

ARTICLE

Putting the Dutch Reformed Church in its Place: A Suggestion for Being a Parochial Missional Church

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Abstract

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa faces challenges due to rapid demographic shifts that reduce the proportion of traditional Afrikaner members and threaten the financial viability of its ministries. Historically, the DRC has relied on geographical congregational boundaries to define membership. However, recent policies have shifted towards individual choice and non-geographical affiliations. This study investigates whether rediscovering congregational boundaries can empower the DRC to fulfil its missional calling in a diversifying South Africa, emphasizing parochial ecclesiology grounded in the Word and Sacrament. Employing autoethnography, this research integrates personal reflections from the author's experience as a student minister with theological analysis, drawing on postfoundational practical theology, missional theology and confessional writings. The study finds that the DRC's move away from geographical boundaries prioritizes individual choice over communal responsibility. A parochial approach, emphasizing local congregations as sacred spaces for all within a defined area, could realign the DRC with its missional identity by reimagining church buildings as central to sacramental ministry and welcoming diverse populations as neighbours. Re-embracing geographical boundaries presents a pathway for the DRC to fulfil its missional calling by fostering inclusive sacramental communities and challenging the church to address historical divisions and pursue practical sacramental unity. Future studies should investigate how such a model can be effectively implemented in South Africa's complex sociohistorical context.

Keywords: Missional theology, Parish, Dutch Reformed Church, Theology of Place, Liturgical theology

Introduction

These reflections are inspired by a few occasions. The first draft of this paper was written as a memorandum for my colleagues to reflect on a specific ministry situation in the church. Second, it was delivered as a paper at a conference that reflected on the 200-year commemoration of the first synod held by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (Kruger and Van Der Merwe, 2017, p.1). The conference reflected on the past, present, and future of the Church in South Africa. As such, this article bears something of a dual nature: on the one hand, it is a historical draft as it reflects on how to be a specific Dutch Reformed Church in the South African context, but on the other hand, it also wants to contribute to how Dutch Reformed Church congregations might be churches in the South African future.

The research question guiding this reflection is: Could the rediscovery of congregational boundaries be a way for the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) to live out its missional calling in South Africa?

Describing the Background

The kernel of this research question was born when I was a student minister or chaplain of the Dutch Reformed Church at a tertiary institution in the early 2000s, during a period of rapid demographic shift among students. Within a decade, the number of white Afrikaner students (and thus potential Dutch Reformed Church members) dwindled to a marginal level. As a minister, together with the structures that oversaw this ministry, I was faced with a practical theological (and, of course, financial!) decision. Will this ministry continue or cease to exist? If so, how would it do so? It continued under the guise of what would initially be called a multicultural ministry and later simply an English ministry. The institution and its residents are spread across a wide area of the city. While worship services were initially held on the main campus, they were later moved to a church (where I was called a minister) that was relatively close to some residences but not within walking distance. Students who were not close to the church were transported (at a considerable expense) to the English service. This service was held concurrently with another service in Afrikaans.

This short vignette does not delve into the intricacies and nuances of ministry. Even here, in outline form, it can evoke – and indeed did evoke – critical questions, such as: Why have separate Afrikaans and English services? Why could the students be transported to a central worship gathering when decentralized worship gatherings could be held? Why bother establishing a ministry among students who would not traditionally associate with the mainline church when many other churches also minister on campus(es)? Perhaps the question I most often heard was, “Why minister at great expense to people who are not our members?”

At the end of 2024, when the *Kerkwees 200* (Being Church 200) conference, celebrating and reflecting on the two hundredth anniversary of the first synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, was held, South Africa's demographic change progressed rapidly. Most Dutch Reformed Churches find themselves in a position where demographic changes have resulted in the fact that within their boundaries, people of "Nether Dutch" (the literal translation of the "Nederduits" in the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk) descent are dwindling, and as a result, their membership and the financial viability of their ministries in those areas are decreasing.

Methodology

From the personal reflections that this article opens with, it can be surmised that this research was conducted within the register of autoethnography (Ellis 2006). However, I also strive to bring my story reflections into conversation with as much theological rigor as possible (Grant 2023). I also draw on Müller's postfoundational practical theology book (Müller 2004, 2005, 2009, 2011), from which I believe that research and practice emerge from a particular context and theological perspective, yet point to other contexts. I shared my contextual and personal involvement with the research questions. I will now briefly share my theological convictions and axioms that I will bring to this research question.

