

# ACTS FOR TODAY'S MISSIONAL CHURCH

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigated the challenges associated with being a missional church in an ever-changing world and possible patterns to live missionally in new contexts. The need for Christian missions to be radically contextual in facing up to these changes provided the basis for this study to build on the importance of context and the ways in which the early church in Acts reinvented itself continually in facing up to new challenges, opportunities, peoples, cultures and questions. The way in which the faith community emerged as a church when it became aware of its boundary-breaking mission was explored by using the seven phases in the development of the mission of the church, as identified by Bevans and Schroeder in their groundbreaking theology of missions. By reflecting on these seven phases, this article formulated patterns for a missional church.

## INTRODUCTION

How does the church react to an ever-changing world? It is quite clear that the culture in which the church exists is a changing river, charting its own path without regard to the preferences of previous cultural systems. We have moved from an era of comfortable change – continuous and incremental – to discomfiting change that is chaotic, mostly unpredictable and with little reference to the preceding culture. In spite of our progress and the growth in knowledge, or perhaps because of such progress and growth, the future will be increasingly less predictable (Taleb 2007:xxviii). Fighting these changes with a *museum curator mentality*,<sup>1</sup> focusing mostly on survival (Minatrea 2004:6) and the strengthening of familiar institutions and practices (Niemandt 2007:38–41), is not the correct strategy. Reading the story of the first church in Acts, one acquires a different impression and a sense that the church has a different DNA: it is, by its very nature, a change agent adept at change and up to the challenge of changing contexts.

The missional church is a reproducing community created by the Spirit, who calls, gathers and sends the church into the world to participate in God's mission<sup>2</sup> (Keifert 2006:28; Van Gelder 2007:18). This article investigates the challenges associated with being a missional church in an ever-changing world, as well as possible patterns to live missionally in new contexts. This study uses the important work, *Constants in context: A theology of mission for today*, by Bevans and Schroeder (2004) as a companion for a journey through Acts, exploring this important contemporary text in the development of a missional ecclesiology. The ability of the early church to adapt to changing contexts, even sacrificing some of its core Jewish identity in the quest of bringing the gospel to a widening audience, serves as a clue to the development of aspects of a missional ecclesiology relevant in changing contexts. This study is done in the expectation that the book of Acts can inform significantly today's missional church in retooling itself for effectiveness in communicating the message of hope amid the rapids of changing cultures.

The author of this article must be understood as a participant observer (De Vos 1998:265–276, 406–417) who has been influenced by his experiences as a minister in a congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church undergoing a process of transformation, as well as by the defining role played by the book of Acts, realised through the congregation's collective reflections on this text over the course of a year. This activity stimulated an interest in Acts as a particularly relevant text for churches challenged by changing contexts.<sup>3</sup>

## Acts as companion in a changing context

The point of departure is one of the important insights developed by Bevans and Schroeder, namely that the church, in the process of participating in God's mission, is very sensitive to the challenges presented by the particular context in which it finds itself. There seems to be an inevitable connection, therefore, between the need for the Christian mission and the need for that mission always to be radically contextual. As Bevans and Schroeder write, '[b]y being faithful to each context the church continues to be called forth by its Lord to share and continue his mission' (2004:31). One of the important steps in investigating the challenges associated with being a missional church in an ever-changing world is to express constantly the church's understanding of its identity and mission in these changing contexts (Dingemans 2005:265). This can be done by a process of analysing and interpreting the situation

1. Guder used this expression in an interview with Minatrea (2004:9).

2. Although the missional church is difficult to codify in a simple definition, I find the following useful: '[a] reproducing community of authentic disciples, being equipped as missionaries sent by God, to live and proclaim His Kingdom in their world' (Minatrea 2004:xvi). '[a] community of God's people that defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose of being an agent of God's mission to the world' (Hirsch 2006:82) and '[a] missional church is a church that is shaped by participating in God's mission, which is to set things right in a broken, sinful world, to redeem it, and to restore it to what God has always intended for the world' (Barrett *et al.* 2004:x).

3. Acts received considerable attention in the South African context among churches concerned with the missional identity of the church. A conference was hosted, in May 2009, by the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, in cooperation with *Communitas* and the Dutch Reformed Church. The interest in the theme served as basis for a follow-up conference in 2010 in Pretoria. The South African Partnership for Missional Churches encourages its members to read Acts.

(context), being aware of the church's possibilities and listening to its tradition. Hendriks (2007:1002) describes this as a missional paradigm that pursues a missional and practical ecclesiology; it develops a methodological strategy on how to be a contextually relevant church.

The questions that come to mind are twofold. Firstly, 'Why Acts?' and, secondly, 'Why do congregations in the throes of transformation experience Acts as particularly helpful and relevant?'

The story in Acts is a story of the early church reinventing itself continually in facing up to new challenges, opportunities, peoples, cultures and questions. This study builds on this story and the importance of context in Acts. The Acts of the Apostles makes it clear that the church only emerges as a church when it becomes aware of its boundary-breaking mission (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:2). In Acts, we become acquainted with a faith community of transformation<sup>4</sup> (Robinson & Wall 2006:12). Spirit-filled communities acknowledge the importance of discerning the times and its context. The church must seek to discern what the Spirit of God is doing in relation to the dynamic changes that are taking place within a particular context (Van Gelder 2007:59). The church in Acts encountered significant change that was neither planned nor anticipated; yet, through a process of discernment led by the Spirit, the church succeeded in facing up to the challenges presented by changing contexts (Van Gelder 2007:60).

