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EXPLORING THE PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF CONGREGATIONS

ABSTRACT

The first congregation was formed in Jerusalem, giving rise to faith communities throughout the New Testament. In the ensuing two millennia, congregations are found worldwide. The aim of this article is to describe congregations and the study of congregations from a practical theological perspective. An introduction to the study field of congregations is followed by a description of the development of the study field of congregational studies from the perspective of four countries, namely the United States, the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, and South Africa. The aim is not to give a comprehensive historical overview of the discipline, but to trace some trends that have an influence on the discipline within the South African context. The second part of the article describes the exploration of congregations from a practical theological ecclesiology (the identity, mission and ministry of the congregation) and an analytical perspective (external interaction between congregation and community, and the internal life of the congregation). A practical theological ecclesiology and an analytical framework should interact critically with each other.

1. INTRODUCTION

The first congregation was formed in Jerusalem after Pentecost (Acts 2); thereupon, the footprints of faith communities are found throughout the New Testament. In the ensuing two millennia, faith communities or congregations are found worldwide in which followers of the Way or Good News met to worship. The aim of this article is to describe congregations and the study of congregations from a practical theological perspective. An introduction to the study field of congregations is followed by a description of the development of the study field in selected countries and its interaction with practical theology. The second part of the article

explores congregations from a practical theological ecclesiology and analytical perspective.

2. THE STUDY OF CONGREGATIONS

The concept 'congregation' needs to be described. A congregation may be defined in terms of a functional approach, in other words, in terms of what congregations do: seeker-sensitive, purpose-driven, small-group, or 24/7 congregations. A congregation can also be described from an organizational perspective in terms of its structure, procedures, organization, or decision-making processes. Both these perspectives have certain limitations: to define a congregation functionally shifts the emphasis away from the congregation as a unique community of believers; the organizational perspective may ignore the spiritual reality of the congregation as a social community (Van Gelder 2000:20-21). From a practical theological perspective, this article focuses on the parish or congregation as a local faith community. A congregational ecclesiology can also be examined, for example, from a New Testament, historical, or systematic theological perspective.

What is ecclesiology? Ecclesiology can be defined as the study of the church. The concept 'church' refers to a wide range of interpretations: building, event, denomination, worldwide organization, ecumenical movement or body, worship service, or the local faith community, parish or congregation (Van Gelder 2000:15; Smit 2008:70-71).

[Ecclesiology] focuses on understanding the church in terms of its nature, ministry and organization. Attention is given to such matters as biblical and theological foundations, historical ecclesiologies (different views of the church in different periods of time), and church polity (how different churches have been organized). All of this is related to God's redemptive purpose in the world (Van Gelder 2000:26).

The ecclesiology of this article focuses on the understanding of the local congregation as a community of believers.

Ecclesiology has two focal points, namely the historical and doctrinal origin of the church, and the church situated in a local context describing the local practices of actual congregations.

Part of the liveliness of the discipline of ecclesiology today stems from an interaction between the desire to preserve the essential character of the church and the need that it adapts to new historical situations, between a normative concept of the church and the

need that it become inculcated in the life of its members (Haight & Nieman 2009:578).

The first focus mostly addresses the study field of the academic discipline of a general ecclesiology (a systematic and historical discipline within theology), whereas the second focus concentrates on the study field of congregational studies within the field of practical theology as discipline.

The study of congregations (and ecclesiology) is also situated within the field of practical theology; this contribution or perspective needs to be explored in more detail. A practical theological ecclesiology (or a theory of the congregation) is concerned with the functioning of the actual congregation (Heyns & Pieterse 1990:57). Practical theology can help formulate a deeper understanding of congregations (Nieman 2012:141). It is important to distinguish between congregational studies as discipline within practical theology and congregational studies as a model to use in the study of congregations (Brouwer 2005:484).¹ From a broader historical perspective, congregational studies

have their roots in the emergence during the twentieth century of detailed ethnographic studies of communities, often involving long term participant observation. While originally developed in America, British contributions to the field began to appear from the 1950s onwards (Williams 2009:244).

