

## ***Transforming mission, twenty years later:* Paradigm shift or cosmetic facelift?**

**Johann Meylahn<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

It is twenty years since the publication of David Bosch's *Transforming mission* (1991). The question that inevitably comes to mind is: has the mission (identity and relevance) of the South African mainline churches embraced the paradigm shift and transformed to become a transforming agent within South African society or have cosmetic changes dominated the need to change?

This article will focus on what the paradigm shift means in theology today and how this relates to and translates into God's transformational passion, of which the church is called to be an agent. The article will investigate the possibilities of embracing a paradigm shift and in doing so rediscovering the local church as an agent of communal transformation within God's mission.

**Keywords:** David Bosch, *Transforming mission*

### ***Transforming mission, twenty years later***

It is twenty years since the publication of David Bosch's great work *Transforming mission* (1991). It is truly a great work that is hailed and praised by many as an indispensable work for anybody reflecting on the mission of the church. Lesslie Newbigin referred to this work as the *Summa Missiologica*. It certainly has had a tremendous impact on the academic world and has transformed missiology, as it embraces a new paradigm of understanding the world and specifically the mission of the church in the world.

It is unquestionable that it has influenced academic reflection, but has it influenced the practice of the mainline church in South Africa? This question inevitably leads to the subsequent question: has the mission (identity and relevance) of the South African mainline churches embraced this paradigm shift and transformed by becoming transforming agents within South African society, or have cosmetic changes dominated the need to change? This is an impossible question to answer, as there are so many denominations in South Africa and within each denomination there are numerous congregations and each congregation has her own local story or testimony of her journey in this time of change. There are some wonderful stories of congregations seeking to become truly missional, as many congregations have embraced the movement of the partnership for missional church (Keifert 2006; Niemandt 2010) for example, but there are

---

<sup>1</sup> Johann-Albrecht Meylahn lectures at the Department of Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. He can be contacted at [jmeylahn@lantic.net](mailto:jmeylahn@lantic.net)

also other interesting and creative models of seeking to be counter-cultural and in that sense a missional and transformational agent within the local context.

It is beyond the scope of this reflection to be a quantitative or qualitative study, thereby counting and reflecting on the various stories of congregations, and it thereby pledges a certain injustice as it paints the picture of the church in broad generalised strokes, assimilating the wonderful stories of local congregations into this generalised perception. This generalisation is justified, as it does not intend to describe the church conclusively, but it is an attempt to indicate perceived trends from the point of view of this specific reflection.

In the last two decades since the appearance of Bosch's book, South Africa as a society has experienced some major paradigm shifts. The country has shifted from an apartheid state where Christianity played a major role, both in support of apartheid and in its criticism, to a secular democracy where religious tolerance, freedom and pluralism is constitutionally enshrined. Such political and constitutional paradigm shifts, together with global shifts, have brought about political-economic-social-cultural shifts as South African society moves from a rather modernistic Christian society into a global postmodern society. The church in such a context of change is not left unscathed. Her role in public space obviously has to change, as she no longer has the privileged position of being the religious justification and blessing of apartheid, nor is she at the forefront of the political-ethical struggle against apartheid. So the church, once powerful both in upholding apartheid and in the struggle against apartheid, is perceived by some as powerless within the public space. In this context of a loss of power and the ability to determine or mobilise public opinion, many experience the church as a disappointment and irrelevant to their daily struggles. This is a tremendous shift: from being *the* authority on numerous public issues to being irrelevant or powerless with regard to public issues.

Thus, with the exception of some congregations, one can say in general that the church has lost her privileged position within South African society and this has affected her self-understanding (identity) and her relevance as an authority on certain public and even private issues. There are many reasons for this shift and some of these will be unpacked.

This is however only one side of the story and probably only reflects the story of the mainline churches. In this time of tremendous paradigm shifts within South African society, another phenomenon or rather phenomena has been witnessed, namely the rise in fundamentalist interpretations of Christianity together with African Independent/Initiated Churches that are mushrooming. In general terms, in this time of radical societal transformation there is a decline in mainline Christianity and a rise in fundamentalism and other non-traditional (non-mainline) forms of

Christianity. Even within the mainline denominations, one can identify a trend that the more fundamentally inclined congregations appear to be experiencing growth in numbers, while the general trend within mainline congregations is a decline in membership.

It is in the context of these extremes - the rise in fundamentalism and a growing “secularisation”<sup>2</sup> - that mainline Christianity is trying to survive. A time of paradigm shifts is a time of crisis as previous paradigms make room for new paradigms. Such a crisis time can be extremely creative as new possibilities are born, but it can also be destructive if the response is one of panic that translates into either holding onto previous paradigms or selling one’s soul uncritically to the new paradigm in an attempt to survive.

Such a survival mode often leads to cosmetic changes and not real transformation. The challenge is to recognise possibilities in the crisis, as Moltmann (1992:xi) argues: “For every crisis calls the traditional and familiar answers into question. Anyone who only talks about the ‘crisis’ without recognizing the implicit opportunity is talking because he is afraid and without hope. Anyone who only wants to have new opportunities without accepting the crisis of previous answers is living in illusion”.