We will take as the departure point the DRC's own self-understanding of its missional calling as encapsulated in Article 53 of its church order (Dutch Reformed Church 2019):

The mission of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is to grant life and fullness to the world, and the church is in service of God's mission.

Through the Word and Spirit, God gathers a congregation to Himself. Through this congregation,

- God causes his Word to be proclaimed,
- God constitutes communion of the saints out of all nations
- God causes ministry to the world in need,
- God causes his command to protect the creation and life of being visibly expressed and
- God's justice and reconciliation. Thus, he causes his kingdom to arrive.
- The missional church ministers the gospel in all its dimensions to people who are ignorant of it or are alienated from it.
- Every congregation is a missional congregation, and every member of the congregation is a missionary.

I am in accordance with the calling expressed by the Church in many ways. First, I consider the liturgical assembly a privileged site for such reflections. (Lathrop 2007; Rienstra 2019; De Bruin 2024b). Second, as the DRC affirmed, it is an insoluble unity

of Word and Sacrament (NG Kerk 2023: 237). Related to this supposition is the fact that a real analogical extension of this liturgy is possible, where practices related to the celebration of the sacramental assembly are not celebrations of the sacraments as such, but rather part of the “Liturgy after the Liturgy” (Bria 1996; Mikoski 2009: 265–72). In addition, where liturgical assemblies of words and sacraments exist, an ordained ministry must exist. (De Bruin 2024a). Thirdly, I will take it as axiomatic that, to be truly inclusive, the DRC must take as its point of departure that “Only pure geography encompasses all without exception” (Milbank 2008: 124). And perhaps the most controversial in our denomination, that

The real, universal Church is found paradoxically in one place, within one circumscribed boundary and in one sacred, consecrated building, for very good theological reasons: only in one specific place can one erect a building which, as Maximus the Confessor taught, images at once the cosmos, the human person, and the transition of human history from old to new covenant through to the eschaton. (Milbank 2008: 125)

I also proceed with the four helpful movements of Browning’s *Fundamental Practical Theology* (1996). The introduction and background of these reflections include a brief exercise in “Descriptive Theology”. In the following sections and in the spirit of Browning’s “Historical Theology”, I provide a brief historical overview of the Dutch Reformed Church’s thinking and practices regarding congregational boundaries and membership. In line with Browning’s “Systematic Theology”, I briefly reflect on the Dutch Reformed Church’s Missional Theology and the development of place within this theology. In the “Strategic Practical Theology” section, I briefly suggest how parochial ecclesiology can help the Dutch Reformed Church fulfil its missional calling in South Africa.

A Brief History of Congregational Boundaries and Membership in the Dutch Reformed Church

According to Cilliers (2006: 45), the Dutch Reformed Church has taken congregational boundaries as an objective measure to determine membership in congregations.

In 1994 (NG Kerk 1994: 288–90), the system changed insofar as, even though geographical boundaries still indicate the primary area of the ministry, it was possible for members of one church, who for *bona fide* reasons would like to become a member of another congregation, to do so after both church councils of the congregation that the member will be leaving and the congregation that the member will join have conducted a formal investigation and approved the fact. Exceptions would be possible, but discretion is not left to the members’ arbitrary will.

In 2002 (NG Kerk 2002: 307–8), the policy regarding congregational boundaries was still geographical, insofar as the geographical area is understood as the area

where the congregation accepts the institutional responsibility to promote the kingdom of God in every sphere. The choice of which congregation to join is primarily the member's responsibility.

Regarding what exactly is meant by membership, the General Synod (NG Kerk 2002: 311) provides the following conceptual explanation: the term church member or member indicates a specific bond between a congregation and an individual, whereby the congregation of Jesus Christ accepts the individual as part of that congregation's covenantal relationship with the Triune God, and whereby the individual participates in the service of the congregation to God, fellow human beings, and creation.

When a report on the missional nature of the Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk 2013: 210) was approved, non-geographical church planting was strongly advocated. It avers that church planting among people whose lives are determined more by this network culture than by their geographical location has become an urgent necessity. Thus, the Dutch Reformed Church must reconsider this matter, extending beyond the boundaries of congregations, circuits and synods. The existence of congregational boundaries has been abolished for all practical purposes; the General Synod should now also *adopt this as a policy stance*. This could lead to new energy sources and a new workforce. The importance of church planting and theological reflection should also be addressed appropriately in theological education.

