

My Pilgrimage to the Missional in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH in South Africa at its 2013 General Synod made a bold resolution—to be a missional church. This resolution was not only an acknowledgement of past failures, but also a commitment to deep and lasting reform. In this article one of the pastors (and leaders) of the church tells this story from a personal, biographical perspective. It is a story of learning and growth and conversion. In this story we see how historical occurrences, personal experiences, reading the Bible and theology, meetings

and conversations with friends and strangers and friendships, old and new, can help people change their minds. We also see how being missional is not only bound up with our understanding of scripture and theology, but also with the context in which we live and work. It becomes very clear that it is impossible to isolate the missional work of the church from the political, social and economic realities in which we live. We also see that being missional should not be romanticized as an ideal situation. Most of the time being missional is conducted in the messy chaos we call life.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013 the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (hereafter DRC) took an important resolution at the meeting of its General Synod. They committed themselves to become a dedicated missional church.¹ At the time it was seen as a remarkable and direction-changing decision that was taken unanimously by Synod. Though Synod resolutions should probably never be treated as Damascus experiences, this will in future be regarded a one of the most meaningful decisions that the Dutch Reformed Church took in the past 50 years.

It was the culmination of a long process of reflection, experimentation and efforts at reform in the Church and an acknowledgement that we needed a new beginning and a new vision for the future. We are well aware that reform is not accomplished through Synod decisions as such, but with this resolution we at least had a clear goal, a functional roadmap, and a commitment of sorts.

This article narrates a personal journey behind this major resolution. I will share some of the experiences, incidents, meetings, conversations, and books that took me along this road. For many of us in the DRC our own stories of growth and conversion

1. For the full text of the resolution see: *Framework document on the Missional Nature and calling of the Dutch Reformed Church* available at: https://www.academia.edu/9789282/Framework_Document_On_The_Missional_Nature_And_Calling_Of_The_Dutch_Reformed_Church.

are intertwined with the story of the conversion of the DRC. It is certainly true of my story—which would be a very typical story in some ways, but also a unique story from other perspectives.

EVANGELICAL BEGINNINGS: FINDING FAITH IN A LIVING GOD

The story of my commitment to a missional understanding of the Church starts with my own story of faith. I come from a typical rural Afrikaans-speaking family in the Northern Cape (in the vicinity of Kimberley). We were Christians (not overly active in the church), but also loyal Afrikaner-nationalists (especially my father). I came to a personal faith in Jesus Christ in grade 11. It was an intense personal experience for me which I, strangely enough, only shared with others (including my parents) after I decided to study for full-time ministry in the Church. Although such a personal experience of faith and conversion was somewhat unusual to many of my friends and even some of my family, it was not irregular in the DRC which always had a strong evangelical and mission branch.

In the next couple of years at Stellenbosch University my evangelical faith was deepened through active participation in the local church and the Student Christian Association. As I look back I realize that two specific experiences during this time had a deep influence on my life and my way of thinking. In my second year we experienced a “revival” in our dormitory. About twenty of the hundred and twenty students came to faith during that year. And most of it lasted. If I at times had doubts about the reality of the power of the gospel, these friends whose lives were changed—some drastically changed—helped to expel those fears. Reading Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship* (1959) in my second year also helped to deepen my own faith.

The second experience came in my fifth year when my mother died unexpectedly. I had a strong relationship with her and the rest of my family were very concerned about my reaction. Although I was deeply saddened and still miss her even today, I

was comforted by God's Spirit in a surprisingly deep and profound way and was able to conduct her funeral service. I realized afterwards that this experience strengthened my conviction that the God of Jesus Christ was indeed a living God. It felt like I now knew that God is a God of his Word who can be trusted to do what he promised.

I share this early part of the story because a large percentage of pastors and even lay leaders of the DRC would have had a similar kind of beginning to their faith journeys. Though our understanding of the content and implications of the gospel was very limited (mine anyway) we knew that God was a living God and that discipleship meant conversion and change.