It is a time of crisis for the church, specifically in South Africa, as the paradigm shifts that have taken place within society directly question the church’s identity and thus her role (relevance) within society. Moltmann (1974:7) refers to the crisis as a double crisis of identity and relevance. This crisis is not a new crisis specific to South Africa or to the current historical epoch, but it is the crisis with which the church continually struggles, as she is called to be church *in* the world whilst not being *of* the world. This is the theme that is central to Bosch’s theological, missiological and ecclesiological thinking, namely the church as an alternative community (Bosch 1975; 1982:8), as she tries to define her identity and her relevance in the creative tension between being *in* the world, but not *of* the world. This situatedness between world and not world can be described as a creative tension (Bosch 1975:4) and it is in this creative tension that the church struggles to seek her identity and her relevance. This struggle for identity and relevance is never complete. As the world continuously goes through paradigm shifts, so also the church, called to be *in* but not *of* the world, needs to redefine her identity and seek her relevance in relation to these changes in the world.

If this is the creative tension in which the church finds her identity and her relevance, then it inevitably fundamentally affects the core of the church’s identity and her relevance (mission to the world) when the world

---

<sup>2</sup> I write secularisation in inverted commas, as I believe that there is no secular realm, as at a deeper level some foundational myth (religion) determines, justifies and legitimises public and private actions. Thus, even in a secular liberal democracy, the ideology of liberal democracy functions as a religion, as it determines public and private practice.

changes as it goes through major paradigm shifts. The paradigm shifts that have transformed South African society challenge the church in a dual sense. Firstly, many of these shifts (from Christian state to constitutionally enshrined religiously tolerant state) have had an “adverse” effect on the church’s role within society. Secondly, the church is called to seek her identity and relevance continually in this creative tension between *in* and not *of* the world as an alternative community. The first challenge is an external challenge that is imposed on the church and the second is internal, as it is part of the church’s calling. If it is part of the church’s calling to seek her identity and relevance in the creative tension of being *in* and not *of* the world, then she is called to firstly understand and interpret the world so as to be able to identify her calling as alternative community.

Bosch, responding to this calling, sought to understand and interpret what is happening in the world by bringing to the conversations other disciplines (philosophy, sociology, etc.) to help in his interpretations of what has changed in the world. He unpacked the paradigm shifts that have taken place in the world from modern to postmodern (Bosch 1991:349 - 363). He also remained faithful to past interpretations and paradigms of mission and how the church over the ages has understood her calling to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world (p. 181 - 348). He compared these historical developments in the Western church with certain paradigms of mission in the Eastern church (p. 190 ff).

Yet, his reflection begins with an extensive reflection on the biblical context (world), thus trying to establish how Jesus proclaimed the kingdom within the creative tension between being *in* and not *of* the world (p. 15 - 180; Bosch 1975:4, 5). Bosch identifies four paradigms in the context of Jesus’ ministry and compares them to possible paradigms of the church today and then clearly identified Jesus’ ministry (proclamation of the kingdom) as an alternative to these dominant paradigms, thereby calling the church to be an alternative community. The concept of the church as an alternative community is a concept from his earlier work and is not directly used in *Transforming mission*, but it certainly still plays an important role in his thinking.

In *Transforming mission*, he focused on the different paradigms of mission within the New Testament, beginning with the salient paradigms of mission that can be used to interpret Jesus’ ministry such as Jesus and the reign of God (p. 31 - 35), Jesus and the law (p. 35, 36) and Jesus and his disciples (p. 36 - 39). He then reflected on the mission paradigms in Matthew, Luke - Acts and Paul (p. 56 - 180).

The world has changed since 1991 when the book was written, and South Africa has moved from a Christian state towards religious tolerance that is constitutionally determined. What *Transforming mission* teaches the church is to seek to identify the paradigms currently dominating the

church's identity and relevance in South Africa and then to seek a Christ-inspired alternative.

### **Paradigm shift or cosmetic change?**

In the above section, some of the major paradigm shifts have been mentioned that have changed South African society fundamentally and brought about an identity and relevance crisis for the church. In this section, these paradigm shifts will be unpacked and some of the church's responses to these changes will be described as she seeks to remain true to her calling of being *in* the world, but not *of* the world as an alternative community as Bosch would say. The church has responded to this crisis in different ways. Some churches have responded by making a few cosmetic changes and thus adapting to the situation, while others have allowed the crisis to lead towards transformation and the church being re-born with a new identity relevant to the context.

### **Modern - postmodern**

The shift from modernity to post-modernity has been discussed at length and in numerous different forms and thus in this section a very brief interpretation of the shift will be given mainly from the point of view of how it effects the church's self-understanding. In *Transforming mission* Bosch (p352 - 362) describes this shift under the following headings: the expansion of rationality, beyond the subject - object scheme, rediscovery of the teleological dimension, the challenge to progress thinking, a fiduciary framework, chastened optimism and towards interdependence, which is a very comprehensive reflection on post-modernity, but mainly from a philosophical and epistemological perspective. One of the major aspects of the shift from modern to postmodern is with regard to knowledge and the interpretation of truth. In modernity, it was believed that individual researchers and/or research communities could find objective truths. The idea that objective facts (truth) can be found through rigorous research and study formed the basis of modern epistemology. Within this epistemology, only objective verifiable facts were accepted as truth. This correlation between truth and verifiable facts gave the natural sciences the lead with regard to knowledge systems, as they believed they were the only ones who had access to objective knowledge. The church could not objectively prove the existence of God and thus she was marginalised in institutions of knowledge such as universities, as it was believed that she had nothing to contribute to universal knowledge because her truths were at best subjective and therefore private. This epistemology influenced everything and determined the modern worldview, modern practices and the development of modern institutions, based on truths that were scientifically discovered and formulated into universal, repeatable theories and these theories

determined the correct application of knowledge (correct praxis). For example, scientific truths were formulated into universally accepted theories and these theories translated into technologically correct practices.