The study of congregations started as a sociological study due to the decline in membership and the influence of congregations in Western societies. Browning (1994:193) identifies the need for the creation of a critical practical theology to enter the field of congregational studies. The study of congregations needs to be taken further than the sociological or systematic theological perspective.

Congregational studies is a practical theological discipline, with its focus on the discernment of the praxis of God in the local faith community (Brouwer 2005:485). Williams (2009:247) emphasises the need to develop a “local theology” to explain the position of the congregation within the culture of the community, referring to integration, the maintenance of stability, and transformation. Browning distinguishes between a descriptive and a strategic theology to explain the study of congregations further.

The study of congregations is a descriptive theology, as it describes Christian action (Browning 1994:198) and, therefore, the need for contextual

1 See the Project Team for congregational studies at the Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut, or the Congregational Handbooks.

richness. Browning (1994:200) proposes a model of descriptive theology that uses the explanatory interests of specific social sciences and places it “within a structure of dialogue that explicitly and critically acknowledges its beginning point in the Christian message and narrative”. Congregational studies will, therefore, always be an interdisciplinary endeavour.

Congregational studies are a natural part of the task of descriptive theology to describe situations. It helps understand how congregations, through practical thought and action or missions, “aim toward the practical reconstruction of life in light of the meanings and demands of a transcendent reality” (Browning 1994:208). Congregational studies contribute towards the understanding of how strategic practical theology takes place in congregations. There is a need for the development of a strategic practical theology that is not the application of theory developed by historical or systematic theology, but that is practical from the beginning (Browning 1994:197). This study focuses on the role and functioning of the local congregation.

Congregational studies contributes towards both a descriptive and a strategic practical theology (Browning 1994:218). Congregational studies combines empirical research in the local faith community and the theological reflection thereon (Brouwer 2005:484). The broad consensus on a definition of the study field is “that congregational studies is the disciplined process of examining a congregation holistically that uses multiple research methods” (Nieman 2012:133). The emphasis is on a holistic and interdisciplinary view of congregations, but from a practical theological perspective. This perspective developed differently in different countries.

3. THE STUDY OF CONGREGATIONS: A PERSPECTIVE FROM FOUR COUNTRIES

The development of congregational studies is explained from the perspective of four countries, namely the United States, the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, and South Africa. The aim is not to give a comprehensive historical overview of the discipline, but to trace some trends that influence the discipline in the South African context.

In the *United States*,

[c]ongregational studies as a discipline began at the turn of the century in response to the rise of American cities, the evolving nature of congregations, and the problems congregations confronted with the new migration of people into cities from the farm, the South, and from Europe, each group often bringing its own religious heritage (Dare 1997:27).

There is a long history on the study of congregations in the United States, especially from a sociological perspective as far as the context of congregations is concerned. In the 1970s, the study of congregations focused more on congregational processes and the resources available for renewal from within the church (Lyon 1992:15). In the late 1980s, the movement was towards the study of congregational identity and the way it “can be relative cohesive within congregations and be a cohesive force for their members and the culture at large in a way that yet appreciates the richness of diversity and pluralism” (Lyon 1992:15).

Congregational studies, as a specific academic field of study in the United States, started in the late 1970s with the work of Carroll, Dudley, Hopewell, and Mead (Nieman 2012:133). The study field of sociology of religion is an important voice in the understanding of congregations;² as part of an interdisciplinary engagement, it is necessary to listen to the contribution of this discipline.

The first *Handbook for congregational studies* was published in 1990 under the editorship of Carroll, Dudley and McKinney. The aim of the *Handbook* is

to take congregations seriously in their givenness as earthen vessels through which the transcendent power of God is at work and made known (II Cor. 4:7) and through which God’s purposes in the world may be realized (Carroll *et al.* 1990:7).

