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Missional spirituality and the embodiment of imperfection

Spiritualitas missionalis cum incorporatione vitiorum

by

Pieter Ignatius van Niekerk

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

Philosophiae Doctor

in the

FACULTY OF THEOLOGY

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on the subject of

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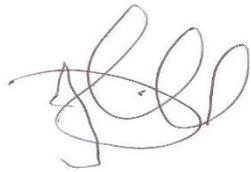
April 2019

DEDICATION

To all the loved ones, friends and carers of the persons who participated in this study

DECLARATION

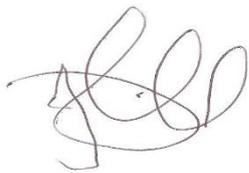
I, Pieter Ignatius van Niekerk, declare that this thesis with the title *Missional spirituality and the embodiment of imperfection* which I hereby submit for the degree at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.



Signature _____

ETHICS STATEMENT AND RESEARCH APPROVAL

I, Pieter Ignatius van Niekerk with student number 80391941, am the author of *Missional spirituality and the embodiment of imperfection*, and have obtained, for the research described in this thesis, the applicable research ethics approval. I declare that I have observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's Code of ethics for researchers and the Policy guidelines for responsible research.



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Missional spirituality and the embodiment of imperfection

Ek dank u vriendelik vir u samewerking.

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SUMMARY

The aim of the study is to investigate the phenomenon of spirituality by exploring the meanings that persons with disabilities ascribe to spirituality. A theology and/or a spirituality of disability is essential to our understanding of what it means to discern who God is and to recognise what it means to be human. The lives of people with disabilities give a rich revelation of God and reveal a fuller picture of being *imago Dei*. An indisputable affinity exists between God and vulnerability. Imperfection is part of being human and strengthens spirituality. God's radical embodiment, known as 'deep incarnation', is tied to the relational character of the Triune God. The deep and interdependent relationship of the Triune God imitates the relationships among persons (*imago Trinitatis*). The implications of Jesus' co-suffering with creation, specifically Jesus' solidarity and compassion with the oppressed and marginalised are emphasised. The Divine Spirit's empowering, life-giving agency and the significance of the Spirit's realm of vulnerability are reflected upon. A spirituality of vulnerability, imperfection and marginality is the primary modus of mission and humanity. A qualitative phenomenological research process was followed. The basic framework of Henri Nouwen's three movements of spiritual life, representing a person's 'inward (self)', 'outward (others)' and 'upward (God)' relations, were employed in a semi-structured interview schedule of open-ended questions. Thirteen participants shared their unique experiences of disability and spirituality. In a post-Christendom era followers of Christ should (re)discover the existence of the church as defined by mission. The *missio ecclesiae* should focus on mission from the margins and not on self-preservation, power and perfection. Both mission and spirituality require a process of transformative reconstruction to form a missional spirituality (*missio spiritualis*), as incarnational, embodied, relational, Trinitarian, cruciform, this-worldly, diaconal and liberative – it embraces *kenotic* love, acknowledges imperfection and is justice orientated. It is at the margins that the vibrant centre of the Triune God's presence and work in the world (*missio Dei trinitatis*) is to be found. Some recommendations, which could serve in the implementation and continuous development of a missional spirituality, are provided to missional communities.

OPSOMMING

Die doel van die studie is om ondersoek in te stel na die fenomeen spiritualiteit, deur die verkenning van die betekenis wat mense met gestremdhede daaraan heg. 'n Teologie en/of 'n spiritualiteit van gestremdheid is noodsaaklik vir ons begrip van wie God is en om te beseef wat dit beteken om mens te wees. Die lewens van mense met gestremdhede bring 'n waardevolle ontdekking van God voort en openbaar 'n baie breër blik op die wese van *imago Dei*. Daar bestaan 'n onbetwisbare verwantskap tussen God en kwesbaarheid. Onvolmaaktheid is deel van menswees en dit versterk spiritualiteit. God se radikale beliggaming, bekend as 'diep inkarnasie', is ten nouste verbind aan die relasionele aard van die drie-enige God. Die diep en interafhanklike verhouding van die Drie-Eenheid is 'n navolging van die verhoudings tussen mense (*imago Trinitatis*). Die implikasies van Jesus se medelye met die skepping, spesifiek Jesus se solidariteit en meelewing met die onderdrukte en gemarginaliseerdes, word beklemtoon. Die Heilige Gees se bemagtigende, lewegewende werking en die belang van die Gees se kwesbaarheid word bepeins. 'n Spiritualiteit van kwesbaarheid, onvolmaaktheid en marginalisering is die primêre modus van gestuurdheid en menswees. 'n Kwalitatiewe fenomenologiese navorsingsproses is gebruik. 'n Basiese raamwerk van Henri Nouwen se drie bewegings van die spirituele lewe, voorgestel deur 'n persoon se verhoudings 'binnewaarts (self)', 'uitwaarts (ander)' en 'opwaarts (God)', is gebruik in 'n semi-gestruktureerde onderhoudskedule met oop vrae. Dertien deelnemers het hul unieke ervarings van gestremdheid en spiritualiteit gedeel. In 'n post-Christendom-era behoort volgelingen van Christus die lewe van die kerk, soos gedefinieer as sending, te (her)ontdek. Die *missio ecclesiae* behoort te fokus op die sending van die gemarginaliseerdes eerder as selfbehoud, mag en perfeksie. Sowel sending as spiritualiteit benodig 'n proses van transformerende rekonstruksie om 'n missionale spiritualiteit (*missio spiritualis*) te vestig – inkarnerend, beliggaam, relasioneel, drie-enig, kruisvormig, wêrelds, diakonaal en bevrydend – wat *kenotiese* liefde omarm, onvolmaaktheid erken en gerig is op geregtigheid. Dit is op die rand van die samelewing waar die lewenskragtige middelpunt van die drie-enige God se aanwesigheid en werk in die wêreld (*missio Dei trinitatis*) te vind is. 'n Paar aanbevelings, wat kan dien vir die implementering en ontwikkeling van 'n missionale spiritualiteit, word verskaf.