The church tried her best to conform to these rigid standards of truth of modernity and thus sought to find a universally acceptable standard for her truths and believed that this could be found in historical verifiable facts. Thus, truth in the church was that which could be historically verified through rigorous historical-critical methods of exegesis. Once these historically verified truths had been found they were formulated into dogmas, believed to be universal because they were based on historically verified facts (truths). Correct dogma would subsequently be applied in correct practice. This modern epistemology was adopted by the church and theology was viewed as a three-storey building, with historical theology (historical verifiable facts) as the foundation, systematic theology (universally accepted theory/dogma) as the systematic formulation of these verifiable facts and lastly practical theology as the application of these facts, formulated as correct dogma.

The shift from modernity to post-modernity changed the interpretation of truth and thus radically changed epistemology. Truth was no longer perceived as something objective, but dependent on the subject perceiving and thus interpreting it, thus epistemology shifted towards hermeneutics. Hermeneutical interpretations cannot lead to universally accepted dogmas or theories because interpretations are subjective, particular and not universal. Knowledge (epistemology) within post-modernity is dependent on locally constructed information that is brought into conversation with other constructions of information from other contexts. In the conversations between the various contextual constructions of knowledge, temporary truths are discovered - temporary in the sense that certain things are agreed upon in the conversation, but recognising that these agreed truths are only truths until new insights are perceived and/or constructed.

Such a paradigm shift has tremendous influence on worldview and on institutional practices, as practices are no longer the application of universal theories/dogmas, but are part of the conversation and thus integral to the construction of knowledge and temporary truths. Thus, practice is no longer just an application of knowledge, but an integral part of the construction of knowledge.

It is commonly asserted that most people in their hearts and thinking are not postmodern, but still very much modern. This anthropological argument is used against post-modernity and the relevance of post-modernity with regard to, for example, a reflection on the identity and relevance of the church. It might indeed be true that most people in their hearts and minds have not made this shift from modern to postmodern, yet the global world has changed and is continually changing according to this

shift in epistemology. So, although they might not be conscious of the change, the change is affecting their daily lives.

Has the church made this shift away from a modern paradigm of truth, dogma and correct practices towards conversations and constructions of temporary knowledge and truths?

### **Christian state - Religiously “neutral” constitutional democracy**

Another major paradigm shift was the shift from a Christian state to a secular constitutional democracy. The process of secularisation in Europe was a slow, gradual process over many years, but one could argue that in South Africa it was an overnight process, as the first democratically elected president of the country was inaugurated with the prayers and blessings of different religious leaders. Within months of the drafting and acceptance of the new constitution, South Africa changed into an open, tolerant constitutional democracy.

In the new religiously tolerant constitution, Christianity was no longer given a privileged position and this constitutional change brought about changes in local practices, for example Christians could no longer claim the sole right to school assemblies and religious (Christian) instruction. Public schools, in accordance with the Constitution, needed to transform from Christian biased towards a religiously neutral and tolerant school. Television programmes by the public broadcaster needed to either cater for all religious groups or stop broadcasting religious material that gave a preferential option to Christianity.

These are just a few practical examples of how this shift has affected the lives of families and communities. The church no longer had the exclusive right to seek to influence public policy, but all religious groups have an equal right. In a context of religious diversity, it is easier for a secular state to marginalise religious opinion on public matters by reducing it to the private sphere and thereby keeping religion out of the public space. The public space is determined in the conversation between individual rights and community/national rights and thus influenced mainly by lawyers and constitutional experts. The church is no longer viewed as an authority with regard to public ethical issues such as the death sentence, abortion, sexual orientation, but these matters are decided by the government, taking different constitutional arguments into consideration. If the church is no longer considered *the* moral authority with regard to ethical/moral issues, then she is perceived as powerless and even irrelevant. This loss of public influence has certainly affected the church's identity in South Africa.

## **Christian - Post-Christian**

The meaning of the term “post-Christian” is much debated. In this reflection, it will specifically refer to believers who were Christian, but for whatever reasons have decided to leave institutional Christianity, and in that sense they are post-Christian. As some of them still understand themselves as Christian, but no longer belong or want to belong to a church, it would be more correct to refer to this phenomenon as post-institutional Christianity.

There are numerous reasons that individuals leave institutional Christianity (church). This section will not seek to provide all these reasons, but only take note of the phenomenon that people are leaving mainline churches and that this exodus has taken on such proportions that it is a concern to most mainline churches.

The church has become a disappointment for many believers and irrelevant to their daily struggles. On the one hand, those who believed with the church in the righteousness of apartheid are disappointed and believe the church led them astray. What guarantee do they have that the church will not lead them astray again? Thus, with regard to being an authority on moral and ethical issues, the church has been shown to be fallible and an unreliable source of moral authority. On the other hand, the church that fought for justice and the liberation of the oppressed during the years of apartheid has become relatively voiceless, powerless and not as organised as she once was with regard to the challenges that society faces today, such as poverty, HIV/Aids, xenophobia, violence and crime. The church, once powerful in South Africa on both sides of the divide, has become silent and powerless in a tolerant constitutional democracy.

