

The *Missio Dei* as Flourishing Life

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ABSTRACT

The idea of flourishing life has become one of the most important concepts in theological discourse, understanding human flourishing as at the heart of the Christian gospel. This literature and document-based research links the concept of *flourishing life* with the *missio Dei* and presents it as a contextually relevant theological interpretation of the *missio Dei*. The Church's participation in God's mission includes contributing towards flourishing life, and it concludes that such participation is of particular importance to ecclesiology.

Missional ecclesiology is interested in everyday life and in faithful presence in everyday communities. The research follows an incarnational approach and argues for a Christian lifestyle focussed on the rhythms of everyday life in a way that appreciates the importance of the material life. It proposes attending to created life, sustained life and consummated life. The connection between flourishing life and the *missio Dei* underscores the important role

of the Church in earthkeeping and affirms the Church's calling to take responsibility for creation. The Church participates in sustaining life through four principles: conservancy, safeguarding, fruitfulness and Sabbath rest. In terms of consummation, the expectation of the end influences the here and now and how the church acts in everyday life.

The research demonstrates that the connection between the *missio Dei* and flourishing life does have important implications for the Church's public theology and the challenge to articulate a positive vision of life. It proposes a pluralistic social vision focussed on diversity, unconditional love, Jesus Christ as the light of the world, the moral equality of all human beings, and freedom of religion.

The research concludes by attending to faithful presence as a way to translate the *missio Dei* into church *praxis*. Ecclesial life is located within the mutual concerns of the neighborhood. Faithful presence includes practices such as listening to the narrative of your place; enacting God's peace in neighbourhoods; serving justice and reconciliation, allowing truth to flourish; and faithful reciprocal relationships with the created world.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of God's mission has received much attention in recent theological discourse and in ecumenical debates and publications. Mission is understood as an attribute of God; and the focus on God's movement towards the world, is described as the *missio Dei*. This is essentially a Trinitarian theology where the life of the church is grounded in the life and activity of the Trinity, and where the mission of the church is to participate in God's mission.

The question addressed in this research is: In what way(s) can the concept of *flourishing life* serve as a contextual and relevant theological interpretation of the *missio Dei*? A number of questions flow from this. If it is possible (or even necessary) to embrace the concept of flourishing life as an interpretation of the *missio Dei*, how does this interpretation enrich missional ecclesiology? In

what way does the *missio Dei*, as flourishing life, impact the public witness of the church?

This contribution combines current ideas on the *missio Dei* with the rapidly developing discourses on flourishing life.

MISSIO DEI

There is substantial theological consensus on the trinitarian theology of *missio Dei* (see Niemandt 2019b, 2; Guder 2015, 25), and it is widely recognised as one of the most important developments in the theology of mission. Niemandt explains that “it introduced a radically new understanding of mission and theology, and mission studies are still grappling with the implications, which stretch far beyond the traditional cross-cultural missionary task of the church” (Niemandt 2019b, 2). There is indeed a growing consensus on the Trinitarian theology of the *missio Dei*, and flowing from that a re-appropriation of and understanding of ecclesiology. Skreslet summarizes: “*Missio Dei* language also invites one to conceive of the church itself as a sent community, dispatched by the Triune God for witness in the world” (Skreslet 2012, loc 798). The message of the Gospel is clear—the church witnesses that Jesus Christ brought salvation to the world. This is also clear when one considers discussions in ecumenical bodies, in partnerships for missional churches and other discourse focused on the missional church. The term *missio Dei* pops up in all of these conversations.

But the overfamiliarity of the term poses its own challenges: what exactly do we mean when we say that “the church participates in God’s mission”? Changing context will certainly influence ideas in this regard. *Missio Dei* must be translated into church *praxis*.

Bevens and Schroeder (2011, 26) remind us that the Church participates in God’s life as communion-in-mission and is in itself missionary by its very nature. The *missio Dei* constitutes the *missiones ecclesiae* (Bosch 1991, 370) and emphasises the kenotic and communal character of the Church, and the fact that the essence of the church is to participate in the mission of God. The Church is essentially missionary.