The matter of circuits and regional synods *was* eventually reconsidered, and in 2023 (NG Kerk 2023: 10–11), it was confirmed that congregations could procedurally change their affiliation to a non-geographically determined synod. Congregations in some regional synods can move into a non-geographically circumscribed circuit.

These snapshots of the decisions made by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church reveal a clear trajectory. Initially, objective geographic boundaries were the primary means of determining membership in the Dutch Reformed Church Congregations. In 1994, it became possible for members to change congregations, but this was still subject to approval by the affected congregation. Decisive steps were taken in 2002. The responsibility for determining membership shifted from the church councils to the members themselves. By 2013, it was stated that congregational boundaries had been *passed* and their demise had to be ratified. The shift was from an objective measure of membership in congregations that were geographically proscribed to the free choice of individual members.

Missional Theology and Congregational Boundaries within the Dutch Reformed Church

Significantly, the context in which the call was made for congregational boundaries to be formally abolished was part of a defining report on the Church's missional nature (NG Kerk 2013: 202–14).

The missional church is rooted in the doctrine of the *missio Dei*, which posits that mission originates in the nature of God. This understanding emphasises that God the Father sends the Son, and both the Father and the Son send the Spirit, culminating in the church's sending into the world. The Church, therefore, is not merely a community that engages in a mission; it is defined by its identity as a sent community that embodies the mission of God. This perspective highlights that the Church is called the image of God, the body of Christ and the dwelling place of the Spirit, representing and extending God's love as a sign, instrument and foretaste of the Kingdom of God (Guder and Barrett 1998: 1–16; Roxburgh, Boren and Priddy 2009: sect. God's dream for the world; Franke 2020: 31–60; Knoetze 2024: 236–8).

Of special importance for our discussion here is the fact that missional scholars and the missional report adopted by the Dutch Reformed Church stress that the church and congregations are formed to be these signs, instruments, and foretastes of God's kingdom through a specific dynamic. Pat Keifert (2006: 37), a very influential voice in the South-African missional conversation, writes:

In this new Missional Era, this time of the missional church, congregations that are faithful, effective, and efficient will be part of the transforming mission. They will be transformed by the mission – called, gathered, and centred in Word and sacrament, and sent into the mission of God in daily life. (My emphasis)

Missional Ministry in a Networked Society

To give effect to this calling to be gathered, formed, and sent into the world, the report on missional ecclesiology adopted by the Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk 2013: 210) emphasized that a new approach to church planting is imperative. It averred that church planting has become urgent among people whose lives are shaped more by this network culture than by their geographical location. This means that the Dutch Reformed Church must reconsider this matter beyond the boundaries of congregations, circuits and synods. According to the report, this was necessary because South Africa displayed an increasing resemblance to a “network society”, where place was seen as less important than “flow”, where the flow of information, capital, images and the mobility of people define society. The report of the Dutch Reformed Church explicitly wants the church to learn from the Church of England's *Mission-Shaped Church* (Archbishops' Council 2004: xv), which contended that:

Communities are now multi-layered, comprising neighborhoods, usually with permeable boundaries, and a wide variety of networks, ranging from the relatively local to global. It is clear that the parochial system remains an essential and central part of the national Church's strategy to deliver incarnational missions. However, the existing parochial system alone cannot fully deliver the underlying mission.

Thus, accepting the Church of England's invitation, the Dutch Reformed Church's report encourages congregations to create space for new expressions within the existing system. This is a mixed approach (the Archbishop of Canterbury speaks of a "mixed economy") (Müller 2009; Dunlop 2025) of congregations that function within the familiar framework of parish boundaries and new possibilities that operate within other types of networks.

In due course, the approach where congregational members could relate to churches based on geographical proximity was also extended to the congregational level, where congregations could relate to circuits and synods on a non-geographical basis (NG Kerk 2023: 10–11).

The Parish Reasserts Itself

Trenchant critiques have been offered of the theology of the Church of England's Mission-shaped Ministry report (e.g. Davison and Milbank 2011; A. Milbank, 2023). Here, I focus on Milbank 2008, which critiques the Fresh Expressions movement, particularly its approach to establishing churches within specific demographic groups.¹

He argues that the idea of the church planting itself in the fragmented and superficial spaces of modern society, rather than inviting people to "come to church". Milbank views this planting of churches as a rejection of the essence of the Church itself. Instead of embedding itself in existing social networks that reinforce a divided and self-interested society, the church should challenge these networks, which foster relationships based on personal appeal or utility, and promote a more unified, transformative community.