KAKARETŠO

Maikemišetšo a dinyakišišo tše ke go nyakišiša ponagalo ya semoya ka go utolla ditlhalošo tše batho bao ba phelago ka bogolofadi bjalo ka ge ba tšweleditšwe ke semoya. Thutatumelo le/goba semoya sa bogolofadi se bohlokwa go kwešišo ya rena ya gore go ra gore eng go fapantšha seo Modimo e lego sona le go lemoga gore go ra gore eng go ba motho. Maphelo a batho bao ba phelago ka bogolofadi a tšweletša kutollo ye e humilego ya Modimo gomme ya utolla seswantšho seo se tletšego sa go ba *imago Dei*. Go na le kwelobohloko ye e se nago dipotšišo gare ga Modimo le go ba kotsing. Go palelwa ke karolo ya go ba motho gomme e matlafatša semoya. Sebopego sa Modimo sa motheo, seo se tsebegago bjalo ka 'sephiri sa bophelo', se šireleditšwe ke semelo sa motho sa Modimo wa Maina a Mararo. Kamano ya sephiri le tirišano ya Modimo wa Maina a Mararo e ekiša dikamano gare ga batho (*imago Trinitatis*). Go gatelelwa dikakanyo tša matshwenyego-mmogo a Jesu le tlhago, kopano le kwelobohloko tša Jesu go bao ba gateletšwego gape ba kgethollwa. Go tšweletšwa matlafatšo ya Moya wo Mokgethwa, moemedi wa go fa bophelo le bohlokwa bja mmušo wa go ba kotsing wa Semoya. Semoya sa go ba kotsing, go palelwa le go makatšwa ke tsela ye kgolo yeo se sengwe le se sengwe se dirwago ka gona ka maikemišetšo le botho. Go letetšwe tshepetšo ya dinyakišišo tša ponagalo tša boleng. Tlhako ya motheo ya mesepelo ye meraro ya bophelo bja semoya ya Henri Nouwen, yeo e emelago dikamano 'go ya ka gare (boyena)', 'go ya kantle (ba bangwe)' le 'go ya godimo (Modimo)', di dirišitšwe lenaneong la dipoledišano tše go sa latelwego thwii lenaneo la dipotšišo tše di nyakago tlhalošo yeo e feletšego. Bakgathatema ba lesometharo ba abelane ka maitemogelo a bona a moswananoši a bogolofadi le semoya. Ka nakong ya ka morago ga Kriste baletedi ba Kriste ba swanetše go hwetša(gape) go ba gona ga kereke bjale ka ge e hlalošwa ke maikemišetšo. *Missio ecclesia* e swanetše go nepiša maikemišetšo go tloga go mellwane e sego go go itšhireletša, maatla le bokgoni. Bobedi maikemišetšo le semoya di nyaka tshepetšo ya phetogo le mpshafatšo go dira maikemišetšo a semoya (*mission spiritualis*), bjalo ka mothofatšo, go emelwa, go kgokagana le batho, motho yo a dumelago go Maina a Mararo, sebopego sa sefapano, dilo tša lefase, go amana le moruti le go lokollwa – go amogela lerato la go *ihlatswa*, go amogela go palelwa gomme wa itlwaetša toka. Ke mo mellwaneng gore senthara ya go kgahliša ya go ba gona ga Modimo wa Maina a Mararo le mošomo mo lefaseng (*missi Dei trinitatis*) o swanetše go hwetšwa. Ditigelo tše dingwe, tše di ka dirišwago mo phethagatšong le tlhabollong yeo e tšwelago pele ya semoya sa maikemišetšo, di fiwa ditšhaba tša maikemišetšo.

SUMMARY IN MP3 FORMAT



Abstract.mp3

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LIST OF KEY TERMS

Deep incarnation

Theology of disability

Embodied spirituality

Imago Dei

Hermeneutic phenomenology

Henri Nouwen's threefold movement of spiritual life

Kenotic love

Spirituality of imperfection

Missional spirituality

Mission from the margins

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Prologue

The daily news frequently includes stories about disability: an auto accident leaves a man paralysed from the waist down, a woman in her prime is diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, new parents are told their baby has cerebral palsy, a young adult leaves college because of mental illness, soldiers return from battle minus legs, arms, hands and sanity, a responsive two-year-old quits talking and withdraws into the shell of autism. Not so common are the stories about how these people move on with their lives (Thompson 2005:245).

The aim of listening to a person's story is not only to get deeper insight into that person, but also to make a contribution towards transformation and healing (Van Niekerk & Jones 2017:72) and to seek justice. '[J]ustice is first about just listening. Not simply listening, but listening for the claims for justice made in the process of everyday life', argues theologian with disabilities, Nancy Eiesland (2001/2002:35). Listening to others' stories can make the broader community, communities of faith and policymakers aware of injustice and harm against those who live lives without dignity and experience discrimination (Van Niekerk & Jones 2017:72). A good example of this is people with disabilities who are marginalised, many of whom struggle to live a life of dignity.

1.2 The researcher's story

Since completing my theological training for the ministry in 1988, I have been a grass roots pastor, contextual theologian, one of the many 'missional agents of the God of life' (Kaunda & Hewitt 2015a:3) and an empirical researcher. I have mainly been involved in serving persons and communities in need, e.g., as fieldworker for the South African Council of Churches, minister in Alexandra township, research co-ordinator for a national poverty survey, minister of a rural congregation, and manager of a rural community development organisation in the Karoo.

My doctoral thesis in theology (Department of Christian studies, University of the Western Cape, with Prof. Dirkie Smit as promoter) in 1997 focused on the relation between faith and social empowerment among members of a poverty-stricken rural congregation. Currently, due to my disability, I am an emeritus minister after having

served a small rural URCSA congregation in the Southern Cape for seventeen years. I am a research fellow of the department of practical theology and missiology at the University of Stellenbosch. I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease (PD) in 2004.

I am inspired by the personal spiritual journey of vulnerability and brokenness of Henri Nouwen, priest and theologian, and his pastoral ministry to persons with intellectual disability, with their limitations and frailty. His life journey grounded his 'spirituality of imperfection' (Hernandez 2006) as an authentic and unique experience.

In the past my focus was on the poor, their struggle for human dignity and empowerment; at present my own disability and vulnerability have led me to an embodied spiritual journey of imperfection. At an International conference with the theme 'Theology, Disability and Human Dignity', hosted by the University of Stellenbosch in 2011, I presented a paper with the title *Towards a theology of the body: A spirituality of imperfection*. Two publications followed after the conference: *Towards a theology of the body: A spirituality of imperfection* (Van Niekerk 2012) and *My body and faith belong together: A spiritual journey* (Van Niekerk 2013).

My personal journey of discovery, and increasing vulnerability, began when I was 45 years of age. Incidentally, my father was diagnosed with Parkinsonism when he was 70 years old, so, when I was diagnosed at a much younger age – after many extensive and expensive tests – it felt quite strange to be diagnosed with the same so-called 'old-age' condition.

For almost a decade before the final diagnosis there had been certain indicators to what was coming; for example, the shakiness of my hands when I was pronouncing the benediction and an inability to tie those elusive strings on the back of a theatre gown. All these experiences had started to bring about feelings of uneasiness, embarrassment and downright incapability.

The encounter with the theatre gown was during a visit to a radiologist. The struggle to try and tie the strings behind my back lasted about ten minutes. Eventually I left the cubicle and sat on a bench, with the theatre gown open at the back, for nearly an hour. None of the task-driven staff noticed my discomfort. I should have asked for help, but I had not. I simultaneously felt vulnerable and upset.

On another occasion, a registrar was instructed by a neurologist to record my medical background. On entering the consulting room, I was surprised to find that we had

company! A number of medical students were waiting there, with their pens and notebooks. Being caught up in a state of very little emotional resistance, I gave my consent that the students could take notes of my 'case'. But I felt trapped and exposed to strangers in that situation, with the registrar commenting to the students that they should focus, since it might be the first and last opportunity during their studies in which they would be confronted with my illness.

On the one hand there was the medical profession (as related above), and on the other, there was the religious profession. The latter proved to result in an almost ridiculous outcome during a Christian camp to which I was invited by a friend. It so happened that there was a faith healer at the camp who was conducting a healing session. My friend was very keen for me to go forward to be healed. At first I was not prepared to do so, but eventually my friend told the healer about my condition and I then stood up and allowed him to pray for me. Lo and behold, he then asked for my total recovery from Alzheimer's ... I then whispered to him that it was Parkinson's ... but too late! No miracle! He had prayed for the wrong condition.

I realised more than ever before, illness, disability, chronic conditions, these are not necessarily things that can or should be healed by faith or the health sciences, and that suffering is not always to be explained or to be understood; sometimes you just need to accept it as part and parcel of life (P. van Niekerk 2013:152).