The *missio Dei* focuses on salvation and restoration, but also explains that “God is by nature a missional God, who is seeking not just to save ‘souls’ to take to heaven someday, but to restore and save the created order: individuals, communities, nations, the environment, the world, the cosmos” (Gorman 2018, 4).

I appreciate Volf and Croasmun’s explanation of the arc that can be drawn from the creation of the world to the calling of Jesus Christ to make all things new, to eventually turn “the entire world into God’s home and our home” (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 6). This transformation of all creation into God’s home seems to be an appropriate description of the *missio Dei*. Or, as Conradie concludes, “The mission of the Church may be understood as preparing the house for God’s homecoming” (Conradie 2015, 231). The Church is part and parcel of the preparations and is called to be involved in God’s restorative work.

This raises several questions regarding the nature and calling of the Church. How does the Church prepare the house for the homecoming? What does this entail in terms of our imagination of what the Church might be? What does creation, sustaining and consummation mean for the future of ecclesial (flourishing) life?

“LIFE IN FULLNESS” AND “FLOURISHING LIFE”

Answering the question about the Church’s participation in preparing the house for God’s homecoming, involves a description of God’s home. When one attempts to describe God’s home, various images comes to mind. One of the overarching ideas is that God’s home is a place where life flourishes. The idea of life in fullness, or flourishing life has become one of the most important concepts in ecumenical and theological discourse in the last three decades. This flows from the conviction that concern for human flourishing is at the heart of the Christian gospel. Pennington labels this a meta-theme or meta-concept with staying power and a universal voice “because it addresses what is most basic and innate to all of humanity, despite the diversity of race, culture, and values” (Pennington 2015, 1).

Marais investigated the rise in the rhetoric of *human flourishing* and identified the following patterns in the discourse (Marais 2015, ii):

- Human flourishing as piety, joy, and comfort
- Human flourishing as a fulfilled life, healing, and dignity
- Human flourishing as grace, happiness, and blessing

She observes that the rhetoric of human flourishing is part of the revival in happiness studies, and that this includes theology (2, 7). The rhetoric shifted, however, from happiness to human flourishing, particularly amongst liberation theologians, feminist theologians, disability theologians, and ecological theologians (10). This shift can be observed in theological conferences, academic research into biblical texts that sketch a picture of the flourishing of human beings, and ecumenical meetings.

The World Council of Churches (WCC), in an important ecumenical affirmation on mission and evangelism, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (TTL) (Keum 2013), states that Jesus Christ's ultimate concern and mission is to affirm life in all its fullness. Although the WCC does not represent all the Christian churches and traditions, it can be accepted as an important and influential voice reflecting ecumenical diversity. This authoritative text on mission and evangelism, a primary point of reference to understand Christian mission in the early twenty-first century (Ross 2017, 91), frequently uses terms such as "fullness of life" (Keum 2013, 3, 14, 17, 25, 34, 37, 39, 44), "abundant life" (4, 37), "wholeness" (19–20), "affirmation of life" (34, 37), and "flourishing life" (5). TTL explains the theme of life in fullness in trinitarian terms:

- "God created the whole *oikoumene* in God's image and constantly works in the world to affirm and safeguard life" (Keum 2013, 4).
- Jesus Christ is the life of the world and the incarnation of God's love for the world.

- The Holy Spirit is described as the life-giver “who sustains and empowers life and renews the whole creation” (Keum 2013, 4).

To prepare the house for God’s homecoming is to participate in God’s mission to bring life in fullness. The WCC does this when it connects the concept of life in fullness with God’s mission: “God invites us into the life-giving mission of the triune God and empowers us to bear witness to the vision of abundant life for all in the new heaven and earth” (Keum 2013, 4). It is clear that the idea of flourishing life is receiving a lot of attention in theological reflection and ecumenical debates. *Life* is indeed a key concept in TTL (see also Bevans 2015, 194). God is regarded as the source of life and expanding life is part of God’s being. We are invited to join in God’s life-giving mission. Bevans summarizes TTL and says that mission is about the flourishing of the whole of creation, respecting its integrity and working for its life (Bevans 2015, 195). He concludes: “It is working with joy for life that gives glory to God” (200). To summarize—the trinitarian God is a God of boundless loving and endless life. Mission is participation in the boundless love and endless life of the triune God. Mission is deeply connected to the issue of flourishing life.