This sensitivity to contextuality is equally important in faith traditions valuing the concept of *Semper reformanda*.<sup>5</sup> In celebrating John Calvin's day of birth 500 years ago, this particular reformed understanding reiterates this important theme in Acts and seems to be particularly relevant. In the reformed tradition, the constant reflection on missional ecclesiology can be seen as part and parcel of a reformed ethos. Dingemans (2005:241) calls this the bridging function of a faith community – building a bridge between mankind, seeking to make sense of life – and the age-old Christian tradition that transmitted the gospel. He calls churches 'hermeneutical bridges' (Dingemans 2005:253).

McKnight (2008) focuses on the importance of reading the Bible with a pattern of discernment. He writes,

[t]he pattern of discernment is simply this: as we read the Bible and locate each item in its place in the Story, as we listen to God speak to us in our world through God's ancient Word, we discern – through God's Spirit and in the context of our community of faith – a pattern of how to live in our world'.  
(McKnight 2008:129)

The church in Acts demonstrates that the church is always forming, even as it seeks to be reforming (Van Gelder 2007:39–40). In Acts we get clues to a new vitality, a new dynamism, a new way of being a church for our time, one characterised by a sense of adventure. The very shifts in our culture have created unique opportunities to read Acts faithfully and afresh, embracing it as a resource and companion for being a church in new and adventurous times (Robinson & Wall 2006:9, 13).

## CONTEXT

It is important for the church to recognise that contexts are always changing, precisely to be able to discern a pattern of how

4. McKnight (2008:104–105) makes the same point in an even broader context – the Bible must be read with a relational and thus missional approach. He says, '[a]ny method of Bible study that doesn't lead to transformation abandons the missional path of God and leaves us stranded'.

5. Burger refers to the emphasis in Reformed faith on God as well as everyday life. 'Van die waardevolste beklemtonings by gereformeerdes is juis die feit dat hierdie klem op God gekombineer word met 'n baie sterk gerigtheid van ons geloof op die lewe random ons' (Burger 2001:89). It is about all of life in all concreteness, '[h]et hele leven komt in het vizier, in alle concreetheid' (Buijs 2004:10). Calvin brought God's will to bear on all areas of life. His concern was that the glory of God be celebrated and witnessed to at all levels of life, that all of creation sing God's praises in concrete and vibrant ways, and that the beauty of God's will be manifest in our patterns of life both grand and small (Report of International Consultation 2007:4).

to live in our world. Bosch (1991:428) stresses the importance of reading the signs of the times, but warns of the tremendous risks involved due to the fact that it is an *interpreting exercise* (Bosch 1991:430). Jonker (1976:45–46) remarked on the reciprocal relationship between the text (Scripture) and context, but emphasised that the most important determinant is Scripture in the controlling position. However, the church cannot escape the challenge to read the signs of the times in the light of the gospel and to allow the Bible to read us afresh in new contexts (Walls & Ross 2008:xi). Hendriks (2007:1012) describes it as a two-dimensional exegesis of the world and the Word that takes place in a gathered faith community that actively relies on God's presence and guidance. The church must try to understand what is happening in the world and who in this world needs the life-changing gospel.

With this in mind, the next questions we can ask are, (1) 'Why now?', (2) 'Why is the story of the church coping with changing contexts so relevant?' and (3) 'What can we read from the times?' Gibbs (2005) emphasises the fact that the church faces many changes – many of which are global in nature. We live in a global interconnected biosphere – economically, genetically, politically, biologically and culturally. We have become a multi-everything global community (Phipps 2009:37). Friedman wrote two important works on globalisation,<sup>6</sup> *The world is flat. The globalized world in the twenty-first century* (2006) and *Hot, flat and crowded. Why we need a green revolution – and how it can renew America* (2008). Friedman describes the globalised world in the twenty-first century as a world flattened by new technologies. We are moving through a period of volatile, discontinuous change (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:5). Our world is dominated by the extreme, the unknown and the very improbable (Taleb 2007:xxvii). These changes pose particular challenges to the understanding of the church and especially the missional church. Changes are rapid; they burst upon us, allowing little or no time to reflect. Globalisation constitutes the interruptive and tumultuous change referred to as discontinuous change (Van Gelder 2007:49), or, in the words of Giddens (2002:xxx), to be living in a *runaway world*.

Friedman's works are of particular significance, as it paints the changing context faced by the church. It is impossible to summarise Friedman in a short article, but I am convinced that his insights into the nature of a globalised, runaway world are particularly relevant to the missional church. The relevant descriptions are:

- a new era of creativity
- a new era of connectivity
- the impact of uploading
- a new era of in-forming.

