

# Five years of missional church: Reflections on missional ecclesiology

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## Abstract

This article explores insights into the emerging missional ecclesiology of twelve congregations collaborating in the South African Partnership for Missional Churches (SAPMC). A brief description of the vision, the understanding of the missional church, and the theological background of the SAPMC is followed by an appreciative-inquiry investigation into the partnership and congregations. The article describes a process of participatory action research into the five-year long missional journey of twelve South African congregations. The findings are discussed within the framework of four themes: practices, movements, attitudes and innovations. The article concludes with the contribution of these findings towards formulating an emerging missional ecclesiology.

**Keywords** Emerging missional ecclesiology, South African Partnership for Missional Churches, missional church, missional practices, missional movements, missional attitudes, missional innovations, spiritual discernment, listening team

## Introduction: The South African Partnership for Missional Churches

In 2004, a number of congregations in Southern Africa formed the South African Partnership for Missional Churches (SAPMC)<sup>1</sup> (*Communitas s.a.*). This article explores, through a process of participatory action research, the five-year long missional journey of the twelve South African congregations. According to Brouwer (2009:1), the concept of the “missional church”<sup>2</sup> promises to guide local churches towards a new identity and mission. He calls it “...a response to a sense of ecclesiological and congregational urgency that is felt all over the world”.

The SAPMC is a network of congregations on a journey of spiritual discernment that empowers the partners to respond to God’s mission. It is a journey of discovering God’s specific call: the call for the congregation to move beyond just doing missionary work, to becoming wholly missional in attitude, vision and action. The SAPMC shares the following vision: “To listen to God’s specific call to us, to let God send us and, through the Holy Spirit, empower us to participate in God’s mission in the world, so that both

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<sup>1</sup> Afrikaans: *Die Suid-Afrikaanse Vennootskap vir Gestuurde Gemeentes*.

<sup>2</sup> See Saayman (2010:5–16) for a comprehensive discussion on the terminology of missional church or missionary church. In this article, missional is preferred.

our outreach and our life together as a church are a witness to Jesus Christ". It is a vision for congregations to reach beyond the boundaries that they are currently living within, according to the pattern that God intends for the whole world. The key is to participate in God's mission (Hendriks 2009:109–119).<sup>3</sup>

Missional congregations are described as congregations on a journey. Easum (2001:10) underlines the importance of understanding that congregations are on a journey: "[...] Christianity is depicted as a movement away from the centers of religious institutional, professional life into the fringes of the mission field". In a guide for congregations considering joining the partnership, the SAPMC elaborates on this description. The guide states the following about missional congregations:

- Missional congregations are aware of the context they are living in. They know that Christendom is vanishing. They understand that it cannot be expected that everyone around them is Christian. They know that they live in the midst of a mission field. They can answer the question: *Where are we?*
- Missional congregations are letting Scripture and prayer shape them as individuals, and as a church, as they engage in forming a people of God. They allow God's Spirit to work through them, and empower them, to take risks for the sake of the gospel. They are answering the question: *Whose are we?*
- Missional congregations can recognise God's actions directly around them, as well as in the wider world. They are learning more about God's mission of redeeming, restoring, and reconciling the world through Jesus Christ. They can give answers to the question: *What is God doing?*
- Missional congregations know how to discern and listen to God's specific call to them. They know their missional vocation, and are willing to act on it. For the sake of the gospel, they are reaching out across boundaries. They can answer the question: *How is God sending us?*
- Missional congregations are a sign, and a preview, of the future that God intends for the whole world. By inviting others to become citizens of God's reign, and by demonstrating how they are functioning as a church together, they are giving witness to Jesus Christ through outreach. They are answering the question: *How are we, as a church, currently living according to the pattern of God's future?*

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<sup>3</sup> See Hendriks (2009:109–119) for a more comprehensive description of the work and activities of the SAPMC. See Keifert (2006) for a description of the journey of being sent on God's mission.

The following themes are evident in the SAPMC: participating in God's mission of reconciliation and the redemption of creation; spiritual discernment to discover God's mission; emphasis on the Trinity; mission as a journey; and being a church, after Christendom and mission, where the congregation finds itself (Hendriks 2009:114).