During this journey I have learnt how absolutely precious a gentle touch and soft hugs are from dear ones close to me. Unconditional love and acceptance from fellow human beings and God's compassion create a feeling of solidarity and partnership with everyone. And how endearing can this partnership with a fellow human being be in unexpected places! Once, while leaving the fitting rooms at an end-of-season sale at Woollies, I struggled closing my zip with tremor hands. An assistant noticed my predicament and innocently came towards me to ask if she could be of any help.

The body is not merely a container in which the soul is incarcerated (P. van Niekerk 2013:153). Humanity and spirituality are interrelated. One way to come to know God is to listen to one's body (Harren 2009:279). In other words, self-discovery and discovering God go together. But this self who is being discovered, is a body (Naylor 1996). As a person with Parkinsons, I am stuck with my body. My disabled body is my embodied spiritual self. By not resisting my being, is to embrace humanity and to celebrate my spirituality.

I have learnt to cope with PD, and enjoyed deep sea fishing as a hobby. But my condition has taken its course, and currently I am physically fragile. I fractured a few of the vertebrae in my spine. This has left me with chronic pain and little room for recovery. I need assistance to eat, wash and dress most of the time. To brush my teeth is not so easy. I fully realise there are different types of disability: some are easier than others to cope with. My disability, compared to others', may be minor, but I am left with a good understanding of persons with a disability who have chronic pain. It is a bitter pill to swallow.

Without taking chronic medication daily and without the support of my dear ones, I would not be able to live a life of dignity. Medicine is also not necessarily an aid to healing. The outcome of prayer is not always in our favour. Carolyn Thompson (2005:247) writes: 'Wrestling with God and oneself to discover meaning and purpose in a life with disability requires persistence and patience', and, as an after-thought, she reminds us, '[i]t also helps to have a sense of humour'.

By the way, my faith is sometimes as shaky as the tremor in my hands. Referring to his journey as a believer, Julian Müller (2011) states, faith can be 'vulnerable and shaky, wavering between conviction and terror, completely honest and tentative' (P. van Niekerk 2013:153). A spirituality of imperfection can emerge when a body is broken and faith is vulnerable. 'I need to learn to accept my condition and to let go of my frustration in order to find peace and my body at home' (P. van Niekerk 2013:154). A spirituality of the body embodies imperfection. It is a spirituality that embraces one's limits and values interdependence. It is a faith that deals with growth and development, illness, degeneration and aging.

1.3 Need for the study

In society, and even in churches, the voice of people with disabilities who are vulnerable and marginalised are usually not heard. How do persons with disabilities find 'hope and meaning', 'faith and strength', 'dignity and purpose' in life? (Thompson 2005:245). At best, the view and voice of persons with disabilities are identified as being of lesser importance in the history of Christian religion, and at worst have been totally suppressed, according to Swinton (2011:274-275):

[H]uman disability is a way of shaping, forming and reforming theology. ... In listening to such voices and reflecting on life experiences of people with disabilities, it hopes to re-think and recalibrate aspects of theology and practice that serve to exclude or misrepresent the human experience of disability.

The Christian faith is shaped by a 'network or community', called the church (Van der Ven 1993:23-24), which is described by different metaphors, for example, the 'body of Christ'. 'The body of Christ presumes a place for everyone' (Weiss Block 2002:131). Reynolds (2013:18) questions the statement of Weiss Block, contending that "place" is difficult for persons with disabilities. Too often, thresholds are encountered in our churches that signal "access denied" – whether physical, behavioural or attitudinal'. An all-inclusive church is a Christian community with wide and open doors to everyone; it is the body of Christ with out-stretched arms, welcoming and embracing everyone with love and compassionate justice. To be inclusive means making everyone part of a community; 'making room for difference, the different treated as difference, not as pathology or a deficit to be cured or fixed before being fully accepted' (Reynolds 2013:25). The essential nature of the body of Christ reveals that its members give care and receive care (Shuman 1999:131-134). The phrase of Shuman, 'letting the body be the body' implies that care is not contractual but, according to 1 Corinthians 12, that care constitutes that church members live in relationships of dependence and interdependence.

As *imago Dei*, humans reflect God both physically and in their connections with others – to be fully human is a reflection of God (cf. Reynolds 2008a:178; Van Huyssteen 2006:320). When one discovers oneself through the other and reflects God, one acts like God. Then one becomes concerned with the well-being of the other who is representing God. God's compassionate love flows over the whole of creation; it is God's mission (*missio Dei*) to touch everyone, especially insignificant, vulnerable and needy persons. Because God cares for the whole world, this is also what the aim of the *missio Dei* should be – to reach all beings everywhere in every facet of their lives (Bosch 2012:400-401). 'The *missio Dei* is, at its very core, relational and communal – and therefore also the *missio ecclesiae*' (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:14).

As *missio ecclesiae*, the reason for a church's existence is its mission (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:4). It is marked by a church for the other,

especially those in need and vulnerable. The church's missional praxis is connected with the 'ethos of *kenotic* love' (Louw 2014:44). The church is a 'self-sacrificial community in its following after the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The church is community, not for the sake of community, but for the sake of participation in God's mission' (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:14).

The church is challenged to 'renew herself to be missional' (Keum 2018:4). 'A missional church 'are gathered, formed and sent out to carry the message of God's love further into the world' (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:5). Keum (2018:5) reminds the body of Christ that '[m]ission is the overflow of the infinite love of the Triune God'. It is this love that defines the most important aim of the church to be to embrace the 'poor and marginalised' (Balia & Kim 2010:179). One very prominent group of the marginalised and vulnerable is persons with disabilities. Altogether, this group is roughly calculated to number more than one billion people worldwide, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Kretzschmar 2018:23), and, paradoxically, to constitute one of the biggest 'minority groups' since they are also the most impoverished and disregarded (Kim & Anderson 2011:450; see Mertens 2009:24-25). It is estimated that only 10% or less persons with disabilities are affiliated to some or other church (Kretzschmar 2018:24).

The mission of the church is mainly seen as 'a movement from the centre to the periphery, and from the privileged to the marginalised of the society. Now people at the margins are claiming their key role as agents of mission and affirming mission as transformation' (Keum 2018:2). However, how current power dynamics within the church entertain people with disabilities to claim their space, needs to be understood in order for transformation to take place. Mission should allow the vulnerable their most complete participation and even to set the tone of the 'life of the church and society' (Keum 2018:13).

Life in the divine Spirit is central to mission, the pivot of why and how we live. It is spirituality that creates meaning, and which lies behind our actions in the world (Keum 2018:2). The spirituality of participants in God's mission is missional. A missional spirituality focuses on God's living presence that leads followers to God's world (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:11); it is contextual and always transformative. A missional spirituality is embodied and grounded in practice (cf. Kreminski 2016) – it is incarnational. Alan Hirsch (Niemandt 2007:151) refers to an

“[i]ncarnational ministry” [which] essentially means taking the church to the people, rather than bringing people to the church’.

Christianity is at the centre of enormous change in the world, and only a missional church, with its active involvement, will successfully come to grips with the developing cultural scenarios (cf. Kaunda & Hewitt 2015a:2; Shenk 2005:73). Followers of the Christian faith should (re)discover that from the beginning, the nature of the church is missional and the existence of the church is defined by mission (Keum 2018:15; Bosch 2012:381). The early Christians practised a ‘mission theology’ (Bosch 2012:15) and a ministry with the marginalised.

Living on the periphery, persons with disabilities throw light on pain and weakness – but also on the ‘humanity’ in their world. It is through these relegated persons that others know the ‘real, suffering, living’ and ever-loving God (Moltmann 1998:121). It can be assumed that the crucial, primary role of people with disabilities is to bring to light that is still concealed – since, among the devout and ‘able bodied’, they are the ‘human embodiment of God’ (Anderson 2003:51).