## **Cosmetic change**

How has the church responded to these shifts? As I have already mentioned, it is impossible to give a true reflection of the church’s response because each church’s story is different, and thus what will be offered here can only be a generalisation. Yet, one can identify two dominant themes that should not be viewed as being conclusive or exhaustive, but aid in interpreting and understanding the church’s response.

The first dominant theme is the rise in fundamentalism. In a time of a loss of identity and relevance through the various shifts mentioned above, one response is to re-establish oneself on the basis of an absolute fundamental truth, thus offering the world an alternative by denying the paradigm shifts and holding onto a modern view of truth and knowledge and thereby responding to the relativism and confusion of post-modernity by providing certain absolute truths. The church sees itself as the institution called to “preserve what is true, good, and beautiful from the past” (Hall 1997:11, 12; Meylahn 2010:456, 457). Change goes hand in hand with uncertainty and thus one response is to counter uncertainty with clearly



defined and eternal (that is changeless) truths. In uncertain times, such a response will inevitably lead to tremendous growth, as certainty is perceived by many as exactly what they need. The idea of a church or a leader giving clear direction and leading the people towards what is right and good appears to be the obvious and only solution to the confusion and relativity that seems to plague society. There is, for example, the movement in South Africa that calls for a return to God as the solution to the many problems the country faces.<sup>3</sup> This return to God appears to be clear and univocal, based on a single fundamental truth and thus a return to a modernistic interpretation of truth. There are many other movements that offer clear answers with regard to either demons and demon possession or clear fundamental gender roles, such as the Mighty Men movement (see Nadar 2009).

The second theme is the opposite of fundamentalism, namely liberalism (Hall 1997:16, 17; Meylahn 2010:457 - 462; Wilson 1997:14, 15). The church is open to the relativism of post-modernity and a great emphasis is placed on freedom and tolerance with regard to the differing interpretations of the foundational texts. The church responds to the identity and relevance crisis by embracing the relativity and plurality of interpretations, thus offering members various possibilities and no clear direction. The members can choose from a wide spectrum of pastoral-spiritual-therapeutic possibilities (cf. Harvey 1999:3; Hart 1967:345; Wilson 1997:4, 38) as if they were shopping in a spiritual mall. Spiritual seekers choose a different “answer” every second month and thereby boost the consumption of spiritual goods offered on the market (spirituality section). Most of the goods offered remain within the modern paradigm, as they offer themselves as *the* answer.

These are the two dominant responses to the paradigm shifts that have taken place, and they are an indication of the identity and relevance crisis of the church within South Africa.

The following two sections will offer two ways of reading the local congregation with regard to her identity in response to the identity and relevance crisis within the above-mentioned broad themes of fundamentalism and liberalism. These readings should not be viewed as judging or comparing congregations by placing them into fixed categories, but as interpretative (reading) tools with which to interpret and understand where the church is twenty years later.

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, the “Turn to God” event, which took place at the Union Buildings in Pretoria on 6 March 2010.

### **Reactionary church<sup>4</sup>**

The paradigm shifts can be difficult to cope with and thus some churches have responded by creating a safe ghetto for their members. In some situations in South Africa, this is literally what happens, as the church premises are barricaded with high walls and security systems so as to keep the world with its criminal elements out and protect the treasures within. This is an obvious caricature to indicate a tendency and in no way should it be interpreted as a judgment of churches that for various reasons needed to upgrade their security systems. This caricature indicates a way of interpreting the world as a place that has “lost it”. It has lost the values and traditions that people should hold dear and the church is going to become the last bastion of these truths and values against the corruption of the world. This reaction to the world/context/paradigm shifts takes on different forms. It could be a reaction to the perceived morality of the world and the church thus becomes the last bastion of moral values, or it could be the perceived shallowness of music and worship and the church thus becomes the last bastion of “true worship”, in other words traditional worship. It could also be the cultural-racial demographic change in the neighbourhood and the church thus becomes the last bastion of certain cultural traditions against the influx of foreign cultures and races.

In a world of pluralism and religious tolerance, the church becomes the last bastion of Christian truths, values and morals. This idea of the church being the last bastion of Christian values often translates into Christian home-schooling or Christian schools being promoted in an attempt to protect Christian children from the influence of the world.

The church becomes the protector of moral values, truths, correct practices, culture, language and even race against or in reaction to the world. This is highly attractive; to have - in a rapidly changing world - a little enclave where things remain the same and offer individuals exactly what they believe they need: a safe space, a true home and a sense of security. The reactionary church is most certainly not *of* the world, but is she *in* the world?

### **Developmental church<sup>5</sup>**

The developmental church believes that her truth is the answer that people are actually looking for, but they just do not know it yet, and therefore practices have to be re-designed so as to convince the “world out there” that this particular congregation or denomination has what the world actually needs. Thus, the ministry practices revolve around convincing the people first of what the right question is so that they can accept the right answer.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Roxburgh and Boren (2009:125, 126).

<sup>5</sup> See Roxburgh and Boren (2009:127 - 129).

Developmental churches believe that it is all about finding the right contemporary package for *the* eternal timeless truth. In short, it is all about marketing. Thus, these churches often rely on expert knowledge and management skills in the belief that it is just a matter of finding the right marketing strategy to “sell” the age-old answer and then all will be well. Such churches will offer their eternal truth in all sorts of attractive packages in order to attract members, often having specifically designed packages for particular target groups - Generation X, Generation Y and seeker services, etc.