Influential voices that can be heard within the SAPMC are: Patrick Keifert and Church Innovations, the Gospel and our Culture Network, Lesslie Newbigin, David Bosch, Darell Guder, Craig van Gelder and Alan Roxburg (Hendriks 2009:112). With regard to the emergence and development of missional theology and missional ecclesiology, the SAPMC must thus be understood against the backdrop of a broader global context (especially within the North American context; See Saayman 2010:10–13).

Mission is understood as ultimately proceeding from a Trinitarian God. The ecclesiology functioning in this backdrop is an understanding that God the Father, through the Holy Spirit, sent the church. The classical formulation of *missio Dei* affirms that mission is God's way of sending forth. The voices, as described above, expanded the definition of mission to include the participation of the church in the divine mission.

The mission of the church is seen in her search for a spiritual framework that affirms human life, mutual respect and equality by working towards inner and mutual conversion, just community, survival of God's creation, as well as church growth (Balía and Kim 2010:25). The importance of cultural and contextual exegesis is underlined by the implications of the *missio Dei* and the missional understanding of the church as participating in God's mission in this world (Bosch 2004:390).

Theology is the interpretative help of translating the activity of God in his world. Although the story of each congregation is influenced by diverse factors such as the leadership role and theological training of pastors, and the denominational identity of the particular community, this backdrop is quite perceptible in the background of the participating congregations.

Following Keifert's introduction of the work of Church Innovations to South Africans in 2002, the SAPMC formed in 2004 (Hendriks 2009:112). *Communitas* (previously BUVTON) and the Faculty of Theology at the University of Stellenbosch were involved from the very beginning. More than 170 congregations from different denominations, as well as several denominational structures, were partners of the SAPMC in 2010. The local partnership developed unique contextual training material for the members and contributed material to the larger international partnership.

Appreciative Inquiry plays an important role in the methodology of the SAPMC. It is used to discover and explore the narratives of congregations (Branson 2004:19). Taking the crucial point of departure that God is working and active in his world, congregations are assisted to discern God's

mission in the process (Niemandt 2007:70). Appreciative Inquiry helps congregations to discover the work of the Spirit in their congregations.

## **The research process**

In 2009, a research project on the founding congregations that have been participating in the SAPMC since 2004 was launched. During the research project, the developments, emerging missional ecclesiology, discernment journey and missional transformation of the participants were investigated. Twelve congregations participated: Nederduitsch Hervormde Gemeente Kemptonpark-Oos, NG Gemeente Constantiakruin, NG Gemeente Doornpoort, NG Gemeente Helderberg, NG Gemeente Joubertina, NG Gemeente Kenridge, NG Gemeente Paarlberg, NG Gemeente PE-Hoogland, NG Gemeente Stellenbosch (Moedergemeente), NG Gemeente Sonnekus, NG Gemeente Weltevreden, and Pniël Congregational.

Three listening processes were used in the research process: a listening team, reading team and final reading team. The processes are described in the sections that follow.

### **First process: Listening team**

Each congregation appointed a listening team that conducted qualitative interviews with twenty-four people. The listening teams' brief was to conduct interviews with six "family members" (people in the inner circle who were active and influential members of the congregation), twelve "inside strangers" (people who attended worship services, but who were not actively involved in congregational life) and six "outside strangers" (people outside the congregation, or members who were not actively involved in the church, and only used the congregation from time to time).

This ethnographic research method (Hendriks 2009:114) was similar to the process congregations undertook when they initially joined the SAPMC during the first phase of the partnership in 2004. Thus, the study built on the skills already available within the respective congregations to undertake ethnographic research of this kind.

The process followed can be described as participatory action research (De Vos 1998:265–276, 406–417). Interpretation was part of the interviewing process. Trained listening teams gave particular attention to the following:<sup>4</sup>

1. recurring expressions and themes;
2. contradictions or disjunctions between statements, or between words and actions;

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<sup>4</sup> The paper by Nieman entitled "Semi-structured interviews" was used in the training and is available.