Creswell (2013:130) suggests that instead of a problem statement, qualitative research has at its conception a ‘need’. My research will explain why spirituality is deeply interwoven to marginality. A spirituality of vulnerability, imperfection and marginality is the primary modus of mission and humanity.

1.4 Research questions

Reflections on theology and spirituality give body to the heart of the study which is qualitative empirical research. The aim of the research is to re-think, recalibrate, give depth and new insight to aspects and practises of spirituality by exploring the meaning persons with disabilities ascribe to the phenomenon of spirituality.

Research questions ‘provide an opportunity to encode and foreshadow an approach to inquiry’ (Creswell 2013:138). A central question and sub questions were formulated in light of literature on disability and spirituality.

1.4.1 Central question

What meaning does a person with disability give to spirituality, as experienced through her or his journey with others, with God or a higher Hand?

1.4.2 Sub questions

How do different images of God influence the spirituality of persons with disabilities?

What is the rationale behind the embodiment of God in contexts of weakness and vulnerability?

What is the divine Spirit's relation to suffering?

What are the implications for a missional community (*missio ecclesiae*) that is embodied by a spiritual journey of imperfection?

Why are those on the margins vital agents of mission?

Why is a missional spirituality essential in a post-Christendom era?

1.5 Structure of thesis

This thesis consists of four movements:

- Inspiration (Chapters 2 – 4)
- Investigation (Chapters 5)
- Interpretation (Chapter 6 – 7)
- Integration (Chapter 8)

Inspiration

A discussion on the preliminary understanding of spirituality and the reciprocal relation between spirituality and theology introduce this movement.

Following the introductory chapter, chapter 2, *Thoughts and experiences of God*, starts my study with a theocentric reflection. My research is given direction by the statement that before we can ask who we are and what it is that we should do, we need to know who God is. As a missiological study, the first question is, 'What does God do?' Another key aspect is the question 'Where is God?' having in mind mainly our people living on the margins of society. My research is further shaped by the conviction of the importance to listen to and to know about the experience of ordinary people, especially the marginalised, and of God in our spirituality. This is so because God chose the marginalised to further God's mission of justice and peace for all of life to thrive. There exists an indisputable affinity between God and weakness. The God of the Bible does

not relate only to people, but God allows God's acts to be revealed in the human reality: where God is known, there humanity always comes into glory. Ontological claims about God cannot be made by humans – disclosure can only come from God. The absolute otherness of God is acknowledged.

Chapter 3, *The embodiment of God*, logically follows chapter 2. It is mainly an Christological study. The concept 'deep incarnation' is introduced and discussed; and tied to the relational character of the Trinity. If the 'human being-in-relationship' is correctly seen as mirroring 'God's being-in-relationship', it thus follows that the human as *imago Dei* is also the *imago Trinitatis*. In this chapter, the interdependence of pneumatology and Christology is also recognised in the discourse of the embodiment of God. One cannot picture the deep incarnation as a facet of Christology only, but also as that of pneumatology. Deborah van den Bosch provides a constructive proposal in pairing the Spirit and vulnerability. Despite being bodiless, the divine Spirit's empowering, restorative, life-giving agency and the Spirit's realm of vulnerability are recognised in the embodiment of God. This chapter delves deeper and reflects on the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ; God becoming matter and flesh. The implications of Jesus' co-suffering with creation, specifically Jesus' solidarity and compassion with human beings, particularly the oppressed and marginalised, are dealt with. Brokenness and woundedness are part of what it means to be human. Weakness and vulnerability are part of the strength of our spirituality.

Chapter 4, *Embodied spirituality*, deals with the phenomenon of spirituality, which should be understood as embodied, based on the *kenotic* love of Jesus and the agency of the divine Spirit. The search for meaning in life, 'a life that matters', is an integral aspect of spirituality. The growing focus on and interest in spirituality can be ascribed *inter alia* to the paradigm shift brought about by post-modernism. The Spirit presupposes that the body is rooted in the Spirit. The living body is the centre from which everything is experienced, as well as the centre from where the expression of that experience occurs. Christian spirituality is concretely lived when Christian faith has been fully merged with our being in its full humanity. It is by becoming more like Jesus that we truly become more human in living a Christian spiritual life. The relational character of spirituality towards the self, others, the world and God (Supreme Being) is widely acknowledged.

Investigation

A reflection on empirical theology introduces this movement. Chapter 5, *Qualitative research: A phenomenological approach*, gives a thorough exploration of the research design and method used in the empirical section of my research. Qualitative studies assist researchers to gather information with a view to giving insight into how participants create meaning and how this meaning making influences their spiritual wellness. As qualitative studies are based on information that cannot easily be measured, such as opinions and feelings, it is especially helpful in this instance. The research question favours a qualitative phenomenological research process. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method which focuses on lived experience. The originality of phenomenology lies in that questions about God are answered from the inner experience of humans, instead of dogmatic abstraction. The hermeneutic phenomenology approach is particularly useful in this study because it both describes the phenomenon being investigated and also elucidates the significant experiences of participants. The purpose of the study is to examine the meanings which persons with disabilities attach to the phenomenon of spirituality, with a view to promoting social justice.

Qualitative researchers often utilise a small, non-random sample of cases to make an in-depth study of. In the current study, thirteen participants were selected if they were an adult with some form of disability; could communicate in Afrikaans or English; and acknowledged the existence of God or a Supreme Being.

In line with Henri Nouwen's definition of spirituality, open-ended questions suitable for a semi-structured interview were formulated. Conversational interviews allowed for less formal and more spontaneous interaction in comparison to questionnaires, tests and experiments, and interpretations that were less abstract. What phenomenological interviewing aims for is a natural narrative or account of everyday experiences in a life normally lived.

Rather than analysing data (and breaking it up into parts), phenomenological researchers prefer explicitation – to illuminate the meaning of what was gathered – by investigating every aspect of the data within its contextual whole. In this way, the phenomenon as a whole will not be lost. Five steps of the explicitation procedure were implemented: bracketing and phenomenological reduction; delineating units of

meaning; thematic clustering of units; summarising each interview; and lastly, the composite summary of general and unique themes. A summary of general and unique themes among participants' lived experiences associated with disability and spirituality was formulated, then transformed into scientific discourse.

The validity of this processing of data would depend on a faithful reflection of the narratives of the participants' meaning. Although the accuracy of the summaries of individual interviews could not be checked by the participants, this study made use of an intradisciplinary process as well as researcher triangulation. Besides the primary researcher and the research facilitators, various other professionals from different disciplines were involved in the investigative process by means of a focus group. Furthermore, the credibility of the research is supported by the confluence of different perspectives on disability, spirituality and the themes that emerged with time.

Interpretation

This movement is introduced by a brief description of hermeneutics. Chapter 6, *Stories about disability and spirituality*, contains the narratives of the research participants. Eighteen themes were identified, of which bodiliness, discrimination, interpersonal relationships, interdependency and faith have prominence. Spirituality is relational. The composite summary of this chapter serves as an introduction to chapter 7, *The embodiment of imperfection*, in which the focus is on the spirituality of disability. A body theology with *inter alia* the themes of *imago Dei*, incarnation, vulnerability and liberation supports the development of a liable Christian theology of disability. Contrary to Christian tradition that is aligned with the marginalised, churches still tend to be segregated when it comes to people with disabilities, and subsequently disregard their rights to be valued and respected as worthy human beings. In general, people with disabilities have been systematically discriminated against and oppressed by society. However, the problem is not 'in' them, but in society's lack of response to their needs. I will explain why there is no clear barrier between ability and disability, but rather a spectrum on which persons function in terms of their level of vulnerability. All persons are vulnerable but some are more and others are less so, and in distinct ways. A theology of disability is a key focus of our understanding of God, of humanity and its relationship in the world in which we live. This claim is substantiated by reflecting on

five God images through the lens of disability. The conclusion to reach is that the human race consists of those who are aware of their disabilities, and those who are not. And those who are more overtly disabled have to accept their prophetic role in enabling the more abled to be aware of the uniqueness of all people as children of God.