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE GOSPEL: GETTING MORE THAN WHAT I ASKED FOR

The second episode of my story has to do with a growing awareness that conversion to Christ had social and political consequences that I did not foresee. I tell this part of the story because in the case of the DRC in South Africa (hereafter SA) the move toward becoming more missional is deeply connected to the rectification of the role the church played in the political life of the country. While the US churches, for instance, may think that they can tell the story of their move to being missional without much reference to specific political issues (whether that is correct or not), that is definitely not possible in SA. For many of the pastors of my age the struggle to become missional is closely bound up with efforts to come to terms with the blunders we made by legitimizing apartheid.

This awakening happened during my years at Stellenbosch University. Strangely enough it was triggered not by my studies or theological reading in the first place, but through people I met and relating to them. I attended one or two meetings that were addressed by leaders of the Christian Institute, specifically the Rev. Beyers Naude (whom I had not met until then) and Rev. Theo Kotze, a pastor in the Methodist Church. These two men were deeply

involved with the anti-apartheid movement and made theological and biblical arguments that I had not heard before.

But there was a second experience which affected me on an even deeper level. As chairperson of the Afrikaans branch of Student Christian Association (hereafter SCA), I also participated in a meeting in 1972 between the leaders of the different (inevitably racialised) branches of the SCA. At this meeting I was confronted by young committed Christian leaders from other races who had a totally different view on the country and the role of the Church than the one I grew up with. I have often told people that this meeting changed my life in a much more profound way than I realized that Saturday morning. After meeting these brothers, hearing their stories of faith and their reasoning, I could never think about people from other races in the same way I had before.

So, in my fourth and fifth year at Stellenbosch it started to dawn on me that my Church was in deep trouble. We were reared to think that other Churches were just mean with us and did not read their Bibles well. I now realized that it was we who did not read our Bibles properly—and did not attend to the well-meant warnings of our brothers and sisters. I knew then that we had to change, if we wished to be worthy of the name of Christ. I knew it would not be easy, but I also believed that it could happen! I realized afterwards that the question of how people change—how we can help people to change, and how I myself can be changed—became the central question of my ministry and most of my theological work over the next four or five decades.

For me personally, and I guess for many of my colleagues, this struggle with our apartheid past was always there, never far away, from 1968 to the present moment. It was present in many forms. It was in a way symbolized in the Belhar Confession² accepted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (later URCSA). Belhar was always there and reminded us of our mistakes but also invited us to remorse and conversation and a deepened faith in the Trinity. We knew that there could be no forgiveness and a new beginning

2. See <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/contemporary-testimony/confession-belhar> for a text of the Belhar Confession.

without seeing, admitting and confessing our sins—before God and before our sisters and brothers. And some of the most blessed moments of my life were when such repentance occurred and our sisters and brothers were gracious enough to forgive us and welcome us back into the fold of the faithful. It was also reflected in wonderful occasions when brothers and sisters from other Churches invited us to join the rest of the Church in efforts to be witnesses and agents of transformation in our country. The truth is that a lot of the energy we needed for the processes of reform in the DRC came from this forgiveness, openness and hospitality we received from fellow Christians in the country. Although many pastors and congregations have “accepted” Belhar as a confession, the DRC as a whole has, sadly, still not succeeded in doing it.

Meetings and conversations—that grew into friendships—played a very important role in my story of conversion. When I look back I know that I was very fortunate at critical moments of my life to meet people that helped me to grow and change. There were several friends and senior colleagues in my own Church; there were a number of colleagues from URCSA, and in later years colleagues from other churches too. And then there was the gracious presence (though I did not know him well) of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In later years I often said to younger pastors that things started to change in my own life when I realized that about 50 percent of my good friends were people from other Churches and races than my own.

**THE CENTRAL QUESTION BEHIND MY WORK: HOW
ARE WE CHANGED AND HOW DO WE HELP OTHERS TO
CHANGE**

Theological work—both reading and writing—played a very important role in the development of my thinking about the Church and the gospel. I was always an avid reader and have written extensively since the early 1980’s. Although I always tried to be academically responsible in the work I did, I saw myself not as an academic theologian in the first place but as a church theologian.