Volf is also involved in a far-reaching discourse on *flourishing life* and affirms that this is at the centre of concern for theology, especially due to the failure in recent decades to attend to this issue. “True, good, or flourishing life is the fundamental human question” (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 8) and belongs to the core of theology:

The flourishing of human beings and all God’s creatures in the presence of God is God’s foremost concern for creation and should therefore be the central purpose of theology. (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 11)

What is human flourishing? Kelsey refers to a flourishing human being, as somebody who reflects the glory of God—“the full richness of God’s reality” (Kelsey 2009, 310). Marais summarizes Kelsey’s approach as a description of human flourishing which is

“to blossom” and “to thrive” (Marais 2015, 15). To blossom is “to manifest the type of beauty of which a given life is capable by virtue of God’s relating to it,” and to thrive is “to have oneself in hand” (Kelsey 2009, 315), thus a kind of life that considers other people and life. Pennington explains that human flourishing is the idea that encompasses all human activity and goals because “there is nothing so natural and inescapable as the desire to live, and to live in peace, security, love, health” (Pennington 2015, 1–2). Thriving therefore has implications for human persons themselves, for non-human neighbors and for the broader context in which human beings live (see Marais 2015, 16). Or, in terms of the images of God’s mission, flourishing life can paint a picture of how we can imagine God’s household. It expresses something of God’s home and God’s preferred future for our reality.

For Volf, flourishing means “the good toward which humans are meant to strive” (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 13). He focuses on life and uses the tripartite description of life going well, life led well, and life feeling as it should (Volf 2015, loc 28; Volf and Croasmun 2019, 16). Volf mentions two images:

One is an image of the verdant garden, beautiful and nourishing, a habitat for humans to “till and keep” and a temple in which to converse with their God (Genesis 2). The other is of a universal city that has become a temple, “the new Jerusalem” on a “new earth,” rich in the glory and honor of nations and utterly secure (Revelation 21). (Volf 2015, loc 51)

Pennington identifies human flourishing as a central part of the Bible’s teaching on salvation and redemption. “God is not unconcerned about our well-being and happiness,” says Pennington, “peace, happiness, blessedness, health, joy, and abundance of life are the consistent message of Scripture and the goal of God’s work” (Pennington 2015, 17).

The idea of flourishing life is not limited to the Christian or Jewish religious traditions. Volf argues that all major religions are “carriers of compelling visions of flourishing,” and that religions are “fundamentally accounts of human flourishing, of the self,

social relations, and the good” (Volf 2015, loc 64, 41). Pennington identifies the meta-theme of flourishing life in ancient philosophy (Stoicism, Epicureanism, Platonism), in religions (such as Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity), and in modern trends (such as Joel Osteen’s *Your Best Life Now* and Positive Psychology) (Pennington 2015, 2). In the Christian tradition, the focus is on the kingdom of God—one of the dominant images of flourishing life in the Bible. The kingdom of God is a dynamic relation between God and the world, a situation “when God comes to dwell in the world and when the world has become and experiences itself as being God’s home” (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 69).

The task of humanity is to serve flourishing life by remaking the world into God’s home, a space where God’s presence with his people and creation can be experienced. Volf and Croasmun summarize God’s mission as the world “with God as a residing ‘owner’ rather than absentee ‘landlord,’ the world having come truly into its own and flourishing by having become God’s home” (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 70).

The concepts of flourishing life, human flourishing and the theological importance of God’s life-giving mission relates to many of the traditional theological *loci*, but is of particular importance to ecclesiology. God’s mission and the affirmation of life has cosmic meaning, and the church must affirm all life, and the whole *oikoumene*, “as being interconnected in God’s web of life” (Keum 2013, 5). This is especially important in the case of missional ecclesiology, as the life and existence of the church is understood as a life in the Trinity. The mission of the church is embedded and flows from God’s mission. God’s mission involves abundant life. The church, being called to participate in God’s mission, and embedded in the inner life of the life-giving Trinity, is “commissioned to celebrate life, and to resist and transform all life-destroying forces” (Keum 2013, 4).

This obviously has far-ranging implications for the imagination of church life and *praxis*. The good news is to proclaim abundant life. The church points to and participates in the reign of God, and this involves flourishing life. The church equips and inspires

members to be faithfully present and to search and serve flourishing everyday life.