Integration

Chapter 8, *On being spiritually missional*, is the final chapter of my research. The chapter reflects on spirituality's interwovenness with marginality and focuses on the internalisation of a missional spirituality by post-Christendom and post-colonial missional communities, vivified through the agency of the divine Spirit. There is a discussion on the meaning and importance of a missional spirituality (*missio spiritualis*) and Karina Kreminski's seven ways of missional spirituality that differs from Christian spirituality is shared. In the formation of a missional spirituality and identity, I propose a reciprocal transformative action between missio-formation and spiritual formation. Both mission and spirituality needs a process of transformative reconstruction to form a missional spirituality. The vibrant centre of the Triune God's presence and work in the world (*missio Dei trinitatis*) are the margins – no wonder that the mission of the margins is an essential aspect of a missional spirituality. Attention is given to the themes of healing and hospitality. In the epilogue, a few recommendations are made to missional communities, e.g. churches and theological departments at universities.

MOVEMENT 1 INSPIRATION

Preliminary understanding of spirituality

My preliminary understanding of ‘spirituality’ is that the Spirit breathes on us, reaching into our very innermost being; and that the Spirit inspires us, resulting in a spiritual attitude.¹ Inspiration and spirituality are etymologically related and theologically connected. On a sliding scale from literal to figurative, there is a whole spectrum of related meanings of ‘inspiration’ and ‘spirituality’, according to Claassen (2016).

In the Christian tradition and ancient Judaism (as well as other religions), the Spirit has (metaphoric) connotations of ‘breathing’ (Christensen 2006:vii; cf. McGrath 1994:242; Louw & Nida 1989:142; Harris, Archer & Waltke 1980:836). Breath implies ‘activity and life’ (Harris et al. 1980:836; cf. Keum 2018:4) and is often associated with God as the giver of life, e.g. Gen 2:7. Thus, ‘[l]iving a spiritual life... is *breathing with the life and breath of God*, who is within us and among us’ (Christensen 2006:vii).

The breath of God, the Spirit, is for everyone. The Spirit is mysteriously always at work (Bosch 2012:496; cf. Keum 2018:5); ‘free to breathe and blow’ where it wants (Christensen 2006:vii; cf. Bouckaert 2011:26). McColman (1997:5) believes that ‘spirituality is as simple as breathing’. All are beneficiaries of the Spirit’s compassion as partakers ‘in the same mystery’, whether they are the spiritual “‘haves”, the *beati possidentes*’, or the ‘spiritual “have nots”, the *massa damnata*’ (Bosch 2012:496).

In sharing his insights on ‘spiritual living’ with his nineteen-year-old nephew, Marc, Henri Nouwen (1988:5) writes:

Living spiritually is more than living physically, intellectually, or emotionally: It embraces all that, but it is larger, deeper, and wider. It concerns the core of your humanity. It is possible to lead a very wholesome, emotionally rich, and ‘sensible’ life without being a spiritual person: that is, without knowledge or experience of the terrain where the meaning and goal of our human existence are hidden.

This study, while from a Christian perspective, strives to also uphold an attitude of humility towards other faiths (cf. Bosch 2012:496) and the wider spectrum of spiritualities. (See in depth discussion of spirituality/ies in chapter 4.) The Christian

¹ I anticipated a relation between ‘inspiration and spirituality’. Claassen confirmed my assumption and helped me to describe the preliminary understanding of spirituality and suggested a Latin translation for my thesis (see title page).

religion is – like every other religion with its individual emphasis and concerns – a phenomenon of history (Kraemer 1961:82; cf. Van Niekerk 1997:16-18).

Waaijman (Fortin 2016:42) describes spirituality to be the ‘lifelong transformative interaction of the human with the divine’. I am greatly inspired by the ‘spirituality of imperfection’ of the ‘restless seeker, wounded healer, and faithful struggler’ (Hernandez 2006:3), theologian, priest and professor, Henri Nouwen. I refer to my spiritual journey described in chapter 1 – an enduring journey with God in which my body and faith belong together (P. van Niekerk 2013:151-156).

Theology and spirituality

My study follows the presupposition that theology is ingrained in spirituality. Theology and spirituality are inseparable (Hernandez 2006:4, 65). ‘The integration of theology with spirituality makes even greater sense when one recognises the reality that the knowledge of God and experience of God, if indeed authentic, are bound to naturally coalesce’ (Hernandez 2006:68). According to Hans Urs von Balthasar (1989:196), the essential purpose of theology is to facilitate the full intellectual and spiritual existence of a person in a close relationship with God. Waaijman (Fortin 2016:42) stresses the ‘intimate’ association between spirituality and theology, with the latter seen as Christian life in all its fullness with source texts at its basis. As such, theology and spirituality are clearly intertwined: ‘Theology is the intellectual articulation of spirituality ..., the attempt to understand and express what is believed and lived’ (Schneiders 2002:135). However, Schneiders opposes the efforts of Sheldrake and others who favour the close relation between theology and spirituality. Schneiders (Endean 2005:77; cf. Schneiders 1986:253-274) contends, ‘spirituality is an autonomous discipline which functions in partnership and mutuality with theology’.

Gustavo Gutiérrez (1988:4-5) concurs: theology is supposed to integrate spirituality and rational knowledge. This perspective was supported by theologians such as Athanasius, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Luther, three or more centuries ago. According to them, the intellectual study of faith and its practical expression are harmonised (McGrath 1999:27).

However, the characterisation of and differentiation between theology, as primarily focusing on doctrines and dogma, and spirituality, which has practice and experience

at its centre, is unfortunate (De Villiers 2006:99; cf. Nolan 2006:xviii). De Villiers reminds us that even if this distinction is made, spirituality and theology should never be disconnected.

Sheldrake (1999:32) focuses on the reciprocal relationship between theology and spirituality, and cautions that spirituality without theology holds the danger of being an individual, private concern. Furthermore, spirituality broadens theology to more than an existence purely in the mind. According to Sheldrake (2007:96), the link that is made between experience and spirituality can maintain the impression that the latter has nothing to do with the mind: 'Spirituality is not simply concerned with experience but embodies a viewpoint (theory), commitments (ethics), and practices (not simply devotional practises but action in the world)' (cf. Endean 2005:75).