Developmental churches are normally very successful in that they often have tremendous growth in membership and this “success” boosts their identity as being those who have found the right strategy to package *the* eternal truth. These developmental churches are certainly *in* the world, but are they not *of* the world?

These are cosmetic changes in response to the paradigm shifts, as both these types of churches are still very much within the modern paradigm of truth and knowledge.

The paradigm shifts referred to earlier are fundamental shifts and cannot be ignored in the hope that they will go away, but they have fundamentally changed the way the world is understood and interpreted. This shift towards a stronger emphasis on hermeneutics away from objective knowledge will inevitably have consequences for the way one lives, acts and behaves in the world. Objective epistemology produced universal facts that in turn produced correct practices. The shift towards subjective interpretations of experiences of reality cannot produce universal facts, but only temporary local communities of knowledge and these communities are open for conversations with other local communities of knowledge.

The church has not been spared this shift. In the past, theology was based on ontological or onto-theological proofs of God’s existence and these proofs were the fundamental truths that were institutionalised by the church through precisely formulated dogmas. In modernity, this changed and the “truths” of the church shifted to the search and discovery of historical verifiable facts with the rise of the historical-exegetical methods. These historical facts would then be institutionalised and formulated into precise systematic dogmas, which would in turn determine correct practices. Post-modernity’s interpretation of truth has changed all this. What is expected of the church in such a context of change? Does it mean that the church has to abandon her truth? Can the church abandon the notion of truth? On what is the church’s identity supposed to be founded if not on a specific truth?

These are all important questions and questions that most probably would be asked by most congregational members. Moltmann (1992) guides

theology with regard to the “church’s truth” and the dimension in which she continually seeks her identity and relevance. In other words, her “truth” is continually sought within these dimensions, as her “truth” is her reliance on the one to whom she belongs and the one to whom she belongs is believed to be the Triune God of history and not an eternal God of the past. Thus the dimensions in which the church continually seeks her truth, identity and relevance is within the story of the Triune God, but not in the abstract, but in the Triune God’s involvement in the history of the world and lastly before the eschatological promise of the kingdom still to come.

The church finds her identity and relevance and thus her truth in a critical, correlational hermeneutical dialogue between these three dimensions:

- the story of the Triune God;
- the context of the world; and
- the eschatological promise of the kingdom to come.

The church is called into continuous transformation as she finds her identity and relevance in a critical, correlational hermeneutic conversation between these three dimensions to receive herself as a gift that is given to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world.

In the following section, an understanding of being church will be interpreted as a way of doing theology *in* and *with* the local community, but not *of* the world. This interpretation will follow five movements that cannot be seen as successive linear movements, but more like the circular or spiral movements of a dance.

## **Transforming mission as five dance movements towards an alternative community - A church *in* but not *of* the world**

### **Listening**

To be *in* the world is to take the world seriously. To take the world seriously is to listen attentively and carefully to the stories of the local community and to *hear the local story*. There is no single local story, but numerous stories, as each individual will have his or her own interpretation of the history and events of the local community. In listening to these individual stories, certain dominant themes can be identified, so much so that one could speak of a common language referring to the communal themes, stories, metaphors, history and symbols that are used by the local community to interpret and understand events and tell *their local story*.

This common language is heard in the casual conversations at the local grocer, outside the school gates as parents gather, waiting for their children, at tea after the church service, or at the local shebeen. These stories, which

are freely and easily shared, form the common language of the community and capture the norms, values, histories and dominant themes of that particular community.

To be *in* the world could be interpreted as listening to this common language of the community. Sometimes there might be more than one common language that dominates in community, especially in complex urban communities, yet even with these multiple languages common themes can be identified that give that complex community its identity and a sense of meaning. These common dominant languages are never the only languages in a community, as there is also the unspoken language, namely the stories that are not easily and freely shared. These are the hidden stories that haunt the community and thus one can speak of phantom stories. The phantom stories are the *other* stories of the dominant language that have not been heard and that have been suppressed or marginalised. To refer to these stories as phantom stories is important, as they are spectral - not in the sense that they are not real, but in the sense that they cannot be grouped or gathered together into an ideological whole and they haunt the dominant constructions (cf. Derrida 1994:2) by dispersing any kind of totalisation, as they appeal to their multiplicity or heterogeneity. The danger of grouping and categorising these phantom stories into a community with a leader is just the reverse of the dominating and totalising tendencies of the world. It is the phantom cry of the excluded (murdered) other that haunts any human constructions (cf. Meylahn 2009), and it is this phantom cry of the non-present (those excluded, marginalised, murdered by the dominant language) that needs to be heard.

The common language of a particular community could be, for example, a story of financial success, as it is a wealthy community. Thus, the common language would be a language made up of stories of success, upward mobility, competition, comparison and jealousy. Or it could be that the common language is a language of being a victim because it is a poverty-stricken community and thus the common language will be dominated by stories of suffering, bad news, dependency, injustice and failure to overcome adverse conditions.

Haunting these common dominant languages are the phantom stories. For example, in the wealthy community, there might be the story of the successful businessman who lost his employment and now feels worthless and fears being judged and condemned by the dominant language and thus he will tell no one of his unemployment and pretend that nothing has changed. Only with those he can truly trust will he share his story of unemployment. Similarly, in the poverty-stricken community, there are phantom stories that do not fit into the dominant common language and thus are not openly told and silently haunt the dominant language.