This is necessary because the disciplined study of congregations is not an intuitive awareness or random investigation, but a sound research framework, giving a balance and sense of proportion to the study of congregations (Carroll *et al.* 1990:8). In studying and analysing congregations, Carroll *et al.* (1990:11-13) identified four aspects or dimensions of congregational life:

- *Programme* includes the structure, plans and activities that a congregation uses to do its mission and ministry within the congregation and the community;
- *Process* refers to the flow and dynamics of a congregation, the communication, decision-making and conflict management in a congregation;
- *Social context* is about the local and global setting of a congregation, and
- *Identity* refers to the belief system, values, symbols and confessions that describe the unique character of a congregation.

2 See, for example, the work of Ammerman (1999; 2005).

The first *Handbook* was revised in 1998 and published under the title *Studying congregations. A new handbook* and took as a practical theological starting point “describing the situation of the congregation and then correlates that situation with the faith and the beliefs of the congregation” (Ammerman *et al.* 1998:25). It started, in correlation with the work of Browning, with the congregational praxis, but moved to formulate a unique congregational theology. “These theologies are also likely to differ, based on differences in the experiences of members and groups within the congregation” (Ammerman *et al.* 1998:32). Four frames are consequently developed to give a comprehensive description of what is happening in congregations: ecological, cultural, resources, and process (Ammerman *et al.* 1998:14-16). This *Handbook* influenced the study of congregations in the United Kingdom and in South Africa.

In the *United Kingdom*, according to recent statistics (2000s), there are still over two and a half million people in the churches on an average Sunday. The discipline of congregational studies pays them the respect of being taken to be *interesting* and worthy of detailed exploration. This is of crucial importance in the critical task of shaping Christian discipleship, ministry, and mission for tomorrow (Williams 2009:252).

The ethnographic method is more popular in the United Kingdom to describe the local church life (Guest 2005:18). The study of congregations is also linked to the examination and resolution of wider social problems as well as the role of social capital in this regard. These models could be divided into two camps: extrinsic studies (that reflect on congregations to serve an external agenda, to enrich theological reflection), or intrinsic studies (that have the understanding of the local congregation as a primary goal) (Guest 2005:19). ‘Intrinsic studies’ are aimed solely at fostering an understanding of the community being studied, for its own sake. In Britain, the tendency has been increasingly towards intrinsic studies, unlike in the United States, where a great deal of research is funded by organisations motivated by the desire to promote particular social or religious ends (Williams 2006:245). The broader aim is then to describe the role of congregations within society.

The emphasis shift towards the need to study congregations is a more faithful way towards its own cultural or even subcultural identity (Guest 2005:20). The need is for a thick description that takes the voice of the membership seriously, a more inductive approach. This led to *Studying local churches: A handbook* (Cameron *et al.* 2005) as further development of the *Handbook for congregational studies* that was developed in the United States.

In the United States, large-scale congregational studies are often engaged with the complexities of the congregation, but the need in the United Kingdom is “also to recognize the importance of cultural and ecclesiastical context” (Guest 2005:23). The emphasis is on the local context that informs and shapes congregational studies and, therefore, the emphasis on an ethnographic methodology to study congregations.

Jan Hendriks (1995; 1997; 2000; 2003) compiled a comprehensive literature review of publications and trends within the study field of congregations in *The Netherlands*. He divides the work on congregational studies into two broad fields: movements and trends as well as strategies and techniques used.

Hendriks identifies six movements or trends within the study field of congregations (“gemeenteopbouw”), to be relevant for the situation in the Netherlands since the Second World War (Hendriks 2008:181-244):

- The first movement places the emphasis on the building up of the local congregation (“volkskerk”). The building process (a spiritual process) starts within the congregation, with a commitment to the life and work of Christ, and then moves further to the society.
- The second movement is a functional movement that asks, inductively, questions about the empirical functioning of the congregation in society. The needs of the membership and of society (for example, care and support) are important for the congregation to listen to.
- Hendriks identifies the missional movement as a third trend. God is a missional God who prescribes the mission of the congregation. The “other” and the world are in the centre of the congregational focus.
- The evangelical movement has evangelization as the chief aim of a congregation (for example, Church Growth Movement and Willow Creek Community Church). The congregation exists to save the world; an important metaphor is the congregation as a lifeboat.
- The next trend views the congregation as an open hospitable church (“gastvrije herberg”). This trend places a strong emphasis on life as a pilgrimage and all are merely guests.³
- Lastly, Hendriks identifies a movement towards a double strategy. It is possible to use more than one strategy: the “volkskerk” or functional movement in conjunction with a more missional or evangelical approach.