3. corrections or redirections made to questions, as well as evasion and avoidance;
4. indigenous coding the respondent used, such as local terms, sayings and categories;
5. extended narratives that provided information and indicated the respondents' worldview; and
6. themes, images, terminology and values that supposed a different framework of understanding.

Questions were asked through semi-structured interviews. Broad issues and topics were established. The priority of the interview was to maintain conversational informality, while still retaining some structure in order to explore the central theme. The questions were:

1. Describe the congregation to a visitor or new member.
2. What does it practically mean to you, and other members, to be a follower (disciple) of Jesus Christ? How does the congregation assist you?
3. Illustrate your awareness of God by sharing how you experience his presence in this congregation, and how he works here.
4. In which way(s) are the members of your congregation led, and assisted, to worship God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?
5. Relate a situation in which you, and/or other people, were involved in a conflict situation within the congregation, and how it was handled.
6. What makes you anxious about the future of the congregation, and what gives you hope?
7. Describe your own, and other people's feelings, about the changes in the congregation during the past three to five years.
8. How do you, and others, feel about the changes that have been taking place in the community during the past five years?

The local listening teams conducted and captured more than 280 interviews. The final listening report from each congregation consisted of a summary of the twenty-four interviews and was sent to the SAPMC for further analysis.

### **Second process: Reading team**

The SAPMC trained a reading team that read, summarised and interpreted the listening reports. The team, under the competent leadership of Corrie du Toit, gained valuable experience by analysing more than a hundred listening reports over a period of five years. The team consisted of eight regular readers, of which three to five read every congregational report. The congregational reports were interpreted in terms of applied narrative theory.

The reading team viewed themselves as participatory observers.<sup>5</sup> Participatory observation is defined as follows:

- Participatory observation is a strategy (not a single technique) for longer-term study that allows the observer the opportunity to really feel what the respondents are experiencing.
- Being a participant means that the observers engage alertly and respectfully during the group activities and events, as if they were regular members of the group.
- Observation is paying attention to what others are doing, from the mundane to the extraordinary, and how they recount the experience on their own terms.
- It is to take note – in the dual sense of appreciating and writing.
- Participatory observation is to interpret – Ellison (2009:96) describes the team members as “participant interpreters.”

The reading team analysed the reports of the twelve congregations, and summarised the patterns that emerged from the replies to the eight questions. The interpreted consensus of the reading team is reflected in the reading reports.

### Third process: Final reading team<sup>6</sup>

During this part of the research project, the reading reports were once more read, discussed and interpreted to establish trends and an understanding of the narratives. The approach and technique were, yet again, that of participant interpreter. The final reading team employed the following matrix:

- What kind of *movements* can be discerned in the congregations?
- What *attitudes* are present that could be conducive for the transformation to a missional community?
- What *habits* can be recognised?
- What *innovations* were developed that expressed a new understanding of being a missional church?

Special attention has been given to the collective result of all the reading processes. In 2009, the SAPMC hosted a conference. The purpose of the conference was to give participant partners the opportunity to narrate their

<sup>5</sup> The paper by James Nieman entitled “Participant observation” was used in the training of the team.

<sup>6</sup> The final reading team members are all involved in the SAPMC and represent a variety of disciplines: Practical Theology, Missiology, New Testament studies and research methodology. Members of the final reading team were Mrs Corrie du Toit, Prof. Jurgens Hendriks, Mr Johan Kotze, Dr Frederick Marais, Rev. Danie Mouton, Dr Marius Nel, Prof. Nelus Niemandt, Dr Xolile Simon and Dr Pieter van der Walt.

experiences during the five years of participation in the missional journey (Kok 2009). I attended the conference and incorporated the reflections in this article.

## Observations on the journey

The various reports present researchers with a vast amount of information that promises exciting possibilities to develop a missional ecclesiology. The approach is determined by what Hendriks (2007:1001) describes as a hermeneutical approach: “A hermeneutical approach is more sensitive, with the understanding that our theological viewpoints are relative to our context, that theology always has a limited viewpoint and a limited grasp of wider realities. A hermeneutical approach can lead to greater humility and a greater dependence on God’s grace and guidance”.