These changes in context challenges the church on every conceivable understanding of being a church: the understanding of the nature and work of the Holy Spirit, multiculturalism and hospitality to the stranger, the ability of faith communities to serve God's kingdom in communities, the empowerment of lay members and the church's responsibility towards God's creation. Storrar (2008:1) has appropriately shown that globalisation enables the convergence of Christian traditions around a new way of thinking about God's relationship to the world in Jesus Christ. The author is convinced that the Acts of the Apostles may serve us with clues to a new vitality, a new dynamism and a new way of being a church for our time, in this flat, runaway world. Punt (2009) draws attention to the fact that Luke's Gospel focuses on the spreading of the gospel to Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish nation, while Acts focuses on the spreading of the gospel to Rome, the heart of the Roman Empire. This has

6. Robertson (2003:3) makes the point that globalisation is about human interconnections that have assumed global proportions and transformed themselves. 'If we focus on globalization simply as a modern strategy for power, we will miss its historical and social depths. Indeed the origins of globalization lie in interconnections that have slowly enveloped humans since the earliest times, as they globalized themselves. In this sense, globalization as a human dynamic has always been with us, even if we have been unaware of its embrace until recently.'

important implications for missional theology. Even if the way the gospel spread in the first century focused on the locality of people in the community, it reckoned with the communities across geographical boundaries – the Judeans, Samaritans and the ends of the earth (Ac 1:8). Local never stood against going global. Acts presents itself as an ideal guide for the church in a globalised, changing world.

### Acts as a companion giving insight into the theology of the early church

In this article the missiological focus of the Bible is acknowledged.<sup>7</sup> Acts is Luke's 'streamlined, somewhat unilinear, carefully constructed, idealized and schematized, highly theological history' (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:12) of the first Christian community. Acts is best read as a species of ancient historiography (Robinson & Wall 2006:21). Luke wrote a historical narrative about the beginnings of Christianity (Marshall 1980:23),<sup>8</sup> but then a history charged with theological meaning. Wright (2006:514) sees Luke's underlying theology as the messianic and missiological understanding of Scriptures pointing to the Messiah and the good news going to the nations. The overall structure of Luke's two-volume work and the scriptural understanding reflected in it bring the whole Old Testament story of Israel to its climax and destination as the purpose for which God created Israel in the first place – the blessing of all nations becoming a reality through the mission of the church.<sup>9</sup> To quote Wright (2006):

*Luke shows that the new centrifugal phenomenon of mission to the nations, to the ends of the earth, was not some unheard of innovation but simply (in the words of Jesus) 'what is written' and (in the words of Paul) 'nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen'.*

(Wright 2006:521)

Reading Luke together with Acts makes it clear that what Luke wants to tell us is that the transition from Israel to the Church is now complete and that the work of God in the covenant community is alive and well (McKnight 2009). Bosch (1991:119) also draws attention to Luke's bipolar orientation, 'inward' and 'outward': inward in the sense that the church devotes itself to the apostles' teaching, especially the resurrection event, and outward in the sense that it is actively engaged in a mission to those outside the gospel. Du Plessis (2009:123) remarks that inclusiveness or universalism is one of the most conspicuous characteristics of Luke-Acts.

Bevans and Schroeder (2004:10) state that the church can only be a church when it embraces its mission everywhere and in all situations. Acts paints the picture of the origin of Christian mission and helps the church in discerning this mission. The disciples understood themselves to be a church only after discovering their mission to the ends of earth. Acts witnesses the development and growth of the mission of the first church – '[a]s the mission takes shape, so does the church' (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:13). The Acts of the Apostles depicts the church emerging in its response to the mission with which it was entrusted and affords us with a particular insight into the way a changing context is navigated while the church is still true to its identity. The church in Acts was challenged to discern how best to live the gospel in its day and in its way (McKnight 2008:130). This can be illustrated by the pattern of discernment found in Acts 15 regarding the issue of circumcision. It is clear that the early church discerned that the ageless command to Abraham to circumcise was not necessary for Gentile converts – even to the point that Paul discerned that circumcision did not

really matter at all. Embracing and discovering its mission, the church, through a process of discernment, found a pattern to live missionally in new contexts.

These insights from Acts enable the elaboration of a theology of mission, illuminating the following three elements. Firstly, the church as participating in God's mission. Mission does not belong to the congregation. It is God's mission – the *missio Dei* – the work of the triune God for the sake of the world, in which the church is privileged to participate (Kirk 2000:25). Mission is both what God does and who God is – an attribute of God (Bosch 1991:390). Mission thus is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God, for God is a missionary God (Guder 2000:20).

Secondly, the missional nature of the church. This means that mission belongs to the very purpose, life and structure of the church (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:290). Since God is a missionary God, God's people are a missionary people (Bosch 1991:372; Kirk 2000:30). Mission is not one of several tasks in which the church should be engaged; it is the basis and origin of the church and is the source of unity, vision and energy in the church.<sup>10</sup> The mission of the church overrides its boundaries, spilling out into the world in fulfilment of the apostolic commission to 'go into the world'. The church finds its being in its mission, under the guidance and power of the Spirit. Its intention and direction is orientated to the world God loves and to which it is sent (Anderson 2007:181).