On reflecting on the history of spirituality as an academic discipline, Kourie (2009:156-158) notes that the 'early study of theology was a *unitary* endeavour' and not separated by divisions. Theology was fundamentally an 'intellectual-spiritual pursuit' (Schneiders 1989:685). However, since the thirteenth century, a separation between theology and spirituality developed due to, *inter alia*, the effect of philosophical conceptualisation and the establishment of the university (Schneiders 1989:685). Thomas Aquinas' differentiation of spirituality in Part II of his *Summa Theologia* aggravated the distinction: rooted in 'dogmatic theology', 'spiritual theology' was considered a subdivision of 'moral theology' (Schneiders 1989:685; cf. Kourie 2009:157). Furthermore, spirituality was downscaled to be mainly reflecting on the philosophical views of the 'contemporary upper-class and male élites' (Sheldrake 1992:40). In the seventeenth century the section of dogma that dealt with the 'principles of the spiritual life' became known as 'ascetical theology'. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the 'spiritual life' was studied and taught as the 'science of the life of perfection'. 'Spiritual theology' had two subdivisions, 'ascetical theology' and 'mystical theology'. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the discipline of spirituality was established, and was consequently liberated from 'spiritual theology' (Kourie 2009:157-158; cf. Schneiders 2005:2-4, Schneiders 1989:678, 689).

I believe theology and spirituality to be reciprocally related (cf. Kourie 2009:162). Theology should be lifted from existing purely in the mind by spirituality (Hernandez 2006:65) and spirituality should make theology contextual and transformative. In practising existential theology, theology comes alive as 'spiritual experience'

(Hernandez 2006:70). I agree and conclude with a statement of Endean (2005:76): 'We need an account of theology as normative for spirituality in a way that keeps it open to the unconventional and unpredictable; we need an account of spirituality as universal but not shapeless'.

The first Movement provides the groundwork for this research; it consists of three chapters of inspiration. Chapter 2, *Thoughts and experiences of God*, reveals something of God's mysterious, unique, missional, liberative and compassionate character with regard to human beings, mainly as a friend of the people living on the margins of society. In chapter 3, *The embodiment of God*, God's dramatic incarnation in Jesus is discussed, showing that bodies matter to God, and emphasises the relational character of the Triune God towards people. The divine Spirit's agency of co-suffering is touched upon. Last, the communal feature of God's image is the same for everyone and being created in God's image ensures the dignity of every person. Chapter 4, *Embodied spirituality*, first reflects on the broad application and understanding of the phenomenon spirituality. Then the relational character of spirituality towards the self, others, the world and God (Supreme Being) is touched on and the spiritual journey of imperfection is discussed.

CHAPTER 2 THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES OF GOD

2.1 *Prolegomena*

There are things that should be said first. Barth describes *internal Prolegomena* as 'the things that must be said first' (Berkhof 1979:41). After stating and summarising my research as reflected in chapter 1, I would like to position my study with a discussion on the concept of *revelation*. The doctrinal starting point for Roman Catholic theology is the *church*, and for Reformation theology, the authority of the Bible. Currently these points of departure are replaced, usually by the construct 'revelation' (Berkhof 1979:43). Revelation is a theological-philosophical construct: Theology is considered to be thoughts of revelation and revelation is the thoughts of God in theological form (Manenschijn 2002:219).

In this study, both spirituality and theology reflect on the understanding and experience of God, and my own imperfection as a person and researcher – as will be considered below. According to De Villiers (2006:104), theology can give expression to a creative spirituality that comfortably accommodates both the rational mind and personal limitations.

[A] biblical spirituality informed by the Eastern Fathers necessarily fosters humility, aporia – that is, the sense of being at a loss, of losing control over language and concept, moving beyond literalism and the idolatries of our mental projections, knowing that to know is not to know, yet being confronted with a reality beyond the compass of our limited minds, being put in our place, having our pride and competence challenged, discovering our creatureliness, and the fact that we cannot know God without being disabled, as Jacob was (Young 2007:54).

I will mainly focus on the self-revelation of God, God's attributes and the limitations of our earthly language to speak of God. The essence of God, as revealed to humans, and the way persons perceive God, will be reflected on. God's relation to people and God's missional and liberatory acts of compassionate justice and love will be discussed. The statement, 'we must know who God is before we can answer the question about who we are and what we are supposed to be doing' (Myers 1999:23) directs this research. Last, I will briefly focus on God's own freedom to be frail.

God exists.² In Küng's major work on God, *Bestaat God?*, with the original title *Existiert Gott?*, he mainly addresses two questions: 'Does God exist?' and 'Who is God?'. He argues that believers in God's existence, and even those who doubt it, depend in the first place on the question, 'what is God like?' (Küng 1978:665). Küng (1978:666) speculates whether God is hidden, or whether God should be understood in different ways, like the two-faced god Janus, or like a mysterious sphinx. He continues by asking, is God for, or against, people? And, what does God mean – fear or safety; unhappiness or happiness; oppression or liberation? For, as Ricoueur (Pieterse 2014:2) writes, the concept of God as found in Christian Protestant religion came into being through different perspectives and with different aspects: 'It varies in the tensions of the dialectic between the understanding of Christian religion as prohibition and accusation, retribution and consolation, and on the other hand, religion as freedom and hope'.

Manenschijn (2002:13), defining 'great' as grace, truth and compassion, believes God is so great, there is no need for his existence. According to him, this does not mean that God does or does not exist: one never knows. The medieval philosopher Anselm (1033-1109) argues that God exists in the mind even if you do not think God exists in reality, and that, for instance, the mere opinion of an atheist proves that God exists (Pessin 2009:46-48; cf. Durand 2015:17). Rollins (2011:126) argues that instead of asking, 'does God exist?', believers should ask a more fundamental question: 'What does it mean to claim that God exists?'. In the challenge of claiming God's existence, knowing what God is like and what it means if God exists, I will take my own limitations and preconceptions into consideration.

2.2 Who is God?

Generally speaking, it is in the Bible that people – to whom God revealed God's self – bear witness to experiences of God. And God continues to reveal God's self to us today, by way of our reading of and listening to the Bible, and through worship and preaching (Pieterse 2014:2; cf. Van Niekerk 2015:328). Anton van Niekerk (2005:229) says we know God through an act of will, supplemented and augmented by various

² On 18 March 1988, I had lunch with Prof. Hans Küng, the well-known theologian, celebrating his 60th birthday. He signed a copy of his book *Bestaat God?* with the remark 'Yes'.

activities, such as praying, reading the Bible, listening to sermons, being part of the service of worship and sacraments, trying to do good works, and witnessing.

These ways of interpreting God's revelation are complex, subjective, and biased, especially interpretations that represent a powerful situation.

Although Western scholarship has historically been aware of the biases of religious doctrine and the presuppositions of a modern scientific worldview, most scholars were generally unaware of the extent to which fundamental factors of cultural and social location had shaped, distorted and limited their interpretations and methods. Furthermore, because of the power of Western societies, these situated interpretations have been appropriated to justify conquest, destruction, and domination over cultures, subcultures, and social groups both within and outside the Western world (Rhoads in De Villiers 2006:107).

2.2.1 Interpreting the Bible

The way we read and interpret the Bible influences our view of God (and revelation) and our spirituality and theology. Further, the Bible is regarded by some interpreters as the only 'something tangible' source of reflection on God (cf. Du Toit 2000:64). Therefore a discussion on how the Bible is interpreted is essential. Each of the different key players, from the original writers to the translators, commentators, preachers and readers of biblical texts, have their own conditioned background, spiritualities, traditions of faith, preconceptions, hermeneutical limitations and/or exegetical biases.³

Jonker (2015) identifies several components when interpreting the Bible and verbalising faith in God.⁴ In biblical times, texts came into existence when believers put their faith in God into words. The way in which they described their confessions of God was influenced by their individual concrete living contexts (contexts of origin). It was important to them to make the message understandable to people in other situations and for the generations to come. These texts were then read and understood by others in their own concrete living conditions (contexts of interpretation)

³ During a post-graduate discussion in the late eighties at Unisa's Old Testament department, we argued that if the writers of the New Testament were Unisa students and used Old Testament texts, they would fail their exams.