Against the acceptance of a network "society" as a given, Milbank (2008: 124) makes the following radical statement: "Only pure geography encompasses all without exception." Churches are not defined by language, culture, income groups, generations, or religious or religious institutional affiliations. In this statement, I find the core of an alternative way of being missional for the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.

The Dutch Reformed Church as a "Parochial" Church

The Dutch Reformed Church differs from the Church of England in two respects. First, unlike the Church of England, the Dutch Reformed Church was never (although the

1 One could perhaps riposte that Milbank does not come from the Reformed tradition, and that is true. Equally, one could also say the same of the Mission-Shaped Church report. Both Milbank and the authors come from the Anglican tradition, listening to his counter voice to the Anglican Fresh Expressions theology could be a way for the DRC to be self-critical.

quip was often made that the Dutch Reformed Church was the National Party – the governing party during apartheid – at prayer) and certainly is not now an established church that has the mandate and responsibility for curing the souls of everybody in the nation today. Secondly, it is no secret that the Dutch Reformed Church has not seen itself as a Church that wanted to welcome “all”. The church provided theological justification for apartheid. This policy was officially changed in 1986. In its mission, it organized and established different “daughter” churches along racial lines (Boesak 2008).

Notwithstanding these substantial differences, one could attach a measure of parochialism to the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Although the 2013 report states that congregational boundaries no longer function practically within the Dutch Reformed Church, it is still formally the case that every square centimetre of South Africa is part of a Dutch Reformed Church congregation. Similarly, the country was divided into circuits and regional synods. For much of the NG Church’s history, the boundaries between congregations, circuits and synods have been fixed (Van Der Merwe 2021).

Second, a congregation’s geographical area is understood as the area where it accepts institutional responsibility to promote the Kingdom of God in every sphere.

The working hypothesis that I would like to advance is that if we were to assume that the way the Kingdom of God could be advanced in every sphere by a missional church would be to be called, formed around the word and sacrament, and sent into the world to be a sign, instrument and foretaste of the Kingdom. Could it then be a way of integrity for the Dutch Reformed Church to live out its missional calling in South Africa for congregations to invite *all* within its boundaries to be formed around the word and sacrament to be sent out into the world? Alternatively, could it be that the Dutch Reformed Church takes responsibility for itself so that everybody within a proscribed area has access to the Ministry of the Word and the sacraments?

In other words, the Dutch Reformed Church pursues a path of retrieval, that, contrary to its 2013 report, considers congregational boundaries and church buildings as places for celebrating the Word and Sacraments. But the boundaries and buildings that are inclusive, rather than exclusive.

Confessions and Systematic Theological Implications

In the following section, I turn to confessions to find a starting point for this question. I do not problematize the confessions from a historical or even dogmatic perspective here – I use them as a heuristic guideline to speak about a specifically reformed understanding of the Ministry of a Local Congregation.

The Belgic Confession (1561) in Article 27 states, on the one hand, the universality of the Church:

And so his holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or certain people. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in one and the same spirit, by the power of faith.

Paradoxically, however, as we have already noted, this scattered church worldwide will always be found in a local concrete form.

If I may then, for a moment, juxtapose the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) (Lord's Day 21, Question 54 and Answer) and the subsequent statement: "What do you believe concerning the holy, Catholic, Christian Church? Answer:

I believe that the Son of God, through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community, I am and always will be a living member."

Could it be that within the concreteness of a defined geographical area, a local congregation can see the entire human race and the environment in which it must flourish, as it manifests in that area, as part of its ministry?

For several years, it has been the case that anyone within or outside the boundaries of a Dutch Reformed congregation could choose to participate without being officially prevented on the basis of race or any other characteristic. For me, the missional question goes further as it asks, "Who does the church choose to actively and intentionally welcome as part of the congregation?"

In this case, the member who is primarily responsible for choosing (by implication) which congregation he or she, and where applicable, their family, will join, and then, by implication, the congregation that takes the choosing individual as the starting point for the focus of its own ministry.

Alternatively, put differently in line with this argument, does the congregation have a caregiving responsibility only towards the people who have chosen to become and remain members of the congregation? Alternatively, does this responsibility extend further to other areas? If so, where would that responsibility lie, and what would it entail?

Let us take the marks by which the church is recognized as a point of departure "when the church preaches the gospel purely, administers the sacraments purely as Christ instituted them, and uses church discipline to punish sins" (Belgic Confession, Article 29).