Thirdly, the importance of contextualisation – the attempt to communicate the gospel in word and deed and to establish churches in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context (Frost & Hirsch 2003:83). The gospel is dynamic and evolves into newer and newer forms in keeping with each local situation and according to the need of the moment (Gnanakan 2008:10). A church sent into an ever-changing environment must be fluid in its capacity to adapt while maintaining a clear commitment to its unchanging purpose (Minatrea 2004:9). Since the very beginning, the missionary message of the church incarnated itself in the life and world of those who had embraced it, affirming that God has turned towards the world<sup>11</sup> (Bosch 1991:421, 426). Hendriks (2007:1007) underlines the importance of faith communities (authentic communal structures) that constantly develop contextually as the faith community responds to the initiative of a living, purpose-driven God. The church is always in dialogue – with itself, with the context, with society at large, with culture; and in dialogue with the Christian tradition it inherited (Dingemans 2005:247).

### THE SEVEN STAGES OF MISSION IN ACTS

Bevans and Schroeder describe seven stages of mission in the development of the mission of the church in Acts in changing contexts. Each stage represents a particular moment in the community's understanding of its mission and its corresponding understanding of itself as a church (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:13). This article is guided by these stages and the reflection is expanded by the author's participation in the faith journey of a particular congregation and the important influence of the book of Acts in that congregation's journey of discernment. The article investigated the challenges associated with being a missional church in an ever-changing world as well as possible patterns to live missionally in new contexts. Guided by these stages, one can find a rich source of reflection for the missional

10. 'Acts can be claimed to provide a strong biblical basis for the dictum that the church is "missionary by its very nature"' (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:30). Acts narrates the fact that the church is mission: 'The church does not have a mission – it is a mission' (Robinson & Wall 2006:43–45).

11. Mission as contextualisation takes the incarnation of God in Christ very seriously (Bosch 2004:426; see also Frost & Hirsch 2003:35–59). 'When we talk of the Incarnation with a capital "I" we refer to that act of sublime love and humility whereby God takes it upon himself to enter into the depths of our world, our life, our reality in order that the redemption and consequent union between God and humanity may be brought about. This "enfleshing" of God is so radical and total that it qualifies all subsequent acts of God in his world' (Hirsch 2006:131).

7. See Wright (2006:30). His point of departure is that the proper way for disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus to read the Scriptures is *messianically* and *missionally*.

8. See also Bruce (1952:15–17), De Villiers (1977:19), Du Plessis (2002:74) and Kümmel (1975:156). Guthrie (1970:336) says the writer proposes to show that God was directing each movement of history.

9. Seay (2006:xix) describes Acts as a unique book in the Bible: 'It stands alone among all the narratives as a supernatural action-adventure'.

church. It gives the reader an opportunity to discern patterns to live missionally in new contexts and informs the understanding of ecclesiology and missional strategy. A brief description of the stages mentioned by Bevans and Schroeder is followed by reflections on patterns emerging from these stages.

## Stage 1: Before Pentecost

### Acts 1

The focus in this stage is on the formation of a community understanding their identity and structure as, (1) determined by the reign of God, (2) with apostolic leadership and (3) waiting on the Holy Spirit. Acts suggests that the first question is not: 'What should we do?' Instead, the necessary questions are: 'What is God doing?' and 'Where is the Spirit moving?'<sup>12</sup> When the apostles are told to return to Jerusalem and wait for the Spirit, it is a way of saying to the church 'You're not in charge here'. It is the Spirit who will make the first and subsequent decisive moves (Robinson & Wall 2006:6). This is important, because the Spirit not only initiates mission, but also guides the missionaries about where they should go and how they should proceed. The Spirit of God calls the church into existence and leads the church by sending it into the world on God's mission. The intimate linking of pneumatology and mission is Luke's distinctive contribution to the early church's missionary paradigm (Bosch 1991:114). So important is the role of the Spirit in Acts that Van Gelder (2007:39) argues that *The Acts of the Apostles* could just as readily be entitled *The Acts of the Spirit*.

Reflecting on this stage and the emphasis on waiting on the Spirit, the following pattern comes to mind: *the importance to wait on God; to acknowledge that discernment is a process that is fundamentally influenced by the Holy Spirit*. The guidance of the Spirit is promised to us as we pray, as we study Scripture and as we join the conversation with church tradition. It would be much easier for God to have given us rules and regulations for everything. But God, in his wisdom, has chosen not to do that. Discernment is an element of what it means to walk by faith and is an intrinsic part of being a missional church. God's people discern how to live in this world by acknowledging the vital role of the Spirit in our interpretation of the world and Word. Keifert (2006:130) and Van Gelder (2007:63–66) emphasise this important pattern of missional congregations: Spirit-filled missional churches expect to discover new insights into new situations. Such communities understand that the Spirit leads them into active ministry, participating in God's mission (Burger 1999:170; Du Plessis 2002:78; Hendriks 2007:1002). They understand that the power of the Spirit maintains the church in truth and love and that dependence on the Holy Spirit permeates every moment of a missional church. There is something contagious about a community in which the Spirit of Jesus becomes a dynamic that not only binds the members into a fellowship of common love, but also touches all who come in contact with members of the community (Anderson 2007:161). Judging from the stories in the book of Acts, the Spirit will take us where we did not, on our own, plan to go and will involve us in ministry that cost us something and, perhaps, everything (Robinson & Wall 2006:130).