3 Emmaus narrative in Luke 24:13-35.

One can also refer to the strategies and techniques that are proposed in the study of congregations. A characteristic of this is the incorporation of the work of other disciplines. In this regard, Hendriks mentions the work of Callahan (*Twelve keys to an effective church*); Carrol, Dudley & McKinney (*Handbook for congregational studies*); Dieterich, (*Center for parish development*) and his own work (*Een vitale en aantreklijke.g.meente*).

In his last literature review, Stoppels (2005:394) refers to two trends that are worth taking note of. First, the missional character of the church and congregations needs a concrete and contextual description. Secondly, the fluid and network position of congregations are in need of a thorough empirical analysis.

The formal study of congregations as a discipline within practical theology started in *South Africa* in the early 1980s. The earlier emphasis was on membership and the empowerment thereof in the congregation (Britz & Erasmus 1994:374). The focus in the 1980s was on building the local congregation (“gemeentebou”) (Nel 2015:24). A few studies and books may be mentioned in this regard:

- Louw – *Dienswerk – ’n eietydse bedieningsmodel vir die opbou van die gemeente* (1986).
- Heyns – *’n Prakties-teologiese ondersoek na die kerklike strukture van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (1986).
- Nel – *Teologiese perspektiewe op gemeentebou* (1986); *Fases in gemeentebou* (1988); *Gemeentebou* (1994).
- Bisschoff – *Gemeentebou: ’n Prakties-teologiese basisteorie* (1991).
- Jurgens Hendriks – *Strategiese beplanning in die gemeente. Die beginsels en praktyk van gemeentevernuwing* (1992).
- Burger – *Die dinamika van ’n Christelike geloofsgemeenskap* (1991); *Gemeentes in die kragveld van die Gees* (1999).

The above list is by no means complete, but gives an indication of what happened in the 1980s and 1990s. It is difficult to classify what has been done in the field of congregational studies. However, at least two areas can be identified, namely the theological framework of congregational studies, and certain strategies that may be used in describing and analysing congregations. In describing the theological and, more specifically, the practical theological framework of the congregation, Burger (1991; 1999) and Nel (1994; 2015) made significant contributions in the South African context. Nel emphasises building a local missional church (Nel 1994:33; 2015:25) and refers to the formation of the identity of the local church

as an “accountability towards God and in a responsible encounter with Scripture and culture this identity should be rediscovered and understood – continually” (Nel 2015:49). Burger aims to formulate a theory that explains the functioning of the congregation or faith community (Burger 1991:18) and identifies four processes that are important in this regard: a vision on the kingdom of God; a faithful commitment; a caring community, and a life of Christian service (Burger 1991:20-21). In his later work, Burger (1999) emphasises the identity, mission and ministry of the congregation. The practical theological framework will be explained in more detail in the next section.

The second area of study is about strategies and methods to analyse congregations. In this regard, Hendriks made an important contribution (cf. also Nel 2009a; 2009b). In his first book, Hendriks (1992) explains the role of strategic planning in analysing and renewing the local congregation. The analysis is done with reference to a theological framework (Hendriks 1992:38-85) as a diagnostic activity (Hendriks 1992:128-129) within the congregation. In 2004, Hendriks published the book *Studying congregations in Africa*, and uses *Studying congregations* (Ammerman et al. 1998) as a basis for his book. Hendriks’ important contribution is to place the study of congregations within the African context:

Our purpose is to empower congregations to address their multiple problems, challenges and sufferings in sub-Saharan Africa as they manifest, among others, in the pandemic of HIV/Aids, sexism, abuse of power, corruption and economic injustice (Hendriks 2004:11).