To summarize—the idea of life in fullness or flourishing life represents a compelling discourse in theology. It may not, at this stage, have the same spread of consensus as the idea of the *missio Dei*, but most certainly raises the question of the possible relationship between the *missio Dei* and flourishing life. Flourishing life serves as an apt description of God’s home, and God’s present and preferred future. This has important ecclesiological implications.

MISSIO DEI AND FLOURISHING LIFE—CONVERGENCE

The question has been posed whether it is possible to embrace the concept of flourishing life as an interpretation of the *missio Dei*, and how does this interpretation enrich the theology of mission and missional ecclesiology? This section entertains the possibility of understanding flourishing life as a particular, powerful and contextually relevant explanation of the *missio Dei*, and explores the convergence between *missio Dei* and *flourishing life*.

Recent discussions explain that missional hermeneutics is grounded in four theological assumptions:

- God, who is love, is missional and therefore has a mission—the *missio Dei*
- Scripture bears witness to God’s mission
- The church is called and sent to participate in that mission in Godlike, or God-shaped, ways (Gorman 2018, 2–3)
- The purpose of the Bible is to equip the church for its witness

One can say that a missional hermeneutic is to read Scriptures with a *missio Dei*-lens. It is what Mburu calls an incarnational and contextualized approach (Mburu 2019, 5–6). Gorman follows this route. He explicitly asks the *missio Dei* question in his book on Paul: “What is God up to in the world? What is the *missio Dei*,

the mission of God?" He answers: "For Paul the answer is clear: to bring salvation to the world" (Gorman 2015, loc 635).

Gorman also connected the idea of the *missio Dei* with life in fullness, or flourishing life. In his exploration of the Gospel according to John, he explains that a single word summarizes the divine mission, and that is "salvation," or, in the Johannine idiom, "life." The *missio Dei*, says Gorman, is "the Son's mission on behalf of the Father in doing signs and giving life" (Gorman 2018, 40).

Gorman suggests that the most appropriate over-arching theme for the gospel of John is "eternal" or "abundant" life (Gorman 2018, 44). "Life" is central in John; he argues that Jesus does not merely disclose something, he delivers something, and that something is life. He concludes that God's *missio* is giving life and that the Gospel of John is "the Gospel of life" (see Gorman 2018, 45-47).

Gorman reminds us that God's liberating, life-giving work is not only the liberation of humanity, but the liberation of the entire cosmos (Gorman 2015, loc 654): "Because God's love is universal it is inescapably missiological" (Gorman 2018, 124). God is on a mission to liberate humanity and the entire cosmos from the powers of sin and death.

It is thus not only possible, but rather compelling, to see the connection between flourishing life and the *missio Dei*, and the implications for any imagination of the missional church. One can only agree with Volf and Croasmun that "all things were created by God; all things continue to exist through God; and all things are destined to become God's home" (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 70).

This impacts on our imagination of what the Church might be, and creates an agenda for the Church to prepare the house for God's homecoming. Ecclesial flourishing life is about creation, sustaining creation and consummation.

The creation, sustenance and consummation of all created life is part and parcel of the *missio Dei*. "God's mission," says Wright, "includes the whole of creation" (Wright 2010, loc 233). The triune God created life, sustains life and is on a mission to bring all life to a new place, to God's home, where all will "live in

peace with God and creation, and all inhabit a space of joy” (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 79–80). The creation, sustenance and consummation of all life is to gift and bless life in such a way that life can flourish. This includes liberation from sin and the restoration of the whole cosmos to a better and complete new reality. Jesus explains his mission: “I have come so that they may have life, and may have it abundantly” (John 10:10). This is also evident when Jesus identifies his mission as giving life, and this is strengthened by his “I am” statements: “I am the bread of life’ ([John] 6:35, 48); ‘I am the resurrection and the life’ (11:25); and ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’ (14:6)” (Gorman 2018, 49). The Gospel of John explains a convergence of the mission of Jesus, sent by the Father, and abundant life. Jesus’ mission is to reconcile, to redeem, to introduce and bring life in fullness—abundant life.