Phantom stories are like the ghost in the opening scene of Shakespeare's Hamlet that "bodes some strange eruption to our state". These are phantom stories, not in the sense that they are not real, but in the sense that they are untold and thus haunt the dominant language by threatening to erupt and thus disturb/disrupt and deconstruct the dominant language.<sup>6</sup>

The pastoral work of the church is to listen to both the dominant language and the phantom stories. The church's pastoral calling is ideally situated to listen to and hear the phantom stories, which are often only revealed in crisis counselling and pastoral care. These stories are told in a context of trust because within the common language these stories would not make sense according to the norms and values of the common language and thus would be suppressed or even condemned.

The church called to be *in* the world comes to the local community not as a *tabula rasa*, but laden with its own dominant language and her own phantom stories. Very often, the church's dominant language is the same as the dominant language of the community and thus she shares and perpetuates the dominant language of the community or is even perceived as the guardian of the dominant language by being the upholder of the norms and values of the community. The listening church needs to be aware of her responsibility or co-responsibility in the creation and maintenance of the dominant common language of the community.

In summary, a call to be *in* the world is a call to listen to the dominant common language as well as, and particularly, to the phantom stories.

## Interpreting

The dominant common language, as well as the phantom stories, needs to be interpreted and this interpretation takes place by placing these stories into a broader economic-social-cultural-political narrative setting in an attempt to understand the language and the stories.

The church cannot interpret this without the help of the other disciplines and thus the interpretation takes place through transversal<sup>7</sup> conversations between the various disciplines.

---

<sup>6</sup> See Derrida's (1990:88, 89) reflection on deconstruction of the dominant interpretations of certain texts. This is equally true of social and cultural texts. There are dominant interpretations and the New Enlightenment, as Derrida envisions it, is called to an infinite responsibility towards the other of the dominant interpretations.

<sup>7</sup> The concept of "transversal rationality" goes back to the German philosopher Wolfgang Iser (1991:296): "Transversale Vernunft ist beschränkter und offener zugleich. Sie geht von einer Rationalitätskonfiguration zu einer anderen über, artikuliert Unterscheidungen, knüpft Verbindungen und betreibt Auseinandersetzungen und Veränderungen. Ihr ganzes Prozedieren ist horizontal und übergänglich, bleibt in diese transversale Typik gebunden. Es wird sich noch zeigen, daß diese Vernunft auch nicht nachträglich zu Totalsynthesen gelangt".

For example, the story of the local mall that opened not far from the informal settlement and thus ruined the community's spaza shop cannot be interpreted in isolation, but needs to be placed into a larger economic-political story, not only of the specific nation, but also of the global economy.

Likewise, the story of the retrenchment of Mr X may be linked to the employment opportunities offered to Mrs Y in China or India. These stories are always embedded in larger stories and it is within these larger stories that the individual stories or local dominant common language needs to be interpreted.

There is always another layer and another layer (narrative setting) to these stories and common language and eventually one comes to that layer that legitimises (explains) the action or plot of the dominant stories/language. The search for this ultimate legitimisation should not be interpreted as a search for grand narratives that give answers to all questions, but as the search for the founding myth. Benjamin (1996) argues that all laws, thus all legitimisations, are founded on some or other founding myth (mythological violence). It is the search for the founding myth that justifies/legitimises the dominant common language - the ideology that founds the dominant common language or the myth that sustains and legitimises this common language. This dominant common language captures and sustains the common values, common themes and common norms of the local community. The founding myth is not presented as a myth, but is presented as "natural" or inevitable, as the way things have always been, are and always will be. In other words, it is presented as an a-historical "fact"; it has always been like that and it will always remain that way. This is the founding myth.

## **Discerning**

These ultimate myth/s need to be discerned and not judged. To judge, one needs to have an outside perspective and if the church is called to be *in* the world, she does not have an outside perspective, but only the perspective of being *in* the world. She is called to discern this myth from within the dominant common language. These myths, by the very fact that they are totalising myths, have many victims, namely the other that/who is excluded from the construction of the myth. This other haunts the dominating totalising myth. This other, like the ghost in Hamlet, haunts the founding myth of the dominant common language.

The phantom stories are the other of the dominant common language, as they are the other stories that are marginalised and suppressed by the dominant language because they do not fit into the totalising construction of the dominant myth. Thus, these phantom stories help discern the myth of the dominant common language and thus deconstruct this dominant

language. This kind of discernment is critical without being judgmental, as it deconstructs the dominant language founded on the totalising myth that holds individuals and communities captive, but without judging it from an outside perspective. It is not an outside perspective from which one can compare one ideology (founding myth) with another and thus bring various ideologies (founding myths) into competition with each other. Such comparison and competition, trying to argue which myth/ideology/religion is right, can only lead to violence and conflict.

Discernment does not seek to judge, but seeks to hear the excluded other in the dominant language and thus allows this other to speak and thereby deconstruct the dominant myth. Such discernment will include discerning the extent to which the church is involved in constructing and sustaining the dominant myth.

Thus, there is a dual listening and discerning: the first is to listen to and discern the dominant interpretation (dominant common language). The second listening and discerning is to listen to the phantom stories, the other, of the dominant interpretation in order to open up the dominant interpretation to be able to listen “otherwise”, in the name of the incoming of the other - the kingdom of God still to come (cf. Caputo 1997:76).