## Stage 2: Pentecost

### Acts 2–5

In this stage the focus is on the unexpected Pentecost experience, where the inauguration of the expected messianic times was by the descent of the Spirit and the endowment of the community with the gift of prophecy. The speech by Peter plays an important role in this regard. Although Bevans and Schroeder (2004:17) are hesitant to see more in Peter's speech

and the events during Pentecost than the fulfilment of Judaism itself, Wright states that the preaching of Peter indicates an awareness of the wider significance of the events of Easter and Pentecost – 'the universality and particularity of the Abrahamic covenant are now both embodied in Jesus of Nazareth' (Wright 2006:514). Peter's sermon reframes the meaning of Scripture in the light of Jesus' resurrection. Israel's story gains new relevance and actuality<sup>13</sup> (Robinson & Wall 2006:55). The experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was not only an event that Christ promised but an event in which the same Christ continues to be present in this world as God's goal of history.

Reflecting on this stage and the emphasis on reframing the expectations of Judaism in the light of the new community's experience of the resurrection of Jesus, one is reminded of Miyamoto's (2008:161) emphasis on the transforming power of worship: 'Worship occupies and must occupy the central place in Christian mission as well as mission theology'. The following pattern then comes to mind: *Spirit-led missional congregations anticipate new insights into the gospel. Their preaching becomes a reframing of the text and the occasion* (Robinson & Wall 2006:65). When it comes to stories, there is always more to tell. You have never fully arrived in a relationship with a biblical text. There is always more there (Sweet 2004:85). McKnight (2008:127) calls this adopting and adapting the Bible. The church is a community where hermeneutical interpretation<sup>14</sup> helps members to orientate themselves in the world and the Christian tradition. It is about engaging the context with a missional imagination. The church is nothing less than a hermeneutical bridge connecting the tradition and wisdom of Christian faith with the challenges and questions of the modern world. Everyone in the community participates in this reformulation of tradition and naming of the future (Dingemans 2005:234, 253, 285). The disconcerting transformational power of the gospel and preaching of the gospel is controversial – in the sense that it leaves nothing untouched, not even the untouchable tradition of interpreting the Bible.

We can see this in the way Peter takes a passage that had been used to preach God's judgement of other peoples and deliverance of God's people, Israel, and how he reframes it into a call to repentance directed at Israel itself:

*Peter seizes on the work of the Spirit swirling around them to say, 'No, these are the promised last days, these are the times of the outpouring of the Spirit', and these are times for you to repent and call on the name of the Lord.*

(Robinson & Wall 2006:65)

Preaching is transformation because it renames and reframes our experience and, in doing so, changes lives. Preaching is transformation because it opens up fresh understandings of the meaning of the gospel. This means that we adopt and adapt the Bible, applying parts of the story and some of the stories in the Bible and adapting others – but always by using patterns of discernment (McKnight 2008:128). Dingemans (2005:235) underlines this important aspect in his description of the church as community of hermeneutical interpretation with the primary task of discernment ('*geloofsbeziinning*').<sup>15</sup>

## Stage 3: Stephen

### Acts 6–7

The focus broadens and the scene presents a picture of growing linguistic, cultural and social diversity, to such an extent that it

13. 'Simply put, the demonstrative coming of God's Spirit makes it clear that Israel has already entered into the final epoch of its history, when decisions made about Jesus take on a redemptive meaning that makes the church's mission all the more urgent' (Robinson & Wall 2006:55).

14. According to Dingemans (2005:234) hermeneutical interpretation is more important than what the church does '*Ik zie de kerk meer als een hermeneutische interpretatie-gemeenschap dan als een handelingsgemeenschap*'.

15. Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:182) suggest this task be worked out in four key areas, (1) discovering the forces that affect the lives of people in communities, (2) connecting people with their neighbourhood and community, (3) encouraging so that missional imagination about the future becomes a regular part of people's thinking and (4) connecting context with the Biblical narratives.

12. See Kuecker's (2008) PhD dissertation, *The Spirit and the 'other': Social identity, ethnicity and intergroup reconciliation in Luke Acts*. He summarises as follows: 'The Spirit is the uniting motif and driving force within the Lucan salvation history, and provided the legitimation of the mission to which it leads' (2008:16).

causes conflict (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:18). Themes such as diversity and the expansion of the gospel message are introduced. Stephen's speech provides the key for the interpretation of what is happening. 'His speech is the first intimation that the Way is a discrete religious system, intimately connected to and yet – because of the centrality of Jesus – distinctly separate from its Jewish roots' (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:19). Stephen's skilfully constructed speech makes the point that God's presence cannot be limited to any particular place. The living God is a God on the move and on the march, who is always calling his people to fresh adventures and accompanying and directing them as they go. The speech and Stephen's subsequent death reveals the basic incompatibility between Judaism and the new faith in Jesus and illustrates the conflict and friction caused by this expansion of the focus and scope of the newfound community.

Stage 3 presents a rich source of reflection on issues such as the relationship between Christian and Jewish faith, the missional dimension of martyrdom and the end of the Jerusalem-phase of the early church. However, I would like to focus on this stage as providing us with patterns and guidelines for resolving conflict (Robinson & Wall 2006:101).