I wrote books and articles in many fields of theology and ministry but I realized at some point that the question driving most of my work was the question of how we can help individuals and congregations to reform in a constructive and responsible way. I show here my progress to ever-deepening and complexifying levels of the answers to this question.

In the first phase of my ministry—I accepted my first call to a congregation in 1975—the focus of my thinking was on how I can help the (individual) members of my congregation to grow in their faith and conversion. In Reformed circles the assumption is that conversion comes from hearing the Word of God in preaching and teaching. In my whole ministry I tried to be very diligent and thoughtful in my preaching. I also did my doctoral work in the field of homiletics on the theme of “Preaching Law and Gospel.” Luther famously said: “The Word of God comes to change us”—and that change, we know, can only be brought about by the gospel and not by the law. The essence of my argument was that people are not changed or transformed when they hear only the law. The law can shake and terrorise us, but only the gospel can save us. I worked primarily with the theology and *Predigtmeditationen* of Hans-Joachim Iwand (1964, 1973) but learnt much from Karl Barth (CD II/1, II/2, III/4), A. A. van Ruler (1974), G. C. Berkouwer (1949) and one of my own teachers, Willie Jonker (1976, 1981).

In this time—around 1980—two friends (Bethel Muller and Dirk Smit) and I started an ambitious project. We initiated a series of Preaching Aids (German *Predigthilfen*) called *Woord teen die Lig* (English: *Seeing the Word against/in the Light*). Over a timespan of about twenty years we published 24 volumes, each of them containing around 20–24 sermon meditations. The idea in all these books was to help pastors preach the Word of God as the gospel that resists us in our sinfulness, that consoles and renews us in our weakness and helplessness and that calls us to obedience to Christ in our daily lives. Planning, discussing and editing these volumes—during late nights in conversation with my two colleagues—was a hugely formative experience for me.

This project took much of my time and energy in the years from 1980 to 1990. During this time, I was a pastor to the students at Stellenbosch University and had the opportunity to regularly preach to 3000–4000 of them on a Sunday. I worked conscientiously on my sermons and received good feedback. But towards the end of that period I started to sense that diligent preaching was not the whole story, that I was missing something, that the process of evangelical change was more complicated than just preaching the gospel on Sunday. Over the next couple of years, I had to modify my theory of transformational change.

First, I realized that the ministry of the gospel was not only about sharing important helpful information with people but also demanded that we be more intentional about formation and transformation. We are liberated and transformed by the grace of God only when we hear and obey the command of Christ, as Karl Barth noted (CD II/2: 566–630). We started to pay more attention to spirituality, the disciplines of faith and moral formation. Presently we have a number of pastors who are doing excellent work in this field of moral and faith formation.

Secondly, we discovered—a common problem in Reformed circles—that we had been underestimating the importance of the liturgy (and the sacraments) as co-means of grace alongside preaching. We assembled a strong group of pastors and academics to work in this field and amongst other things, they started two annual South African volumes on the Revised Common Lectionary, using it for preaching and worship planning. I was part of this move and wrote a couple of articles on the role of worship and later also created a publication on the important role of baptism (Burger, 2017).

HOW PEOPLE ARE CHANGED: A MORE COMPLICATED PROCESS . . .

The third modification was even more fundamental. I steadily came to understand that (probably due to my evangelical beginnings) the primary focus of a substantial part of my ministry was

on individuals and personal transformation. I was not paying nearly enough attention to the life and work of the whole congregation. I remember a growing sense of uneasiness when what was preached in the sermon was not reflected in the announcement of the congregation's program for the week. It became clear to me that we were killing the sermon when there is a gaping incongruence between our sermon message and what the congregation will be doing this week. In later years Lesslie Newbigin (1963, 1978, 1989), whose work for some reason I had not discovered at this stage, gave me language for the problems I was seeing. The gospel is carried in this world not by individuals or sermons or books but by the life and witness of the whole people of God. The congregation is in truth the primary hermeneutic of the gospel (Newbigin, 1989: 222). I understood that prophetic preaching was not enough; ultimately, the congregation had to live prophetically in its context.