### **Re-authoring (poetry)**

Discernment is not done in a vacuum, but is necessarily done from within certain frames of reference or a normative setting. This setting is not normative in the classical sense as being the law that binds the process of discernment, but normative in the sense of being a narrative setting and thus playing an important role in determining the identity and perspective of the discerning individual or community, but remaining open to continuous re-interpretation. For the church, the “normative” narrative setting is the story of the Triune God revealed in the story of Jesus.

Obviously, like any narrative, the narrative of Jesus is open to interpretation and there are numerous interpretations of the story within the Gospels themselves. Yet within these numerous interpretations, a certain commonly accepted storyline can be identified so that, although there are different interpretations, there is agreement as to the basic storyline. Bosch (1991:512 - 518) refers to the six major salvific events portrayed in the New Testament: incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, Pentecost and parousia. This section will only focus on the first three.

The basic storyline can be described in three movements:

- Incarnation: The incarnation is God’s entry into the world and history through God’s son. From the various narratives that were accepted into the Canon, a certain bias can be identified, namely entry and identification with the marginalised, the least of the brothers and sisters (Matt. 25). Jesus identified with the marginal



phantom stories of the community, those stories that were *other* to the *dominant* common language of the purity and holiness of the Pharisaic world. He identified with the tax-collectors (sinner), the fishermen (unworthy), the woman caught in adultery (unholy) and the foreigners (impure). He chose to make his identification with these *other* stories *the site* for the event of the proclamation of the kingdom. He argued that the kingdom has already come, as the blind can see, the deaf can hear and the lame can walk. The kingdom has already come, as the impossible has become possible: the impure, unholy, sinners and unworthy - in short, the *others* of the *pharisaic*-dominated world - have been welcomed to the table of the kingdom.

- Crucifixion: The story of the cross offers the frame of reference with which to interpret and understand the world, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:2 that he knows nothing except Christ and him crucified. The historical accounts of the Gospels reveal to the readers the story of the crucifixion. It is a story of the ultimate criminal (Benjamin, 1996), who was crucified not because he contravened one or two laws and thus deserved the full punishment of the law, but because Jesus questioned not individual laws,<sup>8</sup> but the founding myth of the legal system. He questioned the legitimisation of the legal system as the entry into the kingdom, in other words justification by obedience to the law (Rom. 3). One could argue and say that he was truly a danger to the system, not because he broke one or two laws, but because he questioned the founding myths of these systems. A criminal who breaks one or two laws can be easily dealt with, but someone who questions the very mythological foundations of a legal system is a real threat. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom to come as a site of welcome to the other (Matt. 21:31; 22) questioned the whole system based on pure - impure, worthy - unworthy, holy - unholy, right - wrong, etc.
- Resurrection: The story does not end with the crucifixion, but after three days he rose again, thus proclaiming a victory over the death of the dominion of the law and the new realm of the gift of grace. This victory proclaims the possibility of the impossible, which is beyond the laws of the dominant myth.

The above is certainly not just the basic story-line, but already an interpretation of that story-line, and thus there will be other interpretations and therefore this interpretation is open to conversation with other interpretations.

---

<sup>8</sup> He did not have a problem with individual laws as he says in Matthew 5:17 - 20.

The church's discernment is not only guided by the story of the Triune God, but she is also, just like any community, part of a narrative setting that shapes her discernment, her interpretation of the story of the Triune God, and thus influences her point of view. All this the church brings to the local community, which is brought into conversation with the dominant common language of the community and, more specifically, the phantom stories - the stories of the other, as Bonhoeffer's idea of being church for others (Bosch 1991:514). In this conversation, traces of God's involvement - incarnation, cross, resurrection - are revealed and proclaimed in the words of poetic (*poiesis*)<sup>9</sup> prophecy and hope.

The basic story-line of Christ is proclaimed in the context of the cracks that erupt in the dominant common language where the phantom stories disturb the dominant common language. Prophetic poetry proclaims Christ and the cross in the cracks discerned.

The story of Christ's incarnation is proclaimed and lived through identification and solidarity with the phantom stories that haunt the dominant language. This will inevitably lead to crucifixion by the dominant language (myth) - the law can only lead to death as Paul says (Rom. 7:5; 8:2; 2 Cor. 15:56).

Yet, the story does not end at the crucifixion but only with the resurrection and the proclamation of impossible possibilities in defiance of the law of the dominant common language and thus enables the church to be an agent of *Transforming mission* in the world, but not of the world.

### **Embracing-listening: A dance without end in the time that remains**

New life-giving words are poetically formed and inspired by the revelation of the involvement of the Triune God (Christ event) within the stories of the community. These inspired proclaimed words through the Christ event (cross) create a space (kingdom space) in the present and this space is filled with impossible possibilities of true transformation, true life, liberated from the dominion of death of the dominating myth. This kingdom space with its creative possibilities needs to be embraced and lived to the full and celebrated. Once minds have been liberated from the dominant myth about what is and what is not possible new ideas will emerge about being church *in* the world, but not *of* the world. It is a community embracing possibilities that are not *of* the world (common dominant language), but liberated.

This new life will inevitably translate into specific practices within the community and these practices will over time become "correct" practices and thus dominant practices, which in time will need to be deconstructed by the others who are excluded by these dominant practices. They will be

---

<sup>9</sup> See Bosch (1991:512).

deconstructed by the phantom stories that are not part of these dominant practices. Thus, the embracing is already a listening to the phantom stories, as being church *in* the local community, but not *of* the world remains open to the kingdom still to come.