### Patterns and guidelines for resolving conflict

Congregations will experience conflict. Missional transformation puts the participants in a high-conflict zone, but one must keep in mind that conflict is normal in change (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:134). The challenge is to facilitate the conflict in such a way that it will not impair the mission and life of the congregation, but rather be productive and even growth producing. An authentic, living Christian community is capable of having and resolving disagreements. The pattern deduced from the events in the first church entails at least the following:

- Participation by the community and those most affected by the conflict. The apostles gave the work back to the community and empowered them to participate in the solving of it (Robinson & Wall 2006:104).
- Recognition of the conflict, framing of the challenge and naming of the key issues in the conflict. This creates the opportunity to handle differences and dissension constructively.
- Establishment of guiding principles for dealing with the conflict. This includes acts of self-sacrifice on behalf of each other, which indicate that the church is a missional community that practices reconciliation, but also able to use conflict to enrich discussion (Barrett *et al.* 2004:167, 168).
- Trustworthiness, because trust is the glue that binds a community and enables it to move forward (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:139).
- Public ritual to ratify the resolution. Although healing and reconciliation takes place within the body, it serves to shape and reform the community as a whole (Barrett *et al.* 2004:168).

### Stage 4: Samaria and the Ethiopian Eunuch

#### Acts 8

This stage indicates the steady progression of the gospel, from Jerusalem Jews to Samaritans to a marginalised Gentile (or at least a proselyte Gentile). It is a story of the expanding visions of the early community and God moving the community beyond its borders (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:22). Bell and Golden (2008) describe this stage as an exposition on the tension throughout the early church:

*What do you do when your religion isn't big enough for God? What do you do when your rules and codes and laws simply aren't enough anymore? What do you do when your system falls apart because a new thing that God is doing is better, beyond, superior, more compelling?*

(Bell & Golden 2008:101)

This stage in Acts illustrates the importance of crossing boundaries and welcoming the 'Other', the 'Stranger', the 'Marginalised' in the community.

Through this, a pattern of *hospitality to strangers* comes to mind. God's mission extends the boundaries of covenant membership to wherever the gospel is proclaimed. It is nothing less than another way to explain the Incarnation (Heitink 2007:199). The shape of hospitality entails listening, helpfulness, confronting difference and engaging in the otherness of those who are 'other' than us (Barrett *et al.* 2004:92). People are invited into new relationships with God and with each other as the community's intent is to *welcome as God* welcomes. This is eloquently explained when Acts relates the last years of Paul's ministry. Luke ends his account with Paul, far away from Jerusalem at the centre of the pagan world in Rome, sharing the gospel with whoever is interested (Ac 28:30). He welcomed *all* who came to see him. *All*.

In welcoming strangers and outsiders, the church must reflect creatively on developing inclusive practises that include those who are different in the community. Hospitality is an ancient church practise of which the purpose has been largely forgotten, but it needs to be placed at the core of being a missional church (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:155). This includes welcoming anyone God brings to the community and turning the welcoming space into a safe place (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:121). It implies a new kind of apologetics where there is no need to argue about faith because lives and hospitality speak louder than words. It also implies recovering old and discovering new practises of hospitality to create a new culture.

### Stage 5: Cornelius and his household

#### Acts 10:1–11:18

This event focuses on the apostolic authority in the establishing of churches among non-Jews (Bosch 1991:120). In this epic stage, described by Du Plessis (2009:125) as a 'programmatic episode of inclusion', Luke shows how the church made its most fundamental and dangerous step, which would involve the greatest struggle and demand the most fundamental self-reinterpretation for the nascent messianic movement (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:23). It has often been described as the conversion of Peter as much as Cornelius (Robinson & Wall 2006:151). It was only through a paradigm-shifting vision and an encounter with Cornelius and his testimony that Peter was converted to the recognition that God does not show favouritism but accepts people from every nation (Ac 10:34–35). The principal lesson Peter has learned is more about God than about the scope of his mission. God's inclusive love changes the church – the church is inclusive and the church must proclaim the gospel to all and be inclusive in nature (Du Plessis 2002:78, 2009:125).

The epic drama that illustrates this approach is introduced by relating Peter's vision where the unthinkable is asked of a devout Jew – to dare to entertain Gentiles and share a meal with them. This is followed by Peter travelling to Caesarea and proclaiming Jesus as Lord to a Gentile Roman officer. In the middle of the story, the Spirit descends on all the listeners. Peter asks what would prevent these Gentiles from being baptised and gives orders that Cornelius and his household be baptised. Here we find a whole Gentile household receiving admittance in the community – and the community recognising that not only must it go to Jews, but to Gentiles as well. With the baptism of Cornelius and his household, a redefinition of the religion of the first church is in process (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:25). It narrates not only the redirection of Peter's life and ministry, but the redirection of the life and ministry of the church as well. It narrates the church's discovering what it means to be the church in a multicultural world and society.

The narrative of the encounter between Peter and Cornelius provides us with a pattern that emphasises the importance of a dynamic relationship between context and constant. Stage 5 reminds us of the thrust of the whole book of Acts: changing contexts mean that the church is ripe for renewal and conversion. Mission is not a programme or budget of the church, but everything the church is and does. It is the work of God's Spirit

when we recognise that the church must constantly experience re-shaping and re-forming – as the phrase *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* suggests. Guder (2000:150) pushes it even further: re-forming is not enough – churches continually need *conversion*. The conversion of Cornelius, and Peter, confronts the present-day churches with its pattern of inclusion. More than that: the deeply inclusive identity of the Christian church in itself already poses a challenge and a viable alternative to the deeply divided society we live in (Du Plessis 2009:126).