In this article, the reflections are organised using the matrix that was employed during the third reading process: *habits*, *attitudes*, *movements* and *innovations*.

*Movements* are organic and indicate something of the missional ethos in congregations that gives momentum to the journey. Easum (2001:34) refers to the “move from stuck to unstuck” or “unfreezing moves”, indicating a change in the life and direction of the congregation.

*Attitudes* refer to congregational culture. Easum (2001:11) talks of system stories. Attitudes are found in the subconscious of the congregation. They determine the manner in which a congregation conducts itself.

*Innovations* are the creative responses to new opportunities. Easum (2001:53) emphasises the importance of contextual innovations to incarnate the Gospel. Dingemans (2005:241) talks about the bridging function of the church to connect the message of the Gospel with people seeking sense and meaning in life. For Frambach (2007:23), it is all about a new kind of church: “[...] the people of God must be much more fluid, more nimble, more agile than we have heretofore”. It is a challenge of crossing borders and building bridges to express the true nature of Jesus’ incarnation (Kok and Niemandt 2009:6).

## Habits

Five habits were identified:

- dwelling in the Word;
- dwelling in the world;
- welcoming the stranger;
- *ubi caritas* – caring for people in need; and
- empowerment.

## Dwelling in the Word

One of the most consistent habits present across all twelve congregations was dwelling in the Word. This habit was found in numerous congregational events and played an important role in the journey of discernment. The habit enhanced the culture of discernment and created unique spaces to listen to the Bible in a new way. Nel (2009) states that it challenges congregations to invite others into holy spaces, and creates a constant expanding space from the individual to the community.

In the words of Ellison (2009:93), “[...] congregational members must be cordially invited into dwelling in the Word. They need to be allowed to converse, make decisions, and take actions that are shaped by the living Word of God as they hear one another speaking it”.

Church Innovations (*s.a.*) describes dwelling in the Word as follows:

1. Choose a passage – either a lectionary text for this coming week, or a passage already meaningful to your group, and read it aloud.
2. Sit together as a group, in silence or in conversation, sharing with one another where the passage sparked your imagination or where a memory was triggered. Let the passage draw you together as a group.
3. Refer back to the passage when you are trying to make a decision. Determine what the passage reveals to you then.
4. Close with the passage and prayer.
5. During the next meeting, review the passage again in the same manner.
6. Live in the passage for several months. It will reveal more and more to you as you revisit it.

Ellison (2009:91) says: “Dwelling in God’s Word is a naturally coherent, aesthetic, even synergistic process within which all things are possible and nothing is impossible.” Nel (2009) explains the difference between *talking* about the Bible and *listening to* the Bible:

Talking about the Bible	Dwelling in the Word (Bible)
Read it to members of the church	Read it together with the members
A single reading of a text	Multiple readings of the same text
Read in order to finish reading	Continuous reading of the text
Looking for the correct interpretation	Discovering multiple interpretations
Reading for information	Reading for transformation

While reading through the listening reports, the transformational power of dwelling in the Word became clear:



- 1) A respondent said: “It changes the way members think and feel about the congregation”.
- 2) It is clear that it plays an important role in the discernment processes: “It is the main point on the agenda of church leadership meetings”.
- 3) “It helps us to recognise the need of other people.”
- 4) “It is the most important catalyst for change in the congregation”.
- 5) It seems that members experienced dwelling in the Word as liberating and empowering, enabling them to listen to God’s word and sharing it with others.
- 6) It is clear that it played an important role in the discernment process of both members and people in leadership. It created the experience that the discernment of lay people is just as important in congregational life as those of the leaders.