*Transforming mission* in five dance movements towards being church *in* the world, but not *of* the world as an alternative community will have certain practical consequences with regard to being church. Possible consequences will be broadly sketched in the following section as three models of being a transformative church are described.

### **Liminal church**

The liminal church can be described as the church in a liminal space - a space of being in transition. A church that has opened herself to listening and searching for God's involvement in the community and in conversation interpreting God's involvement rather than proclaiming God's truth to the community is a church in transition from an institution founded on truths and correct practices, to a community that is open, vulnerable and exposed to the impossible possibilities of Christ's presence, revealed in phantom stories of the community (cf. Matt. 25). It is a church that has opened herself to the paradigm shift. The liminal church finds herself in that place of creative tension between being *in* the world (listening to the dominant common language) and not *of* the world (siding with the phantom stories - the other of the dominant common language). The church is *in* the world in the sense that the local stories are intimately listened to and the church is involved in the lives of the people of the local community, but she listens with a bias to the phantom stories that offer critical tools of discernment, and in these phantom stories the Christ event is revealed. The Christ event brings about liberation from the dominant myth and in this sense the church is not of the world. The church is *between* as the church discovers that it is not about proclaiming a timeless universal truth, but listening to God's involvement in the stories of the particular local community.

The church is *liminal* in the sense that she recognises that it is not about cosmetic changes, but about opening herself for true radical transformation.

### **Transformational church**

Openness to God's involvement in the community (Christ event) brings about radical transformation in a sense of re-birth, death of the old self (under the dominant myth) and being born as a new creation, liberated by the deconstruction of the cross. So often transformation is interpreted as making a few changes, even fundamental changes, to the practices of the local church, for example changing the way a church worships, or the kind of activities in children's or youth ministry, or the way the church presents

herself and sells herself through modern technology. These changes are not transformational, but can be interpreted as cosmetic changes.

These cosmetic changes are still founded on what is believed to be the correct practice based on a foundational truth and thus it is still about “having” the truth that is packaged in the best possible way. Nothing has transformed with regard to the foundation or the fundamental truth (founding myth).

“True” transformation is a gift of the process of listening to the traces of God’s involvement in the community, as the Christ event brings about liberation from the dominant language and thus creates space for impossible possibilities (resurrection life). These impossible possibilities are true transformation.

### **Messianic church**

A Messianic church is a church that has experimented with new creative practices and embraces this new reality that is poetically created through the proclamation of the Christ event, but knows full well that this new reality is not the final reality, but only a temporary reality, and that as soon as it has been created it needs to listen to the traces of God’s involvement now. Thus, it orientates itself towards the continuous messianic breaking in of God’s promise in the cracks caused by the phantom stories of each newly constructed reality and best practices. These new practices that emerge out of this way of doing theology within the local community as church will soon develop into “correct practices” and thus exclude and marginalise others, thereby creating their own phantom stories that will eventually question the “correct practices” too. These new correct practices need to be broken open (deconstructed) by the phantom stories in order to embrace not what is, but what is to come. In this sense, the eschatological kingdom (messianic kingdom) always breaks into what is to open it for that which is to come and thus the church’s mission is to be *transforming*.

### **References**

- Benjamin, W. 1996. Critique of violence, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected writings*, Vol 1 1913 - 1926, edited by M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press:236 - 252.
- Bosch, D. 1975. The church as the “alternative community”. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 13, December:3 - 11.
- Bosch, D. 1982. How my mind has changed: Mission and the alternative community, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 41, December:6 - 10.
- Bosch, D. 1991. *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.
- Caputo, J.D. 1997. *Deconstruction in a nutshell: A conversation with Jacques Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press.

- Derrida, J. 1990. *Du droit a la philosophie*. Paris: Galilée.
- Hall, D. 1997. *The end of Christendom and the future of Christianity*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International.
- Hartt, J. 1967. *A Christian critique of American culture: An essay in practical theology*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Harvey, B.A. 1999. *Another city: An ecclesiological primer for a post-Christian world*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International.
- Keifert, P. 2006. *We are here now: A new missional era, a missional journey of spiritual discovery*. Eagle, Id.: Allelon Publishing.
- Meylahn, J.-A. 2009. Being thought from beyond our borders: Towards ethical global citizenship. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 30(2), Art. #56, 6 pages. DOI: 10.4102/ve.v30i2.56
- Meylahn, J.-A. 2010. *The church in the postmodern global village*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Moltmann, J. 1974. *The crucified God*. London: SCM Press.
- Moltmann, J. 1992. *The church in the power of the Spirit*. 2nd edition. London: SCM Press.
- Nadar, S. 2009. Palatable patriarchy and violence against wo/men in South Africa - Angus Buchan's Mighty Men Conference as a case study of masculinism. *Scriptura* 102:551 - 561.
- Niemandt, C.J.P. 2010. Acts for today's missional church. *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66(1), Art. #336, 8 pages. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v66i1.336
- Roxburgh, A.J. and Boren, S.M. 2009. *Introducing the missional church: What it is, why it matters, how to become one*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.
- Welsch, W. 1991. *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*. 3rd edition. Weinheim: VCH Acta Humaniora.
- Wilson, J.R. 1997. *Living faithfully in a fragmented world: Lessons for the church from MacIntyre's After virtue*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International.