This convergence does have important implications. Volf and Croasmun explain the purpose of theology:

It is to discern, articulate, and commend visions of and paths to flourishing life in light of the self-revelation of God in the life, death, resurrection, exaltation, and coming in glory of Jesus Christ, with this entire story, its lows and its highs, bearing witness to a truly flourishing life. (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 61)

In conclusion: Theology as such is interested in and focussed on flourishing life. This also impacts on ecclesiology and missional ecclesiology.

Missional ecclesiology is particularly interested in everyday life. A Trinitarian approach implies that the Father and Son sent the Spirit to guide his Church in the realities of everyday life and to be faithfully present in everyday communities. One of the core concepts in missional ecclesiology, is the concept of incarnation—incarnation means following Christ in the rhythms of everyday life in a way that appreciates the importance of physical and material life.

One of the ways in which missional ecclesiology might engage with the idea of flourishing life, is to attend to the following facets of everyday life:

- Created life
- Sustained life
- Consummated life

CREATED LIFE

God's mission started with the creation of life—the act to create reality outside the reality of the Trinity, and to engage in a relationship wider than the inner relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Gospel, and the essence of the *missio Dei*, begins with the good earth and all of creation God made through Jesus.

When one asks the classic missional question, “What did God do?” (see Niemandt 2019a, 133), the first answer must be that the Triune God created the world and all of creation. That is where the *missio Dei*, inaugurated in the inner discourse of the Trinity, became reality.

In terms of life in fullness, or flourishing life, as an expression of the *missio Dei*, the understanding of creation as a gift of the Triune God puts the doctrine of creation in the orbit of mission studies and reflections on the missional church. When one asks the second classical missional question, “What does God wants to do?” (see Niemandt 2019a, 133), it raises the ecclesiological issue of the Church's involvement in created life, and the task of the Church in earth-keepings and participating in God's continued creation. In a certain sense, the Church's answer to the question is that God wants us to take responsibility for his creation in everything we do, and the Church provides theological language and clarity of calling in terms of creation.

SUSTAINED LIFE

What did God do? God shared the mission of taking care of creation with humanity. “Human beings are people with a mission,” argues Wright (2010, loc 679). God's instruction to fill the earth, to subdue the earth and to rule over the rest of the creatures is an

invitation to participate in God’s sustenance of creation. God is delegating God’s own kingly authority over creation, but then as a benevolent king who loves and takes care of his creation: “We are given the mission to rule over creation, but we are to do it in ways that are modeled (*sic*) on the character and values of God’s own kingship” (Wright 2010, loc 708).

It is important to remember Gorman’s perspective, namely that God is already active in the present, working to liberate humanity from sin, through the “sin-defeating and life-giving death and resurrection of his Son” (Gorman 2015, loc 659).

Conradie (2015, 16) argues that earthkeeping is an integral dimension of the mission of the church. As Wright explains: “Ruling and serving creation is humanity’s first mission on earth, and God never repealed the mandate” (Wright 2010, loc 729). Volf and Croasmun refer to the “home of God”—or the dwelling place of God—as the overarching metaphor for developing a theology of flourishing life (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 149).

Conradie (2015) also prefers to refer to creation as the home of God, and to describe the task of the church as participating in housekeeping or earthkeeping.

What does God want the church to do? God wants the Church to imagine a *praxis* of housekeeping and earthkeeping that includes ministries of healing, justice and reconciliation, and most certainly proclaiming the good news of new life in Jesus Christ.

DeWitt formulated four principles for the stewardship of creation that can shape and inform reflection on the “sustain” aspect of flourishing life (see DeWitt 2008, 89):

- The conservancy principle: We should return the service of creation to us with service of our own.
- The safeguarding principle: We should safeguard the Lord’s creation as the Lord safeguards us.
- The fruitfulness principle: We should enjoy the fruit of creation, but not destroy its fruitfulness.
- The Sabbath principle: We should provide for creation’s Sabbath rest.

For the Church to be faithfully present, the church needs to focus on and enhance the calling to be earthkeepers, to be faithfully present in a way that seeks the welfare of creation and promotes flourishing life.