### Dwelling in the world

A habit closely associated with dwelling in the Word is dwelling in the world. Dwelling in the world entailed a process of dialogue and engagement with the contexts in which the respective congregations found themselves. It is hardly surprising if viewed against the background of the important role of the theological concept of *missio Dei* in the partnerships for missional churches. If a congregation is serious about discerning God’s activities in his creation, attention will certainly be paid to the context in which the congregations find themselves. This is exactly the reason that the question: “What is God up to?” is so important. Cultural and contextual exegesis and a theology of culture (Malphurs 2007:95) become very important: “We must discover how to use our culture and that of others to clarify and promote the gospel”. Van Gelder (2007:59) says, “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”. Dwelling in the world can be described as a process of engaging context and community (Roxburgh and Boren 2009:85).

A significant amount of congregations participating in this study indicated the importance of the role of dwelling in the world within congregational life. It can be seen in:

- Processes that were instituted to cultivate sensitivity to the context of the congregation and community.
- Some congregations explicitly asked the question: “What is God up to in our world?”.
- Events in community life were consciously reflected in worship services.
- Congregations explored possibilities of engaging with community organisations, businesses and persons not part of the church membership, in order to discern what is happening in the community.

A core attribute of dwelling in the Word, and dwelling in the world, was that it focused on discernment. Hendriks (2007:1012) elaborates on this important aspect by stating that theology is a question of discernment that hermeneutically correlates the following:

- a contextual situation with its problems and challenges;
- the identity of the people of God; and
- the role and purpose, or mission, of the people of God that flows from their knowledge of Scripture and tradition.

The research project demonstrated this kind of impact very clearly.

### Welcoming the stranger

Hospitality towards strangers was another habit that was displayed by congregations. Persons participating in the interviews frequently mentioned experiences of warmth, hospitality and caring. Expressions frequently used include the following: “friendliness”, “warmth”, “feeling at home” and “welcoming”.

In some of the narratives, respondents stated that previously excluded persons and people on the fringes of society now feel welcome in their congregations. This growing diversity and acceptance thereof is a sign of transformation. Diversity was acknowledged as a gift of the Spirit, summarised by phrases such as “there is a place for anyone”. In a number of cases, this was facilitated by diversity in worship styles and services, accommodating diversity in spirituality, age, language and worldview.<sup>7</sup>

### *Ubi caritas* – Caring for people in need

Caring for people in need was seen as an important expression of participating in God’s mission. The research clearly demonstrated the extent to which this was valued by the congregations. One of the respondents, an inside stranger, noticed a clear focus on people in need. Another one spoke of people “with soft eyes [...]”. *Ubi caritas* was apparent in congregational culture. Congregation members and outside strangers identified this habit. They associated the presence of God with congregations taking care of people in need.

### Empowerment

Empowering the laity was regarded as very important. There was a clear indication that the missional journey allowed congregations to move away from being churches at which full-time pastors<sup>8</sup> played the most important role. Instead, the members of the congregation were empowered to participate in God’s mission.

<sup>7</sup> Another example: a congregation talked about being a home for all God’s children.

<sup>8</sup> A “*domineeskerk*” – a church centred on the pastor. One description mentioned: “*Lidmate het tot die besef gekom dat die leraar nie alles kan doen nie, maar dat hulle self ook hulle gawes tot eer van die Here kan gebruik*”.

In the words of Bosch (1991:467), it is clearly a case of ministry by the whole people of God. In a missional church, the laity thinks Christianly about all matters, and works with Christian distinctiveness. In one case, the respondents talked about the congregation empowering members to make decisions where their own lives were concerned. Power structures were deconstructed and there was a new impetus to involve the laity. The important role of dwelling in the Word by creating this culture has already been mentioned.

## **Movements**

Movements give expression to the organic change and dynamics through which the missionary nature of the church emerges. It is a clear indication of a change in direction, a new way of being church and a different culture. Four movements were identified:

- a new experience of the presence of God;
- a new focus on the work of the Holy Spirit;
- a new focus on the incarnation; and
- a new language.

### **A new experience of the presence of God**

Kok and Niemandt (2009:5) explored the importance of movements in organic change in congregations. During the research project, it became clear that even outside strangers observed that God is active in the congregations.<sup>9</sup> One respondent mentioned that the collective eyes of the congregation were open to see God at work amongst them.