It cannot be inferred from this that the only responsibility of the local church is to preach the Word, administer the sacraments purely and apply discipline; in other words, that this is all that a congregation needs to do. According to this classic formulation, preaching, sacraments and discipline are indispensable to a true Christian church. I follow another Anglican theologian, Paul Avis (2005: 19–20), when he argues (as I cannot here, alas) that the Ministry of Word, Sacrament and pastoral care are not only “central to the Church’s purpose” but that they “comprise the mission of the mission of the Church exclusively and without remainder”.

What is at stake here is a shift from the traditional understanding of membership, or at least the relationship between membership and the church’s ministry. Within a defined geographical area, everyone and everything within that area is seen as people whom the congregation should serve.

In an earlier study, Milbank constructively explained the tension between the universal and the particular. In the context of another argument, he contends that agape-love, which in later Christian usage was mistakenly used to refer to universal, disinterested love, is actually, according to the Christian tradition up to at least Aquinas, interpreted as “neighbourly love”, and this neighbourly love means “a preferential developed affinity with us, as well as those strangers with whom we suddenly we are bonded together whether we like it or not, by instances of distress, shared experience of preferred comfort” (Milbank 2003: 39).

Milbank (2003: 54) is surely right that we have a “limited range of intense capacity for affection and attention”. In the context of Milbank’s argument, this contingent and contained affection is due to a natural impulse to save our nearest and dearest from danger. Analogously, congregations have limited resources and are constrained by real constraints.

Clearly, congregations are not *everything for everyone*. Therefore, the question is not whether the congregation’s ministry and care should be limited in some way, but in what specific way it should be proscribed.

A voluntary approach would be to limit the ministry to those who choose to associate with the congregation for reasons of denominational affiliation or resonance with the congregation’s cultural style, or to have a minister (and in many respects, this would be inevitable). Another approach would be to discern to whom God is sending the congregation and how the congregation can be incarnated within that demographic or community setting. Both of the afore mentioned approaches is in many ways a given, but adding to the cultural, and theological approaches one could add that that the Dutch Reformed Church should not shake off but take up its “parochial mantle” (Van Der Merwe 2021) with humility and with steadfastness.

Paas (2016: 194–95) provides a descriptive typology for understanding how churches position themselves within a context of subjectivization, based on three axes. The first axis is Private versus Public visibility, which contrasts an

invisible, subjective gathering with the church as a distinct, public body. The second is Consumption versus Sacrament, where the church is positioned either as purely instrumental and dependent on member choice or as having a non-negotiable structure that is sacramentally transparent to God's future. The third axis contrasts the anti-institutional ideal of Community (organism) with the necessary structure of the Institution (organization).

The idea is not to give a prescriptive, unrealistic goal to pursue where the Dutch Reformed Church needs to be everything to everyone in South Africa, but to form the missional imagination of congregations, to accept a different kind of responsibility for the places in which they were planted. This entails an invitation to move away from an overemphasis on the private nature of church participation to emphasize the public nature, to move toward a sacramental understanding of church, rather than an absolutisation of free choice, and to take seriously the institutional nature of the church.

Another disclaimer might be in order; the intention of churches to be present in the community to engage in creative gatherings and forms of community should not be condemned as such. Affording these gatherings and churches the status of churches is, however, not necessary. These gatherings could be seen as a manifestation of the liturgy after the Liturgy, or in another sense, continuations of this liturgy.

Strategic Parochial Ventures

This entails two interrelated reforms: On the "what" front, it would mean that every congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church would take its core identity seriously as assemblies of Word and sacrament, in a word *catholic* churches; and indeed take the prophetic warning of Von Allmen (1965: 314) deeply to heart: "But if ... we are unwilling to obey Jesus Christ through the restoration of the weekly Eucharist ... then the day will soon come when even what we have will be taken from us (cf. Mark 4.25 par)." Related to this reform, the invitation would be for the DRC to reimagine its church buildings not as merely functional spaces for ministry but as "one place, a sacred place, where the church can gather and make bold statements about its mission and faith without compromising its fundamentals or being ashamed" (McAlpine 2011: Where We Need to Be section).

If the above statements guide what DRC Churches in South Africa could be, the "for whom" question is equally fraught.

So far, we have touched on, but have not addressed, the elephant in the room. On the one hand, we have emphasized that the Dutch Reformed Church is closely tied to Afrikaners through its geographical responsibility to South Africa. Historian Ruhan Fourie is correct in stating that the history of Afrikaners is also the history of the NG Church, which, particularly in the aftermath of the South African War (1899–1902), identified itself as a "volkskerk" (people's church) for Afrikaners. This involved

mutual identity formation, in which the NG Church aligned itself with the spiritual and material fate of its Afrikaner members. Simultaneously, the institution played a leading role in shaping the Afrikaner identity.

