictable. The "pipeline" is suitable for stable and regulated contexts. The "spiral" metaphor, by contrast, frames innovation as a dynamic process of looking and listening again and again (therefore not settling to quickly with established points of view – like "everybody supports this idea" or "the young people are not interested"), reframing problems, experimenting early and continuously adapting.

5. Case study

In the following section, a case study is briefly presented to illustrate the role and impact of using the insights of social innovation and the research cycle for missional transformation in a practical situation.

This case study explores how the integration of missional diaconate, Trinitarian theology, and social innovation reshaped the diaconal praxis of the Outeniqualand DRC in the Southern Cape, South Africa. It positions this transformation within the broader policy shifts of the DRC since

2013, moving from charity-based "passion projects" toward collaborative, systemic, and contextually grounded social development.

Theologically, missional diaconate is framed as participation in the *missio Dei* – a deeply relational engagement with a vulnerable world, grounded in God's character of justice, mercy, and shalom. This paradigm shift requires the church to move beyond technocratic interventions and toward adaptive change, incorporating theories from development studies, systems thinking, and innovation science. The authors connect this shift to Korten and Klaus' social development framework, urging congregations to progress from first-generation welfare to third- and fourth-generation systemic transformation. (Korten & Klaus, 1984).

The Outeniqualand Congregation (OC) approached the Centre for Social Innovation (CSI) seeking assistance to appoint an auxiliary social worker. CSI reframed the request, proposing a social innovation laboratory to uncover deeper systemic causes. The OC's diaconal focus on four rural farm schools had yielded educational improvements, yet persistent concerns about weak parenting practices signalled deeper social complexity.

Using the Missional Research Cycle and the Little Seeds Unit's ECD process, CSI convened a two-day workshop with more than thirty stakeholders. Through structured exercises – including systems mapping, appreciative listening, indigenous knowledge integration, and human-centred design – the participants collectively identified parenting as the root cause affecting child well-being, school performance, and broader social challenges. This shared discovery produced a unifying design question: What is the most impactful and affordable way to uplift parenting in the community?

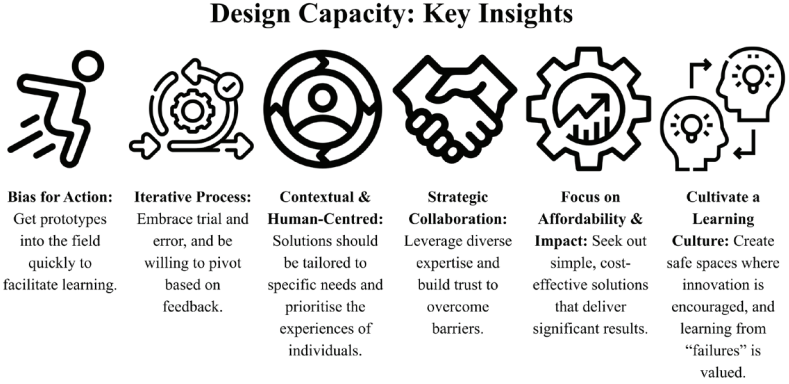
The workshop culminated in the development of a prototype: a network of community-based parent mentors, selected from individuals who already demonstrated effective parenting despite adversity. These mentors would be supported by an integrated "OOP-network" of local stakeholders, creating a relational ecosystem for parent empowerment. The prototype operationalised Rogers' diffusion of innovation principles by starting with willing pioneers, who would refine the model before scaling to broader participation.

Four mentors were appointed, and the OOP[1] network began iterative cycles of implementation, observation, and redesign – reflecting adaptive leadership principles. The process has since been refined and scaled by the DRC's diaconal structures, training facilitators across synodical regions to replicate similar community-driven diaconal innovation.

Overall, the case study demonstrates that missional diaconate, when coupled with social innovation methodologies, enables congregations to respond to complex social realities with humility, adaptability, and theological depth. It argues that sustainable diaconal praxis emerges not from isolated projects but from collaborative, systemic, and incarnational engagement that honours both indigenous community wisdom and the Trinitarian rhythm of relational co-creation.

6. Key insights on innovation capacity and strategy

In the following section, the research suggests key insights from the consultation that can assist in enhancing design capacity. The process identified the following insights: a bias for action; an iterative process; contextual and human- centred design; strategic collaboration; a focus on affordability and impact; and the importance of cultivating a learning culture. These capacities are summarised in the following graphic:



(Figure 4: Design capacity: Key insights)

1 "Oop". Afrikaans for open.

6.1 Bias for action

The consultation emphasised the importance of acting as soon as possible, believing that true learning comes from applying concepts and quickly prototyping solutions. The conclusion was that prototypes must be applied in the field quickly to facilitate learning and gain momentum. This includes early sponsor buy-ins to ensure viable support from the very beginning.

6.2 Iterative process

An important insight in the development of design capacity was the appreciation of the embrace of trial and error, and the willingness to pivot based on feedback. Learning takes place where there is experimentation. A participant from *Betereinders*, gave an example of an innovative tool using an iterative process: "Towards reconciliation, we realised Afrikaners need to speak isiZulu. […] We made little cards that you can learn on the toilet. That worked OK, but people did not want to buy it. It was not financially smart. [Then we made them] into playing cards and we wrote the Zulu words on them. [To be shared] as a gift. 110 Zulu words. [It] was a big success. Someone gave the money. [We also created] Tswana cards and Xhosa cards. That prototype came from trial and error. Sticking to the mandate of learning. From a classroom to a toy. [We] had to pivot several times. The old people could not read the cards [so] we had to enlarge it so that the elderly could also play." This also demonstrates the value of demonstrating pivoting and adapting.