This second area of the study field of congregational studies will be discussed in more detail in section 5.

4. DESCRIBING A CONGREGATION: A PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL ECCLESIOLOGY⁴

The importance of the development of a practical theological ecclesiology has already been discussed. A congregation is more than a social institution and, therefore, the important theological question is: What is the local missional church or congregation all about? This question could be answered from different perspectives; it remains important to give an answer from a theological perspective. This section aims to describe a congregation in terms of a theological understanding and not, for example,

4 Part of this section (4) was published as an addendum in Nel 2015:363-371.

from a sociological or organisational perspective. To do this, at least three aspects need attention (cf. Van Gelder 2000:37):

- A congregation exists in the presence of, and in relationship with the triune God. This relationship constitutes and forms the *identity* of a congregation.
- The task or direction of a congregation describes its purpose or intention. The activities and calling of the congregation come into focus; it is about the *mission* of the congregation.
- The third aspect is about the ways and means of a congregation to do or live its identity and mission. The *ministry* of the congregation is, in this regard, on the table. The activities and matters a congregation does are part of this aspect.

4.1 The identity of the congregation

Congregational identity is formed and created by a relationship with the triune God. The building up of congregations is the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Nel 2015:12). Each person of the trinity plays an important role in this relationship: the *Father* is the creator of the relationship. He is sending His Son in order for His kingdom to become a reality. The *Son* is the saviour; without the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, no relationship is possible. The *Holy Spirit* continues the work of the Father, and the Son makes it a reality in the life of the believer and congregation.

The identity of the congregation is a *confessional identity* (Nel 2015:44-46). Congregations worldwide confess the following about the church: “I believe in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints” (Apostolic creed), and “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church” (Nicene Creed). From both the Apostolic and Nicene creeds, the following four confessional characteristics of the local church can be described:

- One – congregations work in unity and together under the headship of Christ.
- Holy – congregations are different from other institutions, they are doing and living a life marked by love and forgiveness.
- Catholic – congregations are not confined to one place, language, region or nation; it is a universal phenomenon found in many societies.
- Apostolic – the messages of the apostles, and the word of the gospels are the content of the witness of congregations ; should be all about Jesus Christ and the coming of His kingdom.

Congregational identity is relational and confessional, thus creating the constituting elements of a congregation. This marker is important to remember for it describes the fundamental uniqueness of a congregation. The mission and ministry of a congregation are the results or consequences of the congregational identity.

4.2 The mission of the congregation

Mission, as the second marker, is about the direction and calling of a congregation. This flows from the identity of a congregation. The mission of a congregation is an indication of the direction in which a congregation is moving. Bosch (1991:54) gives the following summary of the missional intention of a congregation:

The New Testament witnesses assume the possibility of a community of people who, in the face of the tribulations they encounter, keep their eyes steadfastly on the reign of God by praying for its coming, by being its disciples, by proclaiming its presence, by working for peace and justice in the midst of hatred and oppression, and by looking and working toward God's liberating future.

Nel (2015:27-29) refers to the *raison d'être* (reason for being) of the congregation; this is the missional purpose of a congregation and gives it direction.

The congregation or the church is not the end, but the coming of God's kingdom is the aim of congregational life. The calling of the congregation is to proclaim the gospel, to be witnesses of the work of Christ. The being and practice of a congregation should be marked and embedded in this missional intention and direction. This is a single missional purpose. Nel (2015:106-117) is correct in not dividing it into an intensive and extensive practice, but to see the mission of a congregation as a single calling and action of the entire congregation.