⁴ Louis Jonker's paper *Die Bybel en Homoseksualiteit* delivered at a one-day conference on 'Selfdegeslag verbintnisse' on 12 November 2015 in Stellenbosch; he dealt with the complex process of understanding the Bible.

– which, once again, had an influence on the understanding of the texts. One may call this process the ‘reception of texts’ (Jonker 2015).

With the passage of time and changing circumstances, these texts were re-read and re-interpreted (Jonker 2015). These antique processes of interpretation sometimes resulted in some texts being rewritten, or added to, and even changed. The process changed from the reception of texts to the production of texts. Eventually the process led also to the compilation of texts as the texts became linked, were reacted on and used in interpretation, one to the other. The process stretched over a long time before the canonisation of the Bible took place. This process has also continuously resulted in (new) traditions of interpretation (Jonker 2015; cf. Jonker 2006:401-410; see Smit 1987).

Biblical hermeneutics is no easy exercise; there is more than one way to enter, and more than one potential interpretation of, the Bible. For example, the Old Testament scholar Hasel, in his article, ‘The Biblical view of the extent of the flood’, writes that the flood narrative in Genesis 6:5-9:17 is simply a ‘*genre* of historical narrative in prose style’. Hasel (1975:69) argues:

Often critical scholars seek to understand Bible writers on their own terms; if the Biblical picture is in conflict with the modern understanding of the world and man, then the Biblical view is reinterpreted in such a way so as to remove its conflict with that of the modern conception.

For some readers, Hasel’s interpretation is fundamentally sound, while other readers will question his interpretation, with the result that his ‘intellectual integrity’ (Du Toit 2000:65) is jeopardised.

It is therefore no wonder that Gregersen’s (2012:235) description of the exegesis-process as a ‘present-orientated constructive theology perspective’ is more time-friendly. He writes:

Biblical exegesis and contemporary theology are both concerned with textual meanings (the meaning ‘in the text’); but where exegesis traditionally has dealt with the text in its historical context (the meaning ‘behind the text’), contemporary theology is particularly engaged with the meaning potentials of the text for today (the meaning ‘before the text’).

Claassens (2016) writes that she and her colleagues at three faculties of theology (i.e. Pretoria, Free State and Stellenbosch) strive to cultivate a hermeneutic of accountability among students. They read the Bible differently, more accountably, and in full consideration of flesh and blood persons that could be affected by the thoughtless and sometimes literal reading of the Bible (Claassens 2016). Further, Du Toit (2000:67) reminds us that all literature, including the Bible, is interpreted data; one 'sees always through a mirror' – it is never direct and impartial.

With his theological hermeneutical approach, Billings (2010:226) reminds Christians to evade reductionism when interpreting the Bible contextually; it should become a 'human act'. They should be conscientious of the Spirit's work of 'indigenising the gospel into cultures around the world', but they should also discern the Spirit's work, bounded as testimony of Jesus, says Billings. Yong (Swinton 2011:273) writes about the reliability of contemporary theologies, and states that a pneumatological imagination alerts us to seek out, listen to, and discern the presence of the divine Spirit even in the 'tongues' of the sciences, of modern technology, and of humanistic scholarship. Discerning the Spirit is a multifaceted process (cf. Niemandt 2015b:92).

There are 'user-friendly' methods of reading the Bible. The classical Christian method of *lectio divina*, which literally means 'divine reading', or 'reading from God', according to Kardong (2005:403), becomes, among even Christians of the reformed tradition, a prayerful way to read the Bible. When using this method, the reader reads the Bible believing God is present (cf. Nicol 2008, 2002). *Lectio divina* is also described as a 'medieval experience of reading' (Robertson 2011, as the sub-title of his book); a 'contemplative reading' of the Bible, closely associated with prayer and silence (cf. Pope Francis 2013:121). Sheldrake (2007:96) does not only recognise *lectio divina* as a type of 'sacred study', but also 'one where understanding, desire and transformation are interwoven'.

Carlos Mesters, a Dutch-born Carmelite priest in Brazil who is involved with initiating basic ecclesial communities, teaches a liberationist hermeneutical reading of the Bible to believers. According to him (Droogers-Zoutewelle 1990), a delicate relation between the two texts, namely the Bible and 'Life', exists. Mesters reads the Bible not as a history book, but as an important resource to understanding the readers' existential lives. Mesters named this approach a 'people's reading' (*volkse uitleg*) of the Bible. The method was developed for Brazilian Christians, so that ordinary people

(*eenvoudige mensen*) could read the Bible to motivate them to stand up for justice (Droogers-Zoutewelle 1990:9). He mainly reads the Bible to listen to God today (Bradstock & Rowland 2002:305-306). In *God's project*, a Bible study booklet for victims of apartheid, Mesters introduces a Bible study with *inter alia* the following remarks:

The Bible must be read with the 'heart', the 'mind' and with the 'feet'. *The feet are very important*. The Bible was written as a product of a journey. It is only by following with our own feet the same journey that we can get to know all the meaning of the Bible for us. And this was the journey of the people (Bradstock & Rowland 2002:306).

On this journey one's ears are wide open, to listen to the other. The Dutch Reformed Church's 'Season of Listening' is a good example of reading the Bible to discern God's current involvement and will. It is coined as a 'missional listening process' and consists of the following movements (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:11; see Barrett in Niemandt 2007:78-79):

- '[F]inding rest in God.'
- Adopting a 'listening perspective' as an approach to the Bible.
- 'The source of inspiration for the missional listening process is the presence of the Holy Spirit, for He enables us as God's children to hear what He is saying to us.'
- 'It is a process that takes time and that transforms the listener.'
- 'It is about discernment.'
- 'It teaches us to look to the future by looking at the past.'
- 'This listening process comes to fruition in a life filled with good works.'

To summarise: I agree with the statement that Bible texts are 'living traditions that are challenged and renewed by lived experience of ongoing generations of Christians' (Toensing 2007:133). Reading the Bible with other heterogeneous groups and, preferably, with persons from the margins, e.g. people with disabilities, enables one to discover more about God.

During a ministers meeting with the theme 'Listening to our world', Eddie Gibbs (Niemandt 2007:34) uttered the following remarkable words:

We hear the voice of God not only from the Scriptures but in the heart-cries of those around us. These cries may be cries of anguish by those who suffer dehumanising poverty or chronic sickness. They may be shouts of defiance on the part of those who refuse to be victimised. They may be expressions of disappointment and disillusionment in the wake of broken promises or their own unrealistic and unreasonable expectations. They may be urgent pleas for help by those who cannot provide for themselves or who are attempting to make a living selling items by the roadside or at intersections. They may be murmurs of longing, voiced by those who believe there is a better way and brighter future, and look to our churches as anticipatory signs of that future expressed in the gospel of the kingdom. And then there are the songs of hope and celebration, so often sung in the midst of poverty, and suffering. In those songs we hear the exuberant, irrepressible voice of the African Church.

2.2.2 Discovery of God and the self

There is no difference between the revelation of God and God. 'God is who God is revealed to be', according to Barth (Grenz 2001:35). 'The word revelation is: I am there as whoever I am there. That which reveals is that which reveals. That which has being there, nothing more' (Buber 1970:160; see Ex 3:14). As Billings (2010:102) puts it, 'only God can make God known'.