6.3) Contextual and human-centred design

Solutions should be tailored to specific needs and prioritise the experiences of individuals. One of the participants (from Little Seeds) is a pastor who completed the new theological training of the DRC and was formally trained as a youth worker. Frederick Marais from the Centre for Social Innovation (CSI) at Huguenot College explained, "I would say, in a sense, youth workers were a prototype. But they became a disruptive force. But we could learn from that and create the different layers."

Little Seeds explained, "[I would often have conversations with people and] they [would ask] me what my occupation is. I had to say I am a youth worker." They told her that that was not 'n real ministry job. "One time […] I was saying I am finishing a degree in youth ministry, and [the person]

asked, 'Can you study that?'" CSI explains, "Suddenly, the problem became a person. Human-centred design. I remember driving away and realising we need to change this; this is not fair to [Little Seeds]. I knew about this challenge. Just this compassion, human-centred."

The realisation that "the problem of youth workers" was about the person of the youth worker underscored the power of a compassionate, human-centred approach to design. This shift in perspective can transform abstract challenges into tangible solutions.

6.4 Strategic collaboration

A vital part of design is strategic collaboration. This refers to the capacity to leverage diverse expertise and build trust to overcome barriers. Participants referred to the "Monte Rosa project" that showcased how significant transformation can occur by rebuilding trust and strategically connecting existing elements, rather than "breaking rules." By working within current processes and focusing on relationships, they tackled financial distress and building issues in parallel.

6.5 Focus on affordability and impact

Consultation participants underscored a focus on affordability and impact as an important capacity. It is deemed important to create simple, repeatable, and affordable prototypes that can be scaled and implemented by others without constant external facilitation. There are hidden treasures in communities, and activation of these local networks, in most cases without formal training, has proven to be affordable.

6.6 Cultivating a learning culture

Create safe spaces where innovation is encouraged, and learning from "failures" is valued. Beyond specific tools or methods, the conversation emphasised the need to cultivate a culture of innovation within the church – one that fosters psychological safety, collaboration, respect, and a willingness to "play" and explore new imaginations. It is important to utilise the insights of community members who possess local knowledge to solve problems.

The overall sentiment is that by focusing on design thinking and practical application, the church can effectively address contemporary challenges and move towards a more sustainable and impactful future.

7. Conclusion

This research set out to expand the original *Research Strategy for Missional Transformation* by integrating insights from practice, doctoral work, and the 2025 International Innovation Consultation. The findings provide evidence that the strategy remains a robust and generative framework but also demonstrate that its further development requires a more explicit integration of innovation theory, hermeneutical awareness, and practical design capacity. What emerges is not merely a refined methodology, but a deepened understanding of missional innovation as a theological, relational, and adaptive process.

A first key insight is the critical role of lenses and frameworks in shaping how communities interpret reality and act within it. The consultation highlighted that innovation is not driven by data alone, but by the interpretive lenses through which data is read. Narrative, financial, power, systems, asset-based, and metaphor lenses each reveal different dimensions of reality and enable more holistic discernment. This hermeneutical awareness strengthens the early movements of the research cycle – articulating pain, clarifying questions, and recognising emerging patterns.

Secondly, the research affirms that innovation in missional contexts is inherently participatory and relational. Communities are not passive recipients of solutions but active co-researchers and "problem owners." The emphasis on human-centred design, appreciative inquiry, and asset-based thinking demonstrates that sustainable transformation emerges from within communities, as existing capacities, relationships, and practices are recognised and mobilised. This reflects a theological conviction: that the Spirit is already at work within communities, and that discernment involves joining this ongoing activity.

A third insight concerns the nature of innovation as an iterative and embodied process. The emphasis on prototyping, experimentation, and feedback loops confirms that transformation unfolds through cycles

of action and reflection. Innovation is not a linear progression toward predefined outcomes, but a process of faithful improvisation – what Branson and Roxburgh describe as "walking the road into being." This requires a bias for action, a willingness to learn from failure, and the cultivation of environments where experimentation is both possible and valued.

Furthermore, the research identifies key capacities necessary for innovation: strategic collaboration, affordability and scalability, and the cultivation of a learning culture. These capacities shift the focus from isolated interventions to systemic, sustainable change. Particularly significant is the insight that impactful innovation is often simple, locally grounded, and reproducible – challenging assumptions that transformation requires complex or resource-intensive solutions.

The possible impact of this research is therefore substantial. For theology, it offers a renewed framework that integrates *missio Dei* with contemporary innovation theory, contributing to the ongoing development of missional ecclesiology. For practice, it equips congregations and social institutions with a concrete, adaptable process for engaging complex challenges. For interdisciplinary dialogue, it provides a bridge between theological reflection and design thinking, demonstrating how faith-based communities can participate in broader social innovation ecosystems.

Ultimately, this research suggests that missional innovation is less about generating novel programmes and more about cultivating new ways of seeing, listening, and acting. It is about forming communities capable of discerning God's presence, experimenting with hope, and embodying transformative practices. In this sense, the renewed Research Strategy for Innovation offers not only a method, but a *way of being* – an invitation to participate faithfully and creatively in God's ongoing work of renewal in the world.

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