The changing contexts challenges the church to discern new and creative patterns of what it implies to be missional: the inclusivity of Luke–Acts opens the perspective on Gentiles and serves as a *call of conversion to the present-day missional church to be multicultural*. This is probably the biggest challenge facing traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches in South Africa. Although other, and probably all, churches must discern patterns to cope with an increasingly multicultural world, these churches face an adaptive challenge on which their very futures depend. An adaptive challenge<sup>16</sup> is a challenge where, (1) the solution is outside the current repertoire of skills, (2) the church is faced with change or decline, (3) the solution is critical for the future and (4) the very sense of competence of the church and its leadership is questioned. Taking up an adaptive challenge, the church will become something different, something new (Robinson & Wall 2006:164). Becoming a community of Jews and Greeks, slaves and free people, men and women, meant great change in the hearts and minds and behaviour of everyone involved in the first-century church. Similarly, it will require a change of minds, hearts and behaviours of the present-day church.

### Stage 6: Antioch

#### Acts 11:19–26

Stage 5 prepared the way for the first real encounter of the Christian faith with the pagan world. In Stage 6 we find the climax of Luke's drama and one of the most critical events in Christian history (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:25). In Antioch we find Jewish and Gentile converts side-by-side. More and more Gentiles come to be added to the number that are being saved and more and more Jews reject the message. The focus in this stage is on the formation of a community understanding its identity and structure as, (1) determined by the reign of God, (2) with apostolic leadership and (3) an expanding consciousness of being a church, realising that it was different from the synagogue.

Following the lead of the Spirit, the Jesus movement altered itself and became much more than before Pentecost or in the idyllic days in Pentecost's aftermath (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:27). The radical nature of the Antioch events can be seen in the following:

- The fact that the gospel was presented in terms of the Lord Jesus and not the more exclusive Jewish title of Messiah. For the first time the gospel is presented in terms moving beyond Judaism.
- The fact that a representative of the Jerusalem community was sent to investigate the situation in Antioch and his report that God's grace was truly at work.
- The community in Antioch's consciousness of itself as 'church' – witnessing to the fact that the new community saw itself as something different than the synagogue.

The Jesus movement crosses unimaginable thresholds and enters a world with a much larger missional scope.

Stage 6 reminds us of the overarching challenge issued by the book of Acts: the challenge to cross unimaginable thresholds for

16. Keifert (2006:88–92) and Robinson and Wall (2006:163) apply the insights of Heifetz regarding technical and adaptive change to the church. In the case of technical change, the solution is already within the repertoire of the organisation, the solution is not trivial and it is important for the ongoing life (maintenance) of the organisation.

the sake of the gospel. The dramatic breakthrough described by the events in Stage 6 gives clues to a new vitality and dynamism – a sense of adventure about being church in an emerging pagan world (Bandy 2004:75). The following pattern then comes to mind: the permanent priority of mission,<sup>17</sup> encouraging the church to proclaim the person and message of Jesus and introducing others to a relationship with God through and in Jesus. The only way in which the activity of the church becomes active participation in God's mission is when this practise is played out in numerous patterns in the very life of each and every faith community. Thus, *there must be a willingness to cross whatever threshold and face whatever barrier for the sake of the gospel*. Communities should constantly ask themselves: 'What are we willing to sacrifice for the sake of the gospel?' and 'What are the thresholds that limit our proclamation of the gospel to whomever?' Only then can they name, face and cross those very barriers. As the Antioch community discerned, the importance of leaving behind a particular Jewish identity and embraced the journey of forming a new identity, becoming 'church' among and for the Gentiles, the church of today is equally challenged. In the words of Jones (2008:8), the church is challenged to leave behind the discrete differences between the various flavours of Christianity and to practice a generous orthodoxy<sup>18</sup> that incorporates contributions of all Christian movements to becoming new Christians. The Antioch events encourage the church to a new self-understanding in dialogue – Bevans and Schroeder call this prophetic dialogue.<sup>19</sup>

### Stage 7: The mission to the Gentiles

#### Acts 12–28

The remaining 17 chapters of Acts paint a picture of a steadily expanding mission to the Gentiles. Bevans and Schroeder (2004:27) point out that Luke is careful to show the continuity of the early church with its Jewish roots. Du Plessis (2002:72), however, sees Acts as an *inward and outward* movement, emphasising, on the one hand, the relevance of the movements of Jewish roots and, on the other hand, acknowledging the importance to be inclusive and open for Gentiles. The narratives in Stage 7 illustrate that the existence of Christianity is always linked to its expansion beyond itself, across generational and cultural boundaries. To be a church is to be in mission, to be in mission is to be responsive to the demands of the gospel in particular contexts, to be continually reinventing in new situations, new cultures and new questions. How does the church go about this? What pattern or practises helped in this process?

One of the important narratives in this stage is Acts 15, where we find a pattern of discernment being played out. Circumcision was regarded as a symbol of an everlasting covenant and the issue was one of the most important questions in the early church because Jewish followers expected Gentile converts to adhere to this 'fundamental issue'. Circumcision was indeed central to Israel's identity as God's covenant people. Robinson and Wall (2006:168) recognise that the issue at hand is an issue

17. 'Don't think church, think mission!' (Frost & Hirsch 2003:81).