CONSUMMATED LIFE

The importance of an incarnational approach has already been explained in the argument for attention to flourishing life. However, the incarnation must be seen as the inauguration of the *eschaton*. Any discussion of life in fullness must attend to the new creation that breaks into the present reality: “Eschatology brings together the past and future into the present in a new creation” (Niemandt 2015, 6). Conradie emphasizes the cosmic scope of God’s salvation and argues that it implies a loving concern for the whole of God’s planetary household (Conradie 2015, 263). The question “What does God want to do?” implies a focus on the future and consummation. The future brings hope and shapes church *praxis*.

This leads to the question: How can a vision of hope for the earth be articulated?

What does God want to do with His creation. What is the goal of God’s mission?

This is a rather complex issue, demanding considerable reflection and theological debate. In terms of the flourishing life as part and parcel of the *missio Dei*, I appreciate Conradie’s advice: “My intuition is that the key to telling the story indeed lies in the end of the story. The expectation of the end influences, now already, the way in which the story is told and how the plot is structured” (Conradie 2015, 264). According to Conradie (265), the consummation is the presumed final chapter of the story of God’s house-holding, and the Church participates in the preparation of God’s house for God’s homecoming. The idea of flourishing life presupposes that the final chapter is one where all of creation enjoys the life in fullness Jesus promised. This includes, in the words of Gorman, to follow Jesus the Lamb “into a new heaven and new earth liberated from the effects of our sin and even from sin itself,

alive with the perpetual presence of the living God, in whom we can be both lost and found in eternal wonder, awe, and praise” (Gorman 2011, loc 4469–71).

MISSIO DEI AS FLOURISHING LIFE THROUGH FAITHFUL PRESENCE

The next section attends to the question: How does *missio Dei* translate into church *praxis*? The interaction between flourishing life and church life can be explored by attending to the idea of faithful presence. Sparks et al. (2014) developed the idea of faithful presence to clarify missional *praxis*. The church is deeply connected to a specific place or parish, and must be faithfully present. This means that ecclesial life is located within the mutual concerns of the neighborhood. It is an incarnational approach that takes bodies, location and community seriously, following the clue of Christ’s incarnation and God’s presence in our reality (Niemandt 2019a, 49). I argue for an appreciation of the fundamental importance of the incarnation as a movement towards where people are (place). Place and location form the basis of a missional ecclesiology (Niemandt 2019c, 3). To be faithfully present is to enact a transformational presence that makes God’s kingdom visible in everyday life and in everyday locations. This echoes Newbigin’s characteristics of a missional congregation when he describes a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood (Newbigin 1989, 238–44).

Faithful presence is to listen to the narrative of your place. Sparks et al. explain: “Listening to your place through the narrative of God’s dream awakens you to what the Spirit is already up to and what good news really looks like in the place you live” (Sparks et al. 2014, 125).

Being faithfully present implies the church is God’s gift of peace by bearing the kingdom in its own life, in neighbourhoods. The local church is itself be a new social order. It is to be a foretaste of the kingdom of God (Niemandt 2019a, 46). The church proclaims the good news of flourishing life, but also enacts the good

news by facilitating flourishing life. The presupposition is that God is already present and working, and that neighborhoods are transformed “by identifying and connecting the dreams and assets of the people, associations and institutions that are already there” (Sparks et al. 2014, 130).

Life flourishes where justice rules. Faithful presence includes a ministry of reconciliation and justice. The church brings life where it attends to reconciliation to assist people to deal with the challenges of pain, suffering, murder, and everything that diminishes flourishing life. Justice restores and reconciles, and in this process life can flourish again.

Faithful presence is to be a community of truth. Life flourishes where truth flourishes. Truth starts with being in Christ. Communities of truth reflect the internal truthful relationality of the Trinity, and from there also extends to include honest and truthful relationships with others.

Faithful presence is to promote flourishing life in communities. The congregation must have a faithful reciprocal relationship with the created world, a relationship where place matters and where congregations value a dependent relationship with their neighborhood. Such congregations attend to place, and ask: “What might God be saying to us through this neighborhood? What do the buildings and zoning legislation reveal? What are the streams, air, forests, fields, parks, and even the resident animals, birds, insects, and fish saying?” (Sparks et al. 2014, 146).