For me this was the beginning of a new phase of my theological work focusing on ecclesiological or congregational studies. At the end of 1989 I received a grant for a four-month visit to the UK and the USA to research Congregational Studies as a discipline. I visited several seminaries and universities and spoke to many theologians working in this and related fields, amongst them Duncan Forrester, Carl Dudley (1987), Ray Anderson (1979), Tom Frank, Martin Marty, Fred Craddock and also Peter Berger. At this time there was an explosion of publications in this field and I remember returning to SA with seven bags filled with theological books! I read a huge number of books on congregational renewal, but also studies in the related fields of sociology, social psychology, group dynamics, organizational theory, educational theory, leadership, etc.

On my return I wrote a book with the title *Die Dinamika van 'n Christelike Geloofsgemeenskap* (*The Dynamics of a Christian Faith Community*). The book was well received and widely read and was awarded a prestigious prize for theological books in Afrikaans. The book focused attention on the congregation as such. In the book I tabled a theory on how the dynamics of a faith community works. What was important to me was that the theory was

informed by “secular” knowledge from other fields, but was set within in a broader theological (to be more precise, a practical-theological) frame. The greatest merit of the book, I thought, was that it opened up a conversation on the formation and transformation of congregations in an empirically informed but also theologically responsible way.

At this same period BUVTON, a Centre for Continuing Theological Education at the Theological Faculty of Stellenbosch (the mnemonic is derived from Afrikaans), employed 50 percent of my time away from the student congregation where I was serving. My role was to coordinate research on ministerial and congregational reform. This was a wonderful opportunity and a time of real growth and creative work—for myself and a number of colleagues. We formed several working groups focusing on burning issues in congregations. In the mid 90s we had about 200 pastors and theologians participating in about 15 different study groups. The groups focused on specific issues, e.g. worship and liturgy, moral formation, vocation, youth and education, families, adult education, and one on Church unity, and several good publications and programs saw the light of day. In the meantime, the central focus was still on the transformation of the Church as a system, its local congregations and the South African context. During this time, we also organized a racially mixed group that visited several seminaries, theological faculties and churches in the USA in late 1994. For many of us it was a life-changing experience—with the formation of new friendships over racial boundaries. It was on this trip that I got to know a couple of friends from URCSA much better, especially Russel Botman (who was my roommate on the trip), Daan Cloete and Nico Koopman.

The 1990s were also the years of political transition in South Africa. It was tense and tough but also exhilarating and surprisingly energizing at times. I realized that what we were experiencing with the transition was a unique opportunity. In those days I was reading a great deal in the field of cultural studies and stumbled (via Gerald Arbuckle) on the theories about liminality from Victor Turner’s work in Zambia. During a sabbatical in Germany I wrote

a book with the Afrikaans title *Gemeentes in Transito* (*Congregations in Transition: Opportunities for Renewal in Troubled Times*). The central message of the book was that though times of transition can be difficult and disrupting, they can also be a blessing and bring unexpected energy for conversion and growth. I still think that this book could have had a better reception. Some friends thought that I wrote it too early and that a large number of our pastors and members were not yet ready for it.

During the next ten years several publications aimed at church renewal and reformation were published. Dr Ian Nell and I edited a book *Draers van die Waarheid* (*Carriers of the Truth: New Testament Visions of the Church*). I also wrote a book with the Afrikaans title *Familie van God* (*Family of God*) exploring the metaphor of the family as a useful way to think about the Church. We also worked on a volume of *Woord teen die Lig* about Church unity.

BEWARE OF SUPERFICIAL RENEWAL: RE-ROOTING OURSELVES IN THE GOSPEL

By the mid-nineties the conversation about congregational reform had become mainstream in South Africa and many congregations were talking about restructuring and renewal. Practical, ten-step books on renewal abounded, and more and more congregations entered into some or other kind of restructuring process. I was concerned that a large portion of the material used was too shallow, often restricted to technical change and bound to disappoint. I felt called in the second half of the 1990s to refocus my research on more fundamental theological and practical-theological issues in ecclesiology.