4.3 The ministry of the congregation

The ministry of a congregation is about a comprehensive understanding and description of all the activities that a congregation is doing and undertaking in order to fulfil its mission (Burger 1999:104). It is possible to identify four fields or dimensions of the ministry of a congregation, namely *leitourgia*, *kerugma*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia* (Schoeman 2002:67-92). Nel (2015:106) works with eight modi, which can be summarized into the above four broad ministerial fields. It is important to understand that the

identity and mission of a congregation are conducted within and through these four aspects or fields of ministry.

Leitourgia refers to the liturgical aspects of the congregational ministry. From a New Testament perspective, it is about the message of the gospel, the sacraments of baptism and communion, prayer, and the hymns a congregation sings (Vos & Pieterse 1997:13). Liturgy occurs in a worship service, but should not be confined to the Sunday services. Worship occurs in a small group, a Sunday school class, a family, where believers come together in His name to pray and worship (Matt. 18:20).

Worship and liturgy are central to congregational life. The most important event is the worship service on a Sunday. God calls the congregation and every believer to worship Him, in private, but also there where the congregation meets, even during a church council or committee meeting. The liturgy of a meeting can be more than reading from Scripture and a prayer.

Kerugma refers to the proclamation and preaching of the gospel in the congregation. *Kerugma* can be defined as “to publicly announce religious truths and principles while urging acceptance and compliance” (Louw & Nida 1989:417).

God speaks to his children in the congregation through the Word. This occurs during preaching, witnessing (*marturia*) and teaching (*didache*) in the congregation (Smuts 1995:94). Paul testifies in 1 Corinthians 2:4 about the role of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the Word: “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (NIV). The *kerugma* of the Word is confirmed by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ (Bischoff 1991:86). Christ is the content of the proclamation.

The kerugmatic ministry of a congregation is practised on a few levels (Burger 1999:227-231). The following can be noted:

- The *kerugma* in a congregation should be embedded in the other ministries of *leitourgia*, *koinonia*, and *diakonia*. Liturgy helps the congregation focus on the Word; the Word may only be interpreted in relationship with fellow believers (*koinonia*), and service (*diakonia*) demonstrates the faith of the congregation in a loving Christ.
- The proclamation of the Word (as part of the contribution of the Reformation) is important in a congregation. This is not the word of a single person, but part of the ministry of the congregation, also by ‘doing’ the Word.

- The Word is not only proclaimed in a sermon as part of a worship service, but should be lived in all the activities of the congregation. It is part of the spirituality of the congregation, for example in the meeting of a small group.
- The proclamation of the gospel includes the public prophetic voice of the church and the congregation. The congregation has a responsibility to proclaim and work for justice in the community. The daily spontaneous witness of members is part of the witness.

Koinonia is about the community within a congregation, the relationship and bond between believers. The visible unity in a congregation pays tribute to the love and *koinonia* between the members (1 John 4:7-12). Pastoral care and fellowship, as aspects of *koinonia*, help to build unity and close and caring relationships in a congregation (cf. also Nel 2015:163-165). The experience of what it means to live as a Christian could be summarized in the New Testament with a single word: *koinonia* (Du Rand 1985:56). Love, faith and *koinonia* are closely related terms. They are the fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit. *Koinonia* is a very practical expression of a person's and congregation's faith. Kuhnke (1990:311) draws attention to the fact that fellowship (*koinonia*) can be used to repair and build the identity of a congregation. There is a close link between the identity of the congregation and the ministry of fellowship in the congregation Christ came to serve, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The life and death of Jesus affirms Him as the Servant (Bisschoff 1991:90).

Diakonia is a comprehensive term defining and describing the service of the church and congregations in the world.

The Old Testament also abounds with examples of the service of the faith community towards the poor and the disabled. See, for example, the servanthood of king David towards Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9). The commandments of God are an expression of service; to obey them is to love and serve (Peters 2000:32). The utmost example of service is the ministry of Christ (Nel 2015:160).