Faithful presence is to be a community of hope, orientated in terms of the consummation, and involved in discerning God’s preferred and promised future church, community and creation.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF *MISSIO DEI* AS FLOURISHING LIFE FOR PUBLIC THEOLOGY

The connection between the *missio Dei* and flourishing life does have important implications for the Church’s public theology. Mission is God’s turning to the world. The *ekklesia* is a theo-political category (Hoekendijk cited in Bosch 1991, 377). Bosch explains

that we can think of the Church as an ellipse with two foci: the source of its life is recognized in worship and prayer; and the church engages and challenges the world (Bosch 1991, 385). The church is at the same time called out of the world and sent onto the world. This echoes Volf's observation, citing Alexis de Tocqueville: "When ordinary people, most of them religious, enter the political arena, they take religion with them" (Volf 2015, 65). This raises the question: what is the public mission of God?

The convergence of *missio Dei* with flourishing life, provides mission studies and church witness with a compelling alternative to what the good life might be, especially in a consumerist society.

It also challenges the missional church to articulate a positive vision of life that calls us forward: "The core of our response toward moral decline—where and when it exists—should be to articulate a positive vision of life that calls us forward" (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 53).

A missional creation theology will attend to the idea of the consummation, approached as the telling of a hopeful story of what flourishing life might look like. What does the house where God comes home to look like? In the words of the public declaration of the *Accra Confession* (WARC 2004, 5): "Now we proclaim with passion that we will commit ourselves, our time and our energy to changing, renewing and restoring the economy and the earth, choosing life, so that we and our descendants might live (see also Deut 30:19)."

What is God's preferred and present future? How can the local congregation participate in faithfully retelling the story of what might be at the end of the story? And how can the local congregation be faithfully present so as to be a hermeneutic of the Gospel—a place where the last chapter is already being enacted. How do the congregation members participate in the remaking of the world into God's home? How do we choose life, so that our descendants might live?

Volf and Croasmun propose a pluralistic social vision as part and parcel of the public witness of the Church that may contribute significantly to the vision of flourishing life. They attend to:

Key elements of a Christian account of the flourishing life that allow those who embrace it to live in peace and pursue common good in pluralistic settings, and to do so not only notwithstanding its claim to be true for every human and the entire world, but also largely because of it. (Volf and Croasmun 2019, 105)

They propose the following “pillars of a pluralistic social vision”:

- Trinitarian monotheism is the source of diversity, and difference is not secondary, subsequent to unity; difference is equiprimordial with unity (105).
- God is the God of unconditional love. “God’s law is but a mode of God’s love. Even when humans fail to live according to the law of love, God seeks to mend the world and bring it to its intended fullness so it can become what God created it to be: our home and God’s home in one” (105).
- Jesus Christ is the light of the world. “The truth about flourishing life that Christ proclaimed is for all people” (105). “All truth sought and found anywhere takes us, ultimately, to Christ as its origin” (106).
- There is a distinction between God’s rule and human rule. “The Christian church is (or at any rate ought to understand itself as) a loose international network of communities whose primary allegiance isn’t to the states of which they are citizens or to some yet-to-be-created global superstate but to the one God of all people” (106).
- The moral equality of all human beings. Everybody is made according to God’s image. “All people have equal dignity; all have the same rights and the same moral obligations; all have fallen short of those obligations” (106).
- Freedom of religion and areligion. A person is free to follow the Gospel, or not. One believes with the heart (106).

CONCLUSION

The concept of *flourishing life* can indeed serve as a contextual and relevant theological interpretation of the *missio Dei*, and *flourishing life* expands and gives a particular depth to the *missio Dei*.

The interpretation of *missio Dei* as flourishing life enriches the theology of mission and missional ecclesiology, and this research proposed “creation, sustenance, and consummation of all created life” as essential elements in the discussion of the *missio Dei*. This approach may provide the missional church movement with new ideas, especially in terms of church praxis. Church praxis must attend to faithful presence as a way to make God’s kingdom visible in everyday life and in everyday locations.

The convergence of *missio Dei* with flourishing life, provides mission studies and theology in general with a compelling alternative to what the good life might be, especially in a consumerist society. Croasmun and Volf formulated “pillars of a pluralistic social vision” that might represent a positive vision of life.

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