I had started reading systematic and biblical theological material on ecclesiology already during my time in Germany in 1992. Not all of it was helpful. I have to concur with Hendrikus Berkhof (1985) that ecclesiology was largely neglected by systematic theologians. Wolfgang Huber (1988), who was my host in Germany, helped me with a simple distinction he made between the real

church (where we work and worship) and the ideal church (that systematic theologians write about). His point was that there was not always a productive and responsible interaction between these two fields. I realized then that the real challenge was how to make a constructive connection between what Huber called the real and the ideal.

In 1997–98 I had the opportunity to take this work on practical-theological ecclesiology further during a six-month sabbatical at the Center of Theological Inquiry (hereafter CTI) at Princeton. The result of my research was published in 1999 under the title: *Gemeentes in die Kragveld van die Gees: oor die unieke identiteit, taak en bediening van die kerk* (*Congregations in the Force Field of the Spirit: about the unique identity, calling and ministry of the church*). For me this was a very important book, for two reasons.

First, I was sure that although the church was to a large extent an ordinary organization like any other, it was also—in another way—unique because it was the body of Christ. I was helped to claim this insight through conversations with Bill Lazareth (ex-Lutheran bishop of New York and at that stage research director at CTI). In a presentation at the CTI I referred to the “body of Christ” as an “image” St Paul used in the New Testament. Bill challenged me on this point by asking me what gave me the idea that Paul was using this expression only as an “image”? I still believe that the church is in a way an ordinary human organization, but I also believe that the church is more. In a real sense it is also the people of God, the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Second, it became clear to me that when churches malfunction the primary problem could be on more than one level. There is a tendency in church renewal circles to look for “one-size-fits-all” solutions. The sub-title of this book referred to three different, but all very important, levels of the life of the church namely: identity (who we are), calling or mission (what we do) and ministry (how we do it). I made an argument in the book that most congregations have this inclination, almost a predisposition, to always look for problems on the level of ministry. The reality is that we often have more fundamental problems to deal with. It was clear to me

anyway that the bigger problems in my own church were on the level of mission and identity. I came to understand that in the next phase of our research we would have to focus more strongly on the calling (mission) of the church and the identity of the church. Regular conversations with Russel Botman who was with me at CTI, also helped me to clarify vital ecclesiological issues within the South African context.

During the time in Princeton I formed friendships with two people whose work influenced me in more than one way. I visited Darryl Guder in Atlanta and read his book, *Missional Church* (1989). It helped me greatly because I realized that *The Gospel and our Culture Group* (hereafter GOCN) in the USA were doing more or less the same thing that we were trying to do. I attended their annual meeting in Chicago in 1999, befriended a number of their members and established lasting relationships with them. Though the processes were somewhat different, we appreciated their theological approach and learned much from them. The other person was Pat Keifert, senior systematic theologian at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis and director of Church Innovations (hereafter CI). I met Pat through a mutual friend Don Juel. The six-hour conversation with Pat in my office at CTI was the beginning of a wonderful friendship and fruitful collaboration. Dr Keifert spent a sabbatical in South Africa in 2001 and helped us to start a version of CI's church change process; *Partnership for Missional Church* (hereafter PMC). The introduction of PMC was led by a very able colleague Dr Frederick Marais and over the next 10 years more than 200 congregations participated in it.

In 2002 Pat Keifert, myself and Harald Hegstadt from Norway initiated the formation of *The International Research Consortium*. It was an invitation-only international group of researchers who were interested in studying congregations both from a social scientific and theological viewpoint. We knew a number of good people who were doing either the one or the other; we thought that we should be doing both theological and social scientific work. The Consortium started out with about twelve members from different continents (which in time grew to around forty) and we met once

a year. The decision was taken that the Consortium would not be a formal conference but more of a think tank and space of conversation and cooperation. The Consortium played a major role in our collective thinking about congregations and their mission.