4.4 Seeking a balance in the congregational ministry

Three markers were used to describe a congregation. First, the identity of a congregation is about its relationship with the triune God. Secondly, the mission of the congregation is about the calling and purpose of the congregation. Thirdly, the ministry of the congregation is a consequence of its identity and mission. The four fields of the ministry of a congregation are not isolated from each other, but should be integrated into the ministry

of the congregation as a whole. These four fields could be described as aspects of the ministry of a congregation. It is not about choosing one to be a priority, but it must be viewed in a holistic way. The totality of the congregational ministry should include all four fields or dimensions.

These four fields can be used as an evaluative or critical tool to examine the ministry of a congregation; it can be used to identify strengths and weaknesses in the ministry of the congregation (Heyns & Pieterse 1990:57; Smuts 1995:97; Louw 1992:135). The four fields may help a congregation find balance and integration in its congregational ministry. Within the congregation as body of Christ, each of the functions has an equal place and all are interrelated in a balanced way, without overemphasis of one at the expense of the others (Heyns & Pieterse 1990:61). An example: A certain field may be overemphasised, for example the kerugmatic function during a worship service, and the *koinonia* might be neglected.

It is not only about balance, but also about context. Congregations are always local: they have an address and are situated in a local community. The contextualization of the ministry is about the contextual relevance of a local faith community. This is done within a dynamic and changing environment and congregations cannot escape from it. The world is not as it was twenty years ago. This world can be described as flat and fluid (Joubert 2012:2); it is global, secular and postcolonial. The aim is not to describe all of these concepts, but to draw the attention to the fact that, in light of a changing context, congregations need to rethink their ministry on a continual basis. The identity, mission and ministry, as three markers of a congregation, can be used to define and build a local missional community of believers, or, as in the words of Nel (2015:11), “We eventually *do* because we *are*.”

The next important task is to describe an analytical framework that could contribute to develop the ecclesiology of the congregation.

5. DESCRIBING A CONGREGATION: AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

As faith communities, congregations are social realities and should be described and analysed through an analytical lens, or to answer the question attached to the first empirical-descriptive task of practical theology: What is going on? (Osmer 2008:4-5). The contributions made in the various handbooks (Ammerman *et al.* 1998; Hendriks 2004) are used as a guide to develop an analytical framework.

Congregations can, first, be described in terms of their relationship with their context; every congregation is situated within a specific environment and this constitutes an *external interaction* between congregation, the local community, and the broader society. The external interaction or contextual framework of a congregation may be formulated, first, in terms of an ecological metaphor – the ecological positioning of a congregation. Secondly, a congregation may be described in terms of its interaction with the social or cultural environment. The ecological and social aspects of congregational life are both descriptors of the congregational context.

The concept ‘ecology’ is borrowed from biology and refers to the fact that congregations, like a biological species, interact with a specific environment, habitat or biotope (Brouwer 2009). Congregations are part of a social environment that interacts and influences the congregation. The environment is broad in its scope, has several layers and is made up of visible and invisible elements (Ammerman *et al.* 1998:41). This framework assumes that the congregation is an open system (Van Gelder 2007:135) and that interaction is, therefore, possible. Congregations are part of the global village; national and international events and trends interact with them. Three different layers can be identified: demographic (who are the people in the community); cultural (what are they doing), and organizational (Ammerman *et al.* 1998:42). Some of the influences and trends are visible and relatively easy to trace, while others are invisible and not so easy to detect. Who and what in the community are overlooked or marginalized, and what are the unseen forces that are at work in the community (Thumma n.d.)?

A congregation normally identifies with a theological tradition and this informs its theological or confessional identity, but a congregation also has a *cultural or social identity*.

In addition to being shaped by a theological tradition, congregations are also, of course, shaped by the larger secular culture in which they are located (Ammerman *et al.* 1998:79).

Part of the culture of congregations is the way in which they do things, the symbols they use and the rituals they conduct (Hendriks 2004:134-138). The size and social composition of the congregation may or may not reflect the context of the congregation. Critical questions as to the social identity of the congregation would be: “What of the external context is brought into the congregation? What evidences of these external cultural influences are there?” (Thumma n.d.).