In most of the congregations, there was an indication of a new awareness of the presence of God, especially during worship services. Worship was perceived as the generator of energy in the congregation. In some congregations, the experience of God was seen in more than the worship services – participants talked about being helped to experience God in everyday life.

### **A new focus on the work of the Holy Spirit**

The experience of the presence of God was closely related to, and overlapped with, the renewed focus on the work of the Holy Spirit. Respondents referred to an awakening, a renewed interest in the presence of God, and a growing dependence on the Spirit of God. A clear movement towards an experience and awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit can be observed in the congregational reports. It is the Spirit that leads; it is the Spirit that helps congregations to discern what God is up to; it is the Spirit encouraging congregations to participate in God's work. Transformation in congregations was directly ascribed to the work of the Spirit.

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<sup>9</sup> In the words of a respondent: "*Jy kan God se teenwoordigheid in ons kerk aanvoel in die mense se optrede*".

There was a clear correlation between the discovery of the missional nature of congregations and the focus on the Holy Spirit. Hirsch (2006:193) makes the same observation. This research demonstrated that a growing awareness of the missional nature of being a church is closely related to a strong experience of the work of the Spirit.

### Moving from the attractional model to the incarnational model

Hirsch (2006:127 vv.) gives attention to the difference between an attractional and an incarnational church. In the incarnational church, faith happens in everyday life. A missional understanding of being a church means that being a church happens in the world (Kok and Niemandt 2009:6).

The movement towards a more incarnational understanding of the church is clearly visible in the congregational narratives. For respondents, doing God's work in their daily lives played an important role. The following observations illustrate this incarnational emphasis:

- a shift in focus from church to community;
- a shift from church life to real life – doing God's work in everyday life;
- a shift from the Christian life in the church to the everyday; and
- a shift from church programmes to living and participating in God's mission.

### A new language

Reading the listening reports, the references to a "new language" in congregations became evident. This new language created the understanding that things have changed in the congregation. The new language appears to be a dominant expression of organic change. Hirsch (2006:53) mentions the importance of new narratives in congregational transformation. Branson (2004:xiii) too states that transformation happens through language and conversations. "A congregation needs a particular kind of conversation, a generative discourse, to create the perceptions and imaginations adequate to comprehensive renewal" (Branson 2004:37). This kind of dynamic is evident in all twelve of the congregations.

In a number of the reports the change in the language used by pastors and persons in leadership was mentioned. The language was described as "informal", especially in worship services, but also in other expressions of congregational life. In several cases, this new language was described as "missional language". The new language was closely related to expressions such as "calling", "being sent" and a "willingness to cross borders".

The new language created a new reality and ability to discern God's activities in the congregations and communities. A remark by Frost (2006:186) comes to mind: "Language that integrates the sacred and the secular – where the everyday is redeemed". The new language eventually led to transformation in the congregation and the establishment of a new congregational identity.

## Attitudes

Attitudes refer to the congregational culture. Attitudes are most evident in the subconscious of the congregation, and play an important role in the formation of a new identity and understanding of being a church. Attitudes are closely related to the creation of a new theological framework in terms of the *missio Dei*, as well as the aforementioned new language.

Attitudes are influenced and determined by leadership (Easum 2001:49). Leaders in missional churches have contextual intelligence. The research findings underlined the importance of leadership in the cultivation of a new culture. Leadership led to a new understanding of missional churches and a different way of acting in life. Respondents mentioned “openness to change” and a shift in the way leaders thought. In another congregation, the respondents talked about a different style in leadership that created new attitudes. Three attitudes were identified:

- discernment;
- inclusiveness; and
- positive about change.

## Discernment

Discernment is a key theological term used by the SAPMC (Hendriks 2009:112). Nearly all congregational reports state the importance of discernment. It is the primary identifier of the congregation – as is seen in the role ascribed to dwelling in the Word and dwelling in the world. Discernment is all about listening. One respondent said the congregation had to learn to wait for God, and to listen to God. This is, as can be expected, closely related to the role of prayer in congregations. By praying and listening, God’s mission and his mission for the congregation can be discerned.