Working closely with colleagues in both groups (the Consortium and GOCN), I always found the (slight) difference in emphasis and language interesting. While the GOCN placed the word “missions” centrally in what they were doing, the Consortium preferred to focus on understanding churches and congregational reform. This came to my attention when I gave the manuscript of my book on *Congregations in the Force Field of the Spirit* to one of the leading members of the GOCN to read and, looking at the title, his honest and well-meant comment was: “Why is the book about the church and not about missions?” Not saying but implying: church is boring and dead; missions is vibrant and alive.

In time I understood that this difference in emphasis had more to do with context and historical background than with theological issues. To be honest, in later years, the Consortium, and I myself, started using missional terminology more and more often. I realized, in time, that it gave me language to connect my thinking about the Church and congregations more seamlessly with our faith in the Trinity and God’s mission. But we still believe that we need to reflect on congregations too. Missional ministry is always “incarnated” in some kind of congregational “capsule” whether we like it or not. And that capsule can enhance the missional ministry or restrict it. We are presently working on a publication on Missional Ecclesiology because we discovered that missional change in the DRC has often been hampered by our traditional ecclesiology which was not necessarily tuned to promote missional ministry.

AN UNEXPECTED TWIST: NO DEEP REFORM WITHOUT GREATER UNITY IN THE CHURCH

My work on congregational reform was in a way “interrupted” during the second part of the 1990s when I was elected into more senior positions in the leadership of the Dutch Reformed Church.

From 1999–2007 I was first moderator of the Western Cape Synod of our Church (the largest of the provincial synods) and then for two terms moderator of our General Synod. I could no longer attend all the conversations in the way I did before, but I soon realized that the new responsibility presented me with other opportunities.

I was in a strange way “prepared” for this work by spending the Fall Semester of 1999 at Boston University as a Visiting Professor. I was invited by Peter Berger and during this time had many conversations with him. Peter knew the South African situation well and was surprisingly appreciative of the role a (somewhat!) repentant DRC played in the transition. He was curious about the Church’s willingness to acknowledge and confess the mistakes we made, saying that this was a rare occurrence even in Christian circles. Peter, in a way, helped me to understand that the DRC still had a very crucial role to play in the country.

I was always convinced that deeper church reform in the DRC will have to be accompanied by greater Church unity, and I now had the opportunity to plead and work for that. I am grateful to say that during that time we joined both the larger ecumenical bodies, namely the South African Council of Churches and The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa. For myself and many of our pastors and members these were significant and memorable occasions. It was wonderful to be welcomed back in the fold of the ecumenical church in the nation. Unfortunately, the unification process with our sister church, URCSA, did not proceed that well. Towards the end of my second term as moderator (working at that stage with Thias Kgatla and Allan Boesak) I was very hopeful about our progress but eventually we did not succeed in our efforts. This was—to be honest—one of the biggest disappointments not only of my terms as moderator but of my whole life. We did have one success story and that was uniting the theological training of URCSA and DRC students in the Western Cape. In 2000 the Western Cape Synod of URCSA decided to bring their Seminary from UWC to Stellenbosch.

At the assembly of 2002 the Synod also issued a very strong and hopeful statement committing ourselves to the gospel, the Ecumenical Church and the Nation. I thought that we had never before committed ourselves in such clear language to the country as a whole. We confirmed that all the problems and issues in South Africa were also our problems and we pledged to work for answers with all other groups in the country. I realized then, and on several occasions afterwards, that this commitment energized me (and a large number of my colleagues) immensely. It gave us a hopeful and inspiring vision for the future.

During this time the PMC process and the Congregational Reform movement grew steadily as more and more congregations became involved. The initial work on the synodical resolution of 2013 also started during this time. At the IRC we had several conversations during this period on how to conduct a missional reform process in denominations—which was a much more complicated story than a congregational process! The focus of my own reflection and writing, during the limited time that I had for that kind of activity, was on two themes, namely church unity and identity and vocation. I wrote a smaller non-academic book about the Reformed Tradition as an open and ecumenically friendly tradition (2001) and a somewhat more comprehensive book on the concept of vocation (2005), which I more and more understood as our missional link to the work of Calvin and Luther. They did not use the word “missional” but what they meant with “vocation” had a similar intent.