“By carefully studying this context and discovering a place within it, congregations can work together for good.” (Ammerman *et al.* 1998:74).

This could be understood in terms of the missional identity of a congregation and, therefore,

Contextual analysis is necessary when a congregation is self-centred, or to such an extent focused on its own institutional well-being that it loses sight of its missional character and the needs and challenges that must be addressed in its community (Hendriks 2004:69).

The ecclesiological framework and the context of a congregation should, therefore, be in a critical or prophetic dialogue with each other.

Congregations may also be described in terms of their *internal life*, the functioning and organizational structures of the congregation. The congregational resources and processes within the congregation are two important internal aspects.

Congregations have a variety of *resources* at their disposal. This includes more than financial or capital assets, as well as the human potential and membership capital available in the congregation. Within a resource framework, the following needs to be mentioned (Ammerman *et al* 1998:134-164):

- The members and their potential are a very important asset of a congregation. This human resource is involved not only within, but also outside the congregation in a network of relationships. Formally and informally, members care for one another and for the community. This is a vital resource for the congregation and the community (Ammerman 2005:265).
- Congregations have financial assets: there are income and expenditure patterns, tithing and budgets that could be analysed. The economic and financial assets of a congregation contribute to the functioning and role which a congregation is able to play as an organization.
- Buildings, facilities and sacred spaces provide the physical environment for the congregation to be local and visible.

It is important for congregations to use all their resources in order to enhance and support the ministry of the congregation. Important questions in this regard are:

In what ways do the resources of this congregation shape its theological commitments? How do the sources of support condition the expression and practice of its faith? Does the congregational space support the ministry? (Thumma n.d.).

The use and management of congregational resource should be done within an ecclesiological framework.

Processes in congregations are about relationships and communication; this may be evaluated in a mechanical way or the congregation could be described in a more organic way as a body (Hendriks 2004:145-146). These processes can be formal in the way in which practices, procedures and policies are being officially prescribed and accepted, or it may be informal as social interaction that happens without guidance or formal instruction (Ammerman *et al.* 1998:107). An important aspect of processes in congregations are the dynamics of authority: who is in charge and how is the authority (tradition, denominational, leadership, church council, priesthood of believers, the Holy Spirit) (Thumma n.d.). In analysing congregational processes, at least three activities should be understood in the functioning of a congregation (Ammerman *et al.* 1998:109-126):

- In a congregation, decisions are taken and plans are made. “Every congregation has its own way of doing its local business, of making the decisions within its power to make.” (Ammerman 1999:52). The way this is done should be in accordance with the congregation’s understanding of its mission and ministry.
- Within a congregation, through different ministry activities, a faith community is formed and build by way of relationships and communication among the members and by accepting and welcoming new members. The commitment and activities of the membership are important aspects of this process.
- A third indicator of the quality of processes within a congregation is the occurrence and management of conflict in the congregation. Conflict may be an aspect of vibrant growth in a congregation, but it could also be negative and destructive in a congregation.

6. CONCLUSION AND THE WAY FORWARD

From a practical theological perspective, two aspects are important in the study of congregations: an ecclesiology and an analytical framework. In describing and exploring congregational life, a practical theological ecclesiology and an analytical framework should be in critical interaction with each other. As Browning indicated, a descriptive and strategic theological activity is needed in the study of congregations.

Practical theology also gains from congregational studies. Recently, there was a movement in the study of congregations not only towards the study of ministerial activity within a congregation, but also an interest in

a range of faithful practices found in ordinary settings (Nieman 2012:134). These activities in ordinary settings may be explored as “lived religion”, and a changing context “requires us to adopt a broader perspective to the field we define as lived religion” (Ganzevoort & Roeland 2014:97).

Congregations remain intentional, potent, formative channels through which significant religious work is done, from participating to belonging, and from orientating to interpreting to norming (Nieman 2012:134).

The importance of the study of congregations cannot be underestimated and the way in which congregations and their members are involved in the local context through a lived religion requires further study.

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