Listening can be expressed as follows:

- listening to strangers;
- listening to people in need; and
- listening to the community.

## Inclusiveness

Missional congregations value inclusiveness. A number of congregations reported that they experienced a more inclusive and non-judgmental culture. One respondent spoke about the fact that the congregation accepted people – sin and all. The indicators of a more inclusive approach vary from congregations becoming more multicultural, to a congregation’s acceptance of homosexual couples. Keifert (2009a), in reflecting on the SAPMC, also mentions the creation of multicultural bridges to members of the community, as a feature of the SAPMC.

## Positive about change

Congregations reacted very positively to the transformation brought about by the missional journey. Change, congregational growth and renewal created a network of transformation and a positive climate. Respondents mentioned openness to new ideas and the willingness to take risks in the pursuit of transformation. This was associated with the unleashing of energy in the congregation. One congregation was described as energetic and being “out-of-the-box”.

## Innovations

Innovations are creative expressions of the discovery and praxis of being missional. Innovation can be described as a posture of creativity (Keel 2007:243). Frambach (2007:23) underlines the importance of innovation: “[...] the people of God must be much more fluid, more nimble, more agile than we have heretofore”. Easum (2001:53) distinguishes between incidental innovation and a culture of intentional innovation. Innovative congregations plan and nourish innovation. It is not a case of innovation for the sake of being innovative, but rather understanding the need to be constantly adaptive in changing cultures.

Nearly all the congregations studied mentioned some form of innovation during worship services. The important place of worship services as expression of congregational identity explains the energy invested in this area of congregational life. There was no uniformity in the specific innovations. Some of those mentioned were:

- worship services focused on diverse spiritualities;
- informal worship services and informal language; and
- innovative forms of congregational leadership or management.

## Reflections on missional ecclesiology

The study of congregations remains a central ingredient in theology. Keifert (2009b:2) identifies it as an important contemporary field of research. Congregations belong in the centre of theology, which offers new opportunities and insights. According to Keifert (2009b:11) “[...] it is a return that is fully informed by the significant social, cultural, and theological developments that have taken place over the past several centuries”. Hendriks (2007:1002) states that missional theology and ecclesiology will focus on a contextual praxis. By this he means that discernment and reflective engagement become important as faith communities engage in the world. Contextual praxis, explored by empirical research, is very important to formulate a new ecclesiology (Heitink 2007:342–344). The importance of congregations (Kritzinger, Meiring and Saayman 1994:44) and the fact that the church is mission (Bosch 1991:390), as well as “the return of the sense of mission” (Keifert 2009b:23), creates interesting possibilities in the emerging missional ecclesiology.

The overwhelming idea growing as a result of the reading and reflection processes is a new theological understanding of the congregational identity, now understood as being a gift of the Spirit. In an emerging missional ecclesiology, the following outlines can be drawn from the missional journey of these twelve congregations:

- A missional church is a community of God's people that defines itself, and organises its life around its real purpose of being an agent of God's mission to the world. In other words, the church's true and authentic organising principle is mission (Hirsch 2006:82)
- The church is understood as being a community of people discerning what God is actively doing in the world around them and then participating in God's work. It is about engaging God in the community through his Word.
- The church is a community gathered around Jesus Christ in order to participate in his life and incarnate it into the context in which he has placed them (Keel 2007:155). This also means that missional churches are deeply connected to the community. Wherever community members live their daily lives, they are learning the way in which to easily, naturally, and routinely embody, demonstrate, and announce God's life and reign for the sake of the world around them.
- The future of the missional church depends on a differentiated and empirical, informed perspective on culture and context (Brouwer 2009:1). The church is a community of people who look to discover what God is actively doing in the world, and then participate in God's work.

Viewed in light of the mentorship role played by Keifert (2009c) in the SAPMC, it is perhaps appropriate to conclude with his words: "The learning goes on and the challenges exhaust and inspire. The Holy Spirit leads on and we stumble and tumble into God's preferred and promised future together in God's mission".

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