REFORMING CONGREGATIONS—AND COMMUNITIES!

After I stepped down as moderator I returned to my work at BU-VTON—the name was in the meantime changed to Ekklesia—to focus on the Continuing Theological and Ministerial Formation of pastors. At the Synod of 2007 the DRC took a courageous decision, making continuing education compulsory for all pastors. Pastors in future had to do 50 hours of formative training per year. I was grateful for this development because I always felt that a hopeful,

reflective and energetic leader was an absolute necessity for missional renewal. We also succeeded in opening up the training for pastors from other churches which transformed our conversations in an unbelievably positive way.

During the previous 5 or 10 years I came to see my own role in the Church more and more as emphasizing the importance of proper theological work. For me this did not mean academic work in the first place but linking what we do in the church more closely to the gospel and the Triune God. Theologians that had a strong influence on my thinking during this phase were Newbigin, Barth, Bosch, N. T. Wright, Michael Welker, Migliore and a good friend, Prof Dirkie Smit, alongside Andrew Walls. We invited Walls (1996) and Kwame Bediako (2000) to Stellenbosch in 2008 and a couple of conversations with them, especially with Prof. Walls, helped me greatly. His focus on Africa and his clear understanding that Christians do not primarily believe in a book (the Bible) but in a person (Jesus Christ) renewed my own vision for the Church. In 2009 I wrote a book on the real presence of Jesus with his Church even after the Ascension under the title *Waar is Jesus nou?* (English: *Where is Jesus now?*). A new appreciation for Jesus and Christology also brought me back to Trinitarian Theology. A large portion of my reading the past ten years has been in the field of the Trinity. I regularly teach courses on *The Trinity, missio Dei and the Plot of the Gospel*, where we are exploring ways in which we can connect our ecclesiology more closely not only to biblical perspectives but also to the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. I confess that I have a new first rule for missional churches: “If you want to help people be enthusiastic about the church, you do not talk to them about the church. You talk to them about God and the gospel!”

From the side of Ekklesia we have organized two conferences on Missional Reform in the past six years. The first one was on *Missional Theology and Missional Churches* (the proceedings were published in 2017 under the title *Cultivating Missional Churches*) and the second one on *Missional Ecclesiology* (to be published in

2021). These conferences were well attended by pastors from many different churches and denominations in South Africa.

After my retirement I have been focusing on work with the African Independent Churches in our country. They are a formidable and growing sector in South African Church life. Their membership is estimated at 15–18 million—almost a third of the South African population! We are assisting them with ministerial and theological training and try to link them more closely with the older churches. Not for their sake only—also for the sake of the older churches.

One major development (I should be honest and say “correction”) in my own thinking about being missional is that I realized that the main focus of our work should never be on congregations as such, but rather on the communities and even the societies which we are called to serve. I often confess to pastors in these days that I spent too much time on studying and talking about congregations and too little time on understanding and focussing on communities. I was reminded of a Dutch scholar, Graafland (1989) who said about Calvin that he worked himself to death in Geneva not because he wanted to build a great church but because he wanted to win the city for God. I had to say to myself: it is not about the church, stupid. It is about the communities and about the cities!

IN CLOSING

There has certainly been a move towards becoming more missional within the DRC. I see that in my own life, in the lives of many colleagues and congregations and in the resolution of our General Synod. But this conversion is certainly not an accomplished fact. Far from it. The truth is that we are struggling; we are still wrestling with our past and have not succeeded in our unification process; we are fighting secularism, materialism and an unhealthy evangelicalism at the same time; we are dealing with difficult issues (e.g. LGBTQI+ people in the church) that can divide us even further; and then there are all kinds of trivial (but seemingly urgent)

matters that cause us to lose focus and energy. This is not a success story. We are bleeding from many wounds, we are losing members, in more than one way we are dying.

But we also see many hopeful signs: a new sense of openness to other Christians, people committing themselves to the country with new enthusiasm, a strong movement to recover the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Trinity as the core of our Christian Faith. And we remember that Jesus said: it is only when a grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies that it can bear much fruit (Jn 12.24).

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