In our reflections so far, this raises a very legitimate question that the Cas Wepener (2025) Scholar at the University of Stellenbosch poses to the Dutch Reformed Church in its official Newspaper, *Die Kerkbode*: “Why do church services still not reflect South Africa’s great diversity?” Implicit in this question is a value judgment. In South Africa, unilingual and single-ethnic churches are anachronistic, and the Dutch Reformed Church stands out. Perhaps a counterquestion could be elicited from this perspective: Is it always and in all circumstances wrong for a congregation to minister to people in their mother tongue, in this case, Afrikaans, and for congregations to be constituted by predominantly one ethnic group, in this case, Afrikaners?

Milbank’s exposition helped me navigate the complex position of the Dutch Reformed Church (2003: 54).

The Samaritan is also the neighbor, and Jesus is clearly not teaching us to respect and help strangers only as strangers. Nevertheless, one should interpret the parable to mean, in addition and inversely, that the daily neighbor is also the arriving stranger through time ... and this reading duly qualifies, without cancelling, the main point that has just been made. This specificity of given proximity, which is also an endlessly surprising gift of renewed contingent arrival, is our only creative way to participate in God’s equal love for all.

It was through contingent and perhaps providential intertwining with the Afrikaner people over time that the DRC became rooted in South Africa. It is a fact that these places are becoming more demographically diverse, with different people from various language groups and cultures arriving contingently. The invitation for the DRC is to welcome these “strangers” as true neighbours. This welcome specifically makes provisions for welcoming them to the ministry of words and sacraments. The question would immediately arise: “But what form should this welcoming take?” Would this not be a platitudinous statement with which no one could disagree? Perhaps. However, the axiomatic proscriptions above (one consecrated building in a specific bounded area) would give particular focus to the DRC.

First, it would not entail planting a new non-geographical congregation. Second, this does not mean hosting an additional non-sacramental service in a language other than Afrikaans in the same building. It would also not entail planting a new independent congregation in the same building. It is instructive to return to the image of the Parable of the Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), which is set in a context where the once dominant “Judeans” find the Samaritans as “strangers” on their geographical doorstep. The Dutch Reformed church could discover them not only as strangers

but as neighbours, and to strengthen an allegorical point, perhaps, being sacrificial in caring for them, as innkeepers. If I reflect on the days when I tried to minister, this would have been the theology that could have informed my ministry. Was it necessary to provide the opportunity for students to be ministered to in a gathering of Word and sacrament together with their fellow Afrikaans students, or at least in the same building with them? Perhaps not; however, it did seem that these strangers were inevitably on the doorstep of a territory where the DRC traditionally took responsibility for Dutch Reformed students. This “fresh expressions” impulse could have been more fully developed by engaging in “liturgy after the liturgy” gatherings – eating together and socializing to discover the meaning of living together.

Taking this stance unavoidably confronts the church with the scandal of division in a painful way. This is perhaps one of the advantages of our approach. The ministry’s missional focus would inevitably be to seek ways to practise sacramental repair.

Conclusion

I am convinced that (once again) taking seriously the concreteness of place in the form of geography and congregational boundaries, and all who live there, as a reference point and perhaps even a starting point for the congregational ministry, can help the Dutch Reformed Church, and perhaps other churches, wrestle with what, and how to be the church in their context.

Taking these points of departure seriously can challenge the Dutch Reformed Church as a collective in another way. On the one hand, it is to take up a renewed reflection on a theology of place (Niemandt 2019), but it would also invite the church to take *co-responsibility* for ministry in various *places* in South Africa. This would mean that resources are shared, allowing the Church to be “present in every place” (Foulger 2023) and not only in well-resourced areas or places with a strong representation of a particular demographic group. Again, it would be foolhardy to think that the DRC could do this alone, so the urgent task of ecumenical ministry becomes all the more pressing.

These reflections may seem dogmatically restrictive or prescriptive in nature. However, in a way, as with geographical boundaries for the congregational ministry, these conceptual boundaries can be freeing. First, there are certain things that we cannot and have not to do. Second we are given an almost endless opportunity to be South Africa, where place and geography have such a violent history (with the Group Areas Act, forced removals of people etc.). It may be precisely the place and concreteness of geographical boundaries where and how our congregations can be a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

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