18. 'We are committed to honour and serve the church in all its forms – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Anabaptist. We practice "deep ecclesiology" – rather than favoring some forms of the church and critiquing or rejecting others, we see that every form of the church has both weaknesses and strengths, both liabilities and potential' (Jones 2008:223). See McLaren's (2004) *A generous orthodoxy* for a broad exploration of the concept.

19. Bevans and Schroeder (2004:348) propose that mission, understood as prophetic dialogue, will serve the church well in the first years of the twenty-first century. This means that mission is foremost an exercise of dialogue – a challenge of witnessing in private as well as public spheres (Du Plessis 2009:122). Hendriks (2007:1012) refers to a critical and constructive dialogue of discernment that hermeneutically aligns the following: 'A contextual situation with its problems and challenges; the identity of the people of God, and the role and purpose, or mission, that they have, which flow from their knowledge of Scripture and tradition'. Mission is about persuasion and freedom-respecting love that recognises the freedom and dignity of all people. Mission can, therefore, only proceed in dialogue and can only be carried out in humility.

of clarifying the relevance and authority of the Jewish laws – a question of *halakha*. The early Christians discerned that this ageless command to Abraham was not necessary for Gentile converts. Peter concluded that the hearts of Gentiles are 'cleansed by faith' rather than by the ritual purification of circumcision. James summarises in *halakhic* manner and his verdict is that Gentile converts needed only to offer minimal respect for those commandments that distinguished Jews from surrounding nations. 'Here we find a pattern of discernment, a pattern of listening to the old, understanding the present, and discerning how to live that old way in a new day' (McKnight 2008:134). It is, in a certain sense, Dingemans's (2005:241) hermeneutical bridging in action – building a bridge between the quest of Gentiles to make sense of the new life in Christ and the tradition that served as transmitter of the gospel.

Thus, this article proposes the following pattern of discernment, following McKnight's (2008:206) hermeneutics that gospel adaptation for every culture, for every church, and for every Christian is precisely why God gave us the Bible. In this hermeneutics, McKnight makes a case for *missional listening* (McKnight 2008:107–112), in that:

- Missional listening begins with the wisdom of ages – reading the Bible with the tradition.
- Missional listening is empowered by inspiration – the presence of the Spirit who facilitates the living presence of God speaking to his church. 'God spoke in those days in those ways, and I believe he is speaking in our days in our ways' (McKnight 2008:204).
- Missional listening is a process, takes time and transforms the listener.
- Missional listening is about discernment. Hendriks (2007:1003) says a missional theology believes that theology is about discernment: '[i]t is a correlational and hermeneutically active dialogue'.
- Missional listening blooms into a life of good works.

Missional listening is serious about the plot of the Bible. Missional listening is serious about the story of the Bible. Missional listening is serious about the behaviours of the characters in the plot. Missional listening is serious about the demands of the gospel in each context and is serious to assist the church to be continually reinventing in new situations. Missional reading regards Scripture as the current Word of the living God – it continues to inform us how to respond as God's sent people in our own social world. Missional listening is an appropriate pattern of discernment because it teaches us to look forward by looking to our past.<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The runaway, flat, globalised world is asking the church to discern new and creative patterns of what it implies in practical terms to be an inclusive church in a new era of creativity, connectivity, in-forming and empowered uploading society. This exploration of Acts, with Bevans and Schroeder as guides, was done in the expectation that it can inform today's missional church in retooling itself for its mission in the rapids of changing contexts and cultures. In this process, the following patterns for today's missional church emerged:

- A missional church is a church in which discernment plays an important role. This entails discernment of how to live in this world by acknowledging the vital role of the Spirit in our interpretation of the multicultural world and God's Word. It also acknowledges the importance of waiting on God – discernment is a process that is fundamentally influenced by the Holy Spirit.
- In a missional church, transformational preaching reframes the identity of the church. Spirit-led missional congregations anticipate new insights into the gospel. Their preaching becomes a reframing of the text and the occasion.

- The very nature of being a missional church creates conflict and tension. Missional churches embrace conflict in a positive and productive way and develop patterns and practises to resolve conflicts.
- Hospitality to strangers. A missional church crosses borders and overcomes the barriers that separate people from each other. The outcast and marginalised are drawn into the community.
- The inclusivity of Luke–Acts opens the perspective on Gentiles and serves as a call of conversion to the present-day missional church to be multicultural.
- A missional church understands that there must be a willingness to cross whatever threshold and face whatever barrier for the sake of the gospel. Being a risk-taking community is part and parcel of the identity of a missional church.
- The aforementioned pattern of discernment is closely related to the pattern of missional listening. The challenge to be a contextually relevant church is met by the pattern of missional listening. It teaches us to go back to narratives such as the wonderful action-packed stories of Acts, so that we may know how to go forward in our world.

Hopefully, these patterns, deducted from the first church in Acts when it was challenged to discern how best to live the gospel in its day and in its way, will encourage congregations in our day to become missional.

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20. Adapted from McKnight (2008:212). See also Robinson and Wall (2006:265) describing Luke's interpretive strategy as 'comparative midrash', where biblical characters are called in to help ever-changing audiences – at ever-changing locations – to interpret what it means to be a people belonging to God.

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