To write of or speak about God and God's revelation is complex, challenging, mysterious, and potentially dangerous. 'The way in which we conceive God and the way we speak of God have real consequences in the realm of human affairs' (Case-Winters 1990:19). The different images of God may at the same time be equally true, because of the wealth and depth found in God and God's mysterious relation with people (Lindijer 1990:9). Certain images of God are dysfunctional (Louw 1995:7). According to Louw (2014:37), spirituality or faith can be unhealthy, and he quotes Glenn and Robitaille on what that could mean. Their view is that it is mostly the recasting of beliefs that go awry instead of the beliefs themselves, in that the presence of God or transcendence becomes couched in attitudes which could be described as 'severe, exacting, malevolent, and/or indifferent'. Some images of God are 'toxic or abusive or absurd' (McColman 1997:16), others are distorted, oppressive and even 'demonic', according to Frielingsdorf (2006:12). Frielingsdorf (2006:11) has recognised four negative images:

God as

- punishing judge;
- demon of death, bringing death instead of life;
- metaphysical book-keeper enforcing the law; or
- demanding achievement and success.

He continues to say that bad, harmful images of God tend to develop from seeing one aspect of God as the supreme, focal image. The image of 'God as demon of death' is questionable. Sometimes death is a 'friend' to a terminally ill person who suffers from unbearable pain:

[D]eath seems to us to be part of life, as a stage thereof, as something natural, no longer the enemy thereof, nor the curse of life, but sometimes even a release or liberation from life and a blessing⁵ (Pohier 1988:135; see Van Niekerk 2005:218-239).

It is written that in the North American colonisation, slaves were evangelised with the hope of keeping them docile and subservient to whites (World Council of Churches 2012:157). God was introduced as a 'Ruler, Lord, Master and Warrior', ensuring 'Christianity [as] a religion *of* and *for* the ruler, elite, and the upper-class' (World Council of Churches 2012:157). These images need to be rejected when they make anyone feel anxious, inhuman, and/or restrained (Lindijer 1990:9).

Conversely, Rollins (2011:12-17) writes about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concern about the Christian perspective of God as *deus ex machina*,⁶ God being mainly 'reduced to the status of a psychological crutch ... in order to solve a problem rather than expressing a lived reality' (Louw 2014:4; cf. Hauerwas 2005:17). Pascal refers to this idea as 'the God of Philosophy', a concept of God created by humans, offering people a different kind of protection than that of their fellow humans, or which gives a supernatural explanation for something people cannot understand (Rollins 2011:14-15). If God is viewed in this manner, then God is eventually impotent (Rollins 2011:14-15). In

⁵ '... *de doodt lijkt ons deel uit te maken van het leven, als een etappe ervan, als iets natuurlijks, niet meer als de vijand ervan of de vloek van het leven maar soms zelfs als een bevrijding van het leven en een zegen*'

⁶ It means literally 'God out of the machine', referring to a playwrighting technique using a clumsy device to resolve a problematical issue in a play (Rollins 2011:12-13). 'The expression comes from the world of Greek drama; in these plays, gods (*deus*) usually made an appearance in the final act and magically sorted out the problems of the main characters' (Upendran 2014).

adopting this view, the transformative power of Christianity is lost, faith is diminished into a coping mechanism and theology dissolves into mere justification.

'Who and how is God?' and, 'what does God do?' According to Conradie (2006:225), these are the only questions that need to be answered in the Christian faith. Similarly, Keifert asks, 'What is God up to here?' and 'What is the word of God for us in this place and time?' when he addresses Christian involvement in the task of spiritual discernment (Niemandt 2015b:92).

We discern the Spirit of God wherever life in its fullness is affirmed and in all its dimensions, including liberation of the oppressed, healing and reconciliation of broken communities and the restoration of the creation (Keum 2018:7).

The being, images, attributes, essence, nature, characteristics, personalities, typologies and constructions of God may be perceived, imagined, emphasised and valued differently by persons of the same faith in the Christian God. The different images have diverse values (McColman 1997:16). Images of God are influenced by subjective and existential factors (Louw 1995:7). These images depend on the believer's personal experience of faith in, and associations with, God; the perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and ideas that conscious persons have about and/or of God (Van Niekerk 1997:20).⁷ Bosch (2012:186) contends that various factors play a role in a person's understanding of God's revelation, for example, ecclesiastical tradition, personal context (sex, age, marital status, education), social position (social 'class', profession, wealth, environment), personality and culture (worldview, language, etc.).

In *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin (1972) introduced the concept of 'double knowledge', which consists of the inseparable knowledge of God and oneself (Van Niekerk 1997:5; cf. De Gruchy 2009:120; Hernandez 2006:23). If one's understanding of God is shaped by one's values and desires, one also models oneself according to one's imagination of God (Migliore 1983:33). 'Self-discovery and discovering God go together' (Van Niekerk 2012:373). The influence between a

⁷ I asked members of a 'poor' rural congregation about their experiences of, and associations with, God. They shared mainly a 'positive image' of God (Van Niekerk 1997:171): God has the character of being either 'good', 'soft', 'friendly', 'humble', 'unchangeable' or 'strong'. He has the personality of the 'Crucified', also the 'Creator', 'Saviour' and 'Protector'. God also 'gives assistance' and 'shows understanding to persons'. God creates 'trust', is 'just and true', 'loves' and 'cares' (Van Niekerk 1997:171). However, their faith in God shows a total dependency on God. God has power over them and controls their destiny. These perceptions, combined with their self-image and the poor socio-economic situation in which they find themselves, result in a vicious circle of powerlessness (Van Niekerk 1997:278).

person's understanding of God and her or his self-understanding is reciprocal (cf. Hernandez 2006:23). Moltmann (1993:267) writes:

Man develops his manhood (sic) always in relationship to the Godhead of his God. He experiences his existence in relationship to that which illuminates him as the supreme being. He orients his life on the ultimate value. His fundamental decisions are made in accordance with what unconditionally concerns him. Thus the divine is the situation in which man experiences, develops and shapes himself.

Our humanity is shaped by our image of God (Migliore 1983:33) and *vice versa*.

2.2.3 Listening to the marginalised

It is important to listen to and know the experience of ordinary people, especially the marginalised, of God in our spirituality. They represent the 'minority',⁸ whom we as theologians need to serve to make theology and spirituality contextual, relevant and transformative. Because '... God chose the poor, the foolish and the powerless (1 Cor. 1:1-18, 31) to further God's mission of justice and peace so that life may flourish' (Keum 2018:2-3; see para. 2.7.2; chapter 8). Myers (1999:190) refers to women and children when he says, '[t]here are always voices that are not easily heard'. The Christian scriptures present 'God who identifies with the most vulnerable in society' (Balía & Kim 2010:122). God reveals God's self in a very special way to those who are dependent on God, e.g. the poor and needy; the sick and 'disabled'; the powerless and marginalised (see The Confession of Belhar). For example, God chose Israel (para. 2.7) to serve the marginalised, the orphan, the widow, the poor and the stranger (Bosch 2012:18).

The disability theologian, Deborah Creamer (2012:343; cf. Swinton 2011), shares with the reader different liberatory images of God embracing disability:

- Authentic God (Creamer) – 'where God authentically claims I AM rather than assigning or accepting value based narrowly on ability or capacity';
- Interdependent God (Black) – 'which proposes God to not be a giant puppeteer who causes impairment but rather that God is present in the midst of life and the midst of suffering'; and

⁸ The use of 'minority' contradicts the reality. It does not refer to quantity or the number of persons, but to the quality of life of many people on the margins of society, those with no, or limited, socio-economic and political influence.

- Accessible God (Weiss Block) – ‘which highlights the stories of Jesus welcoming all to sit and eat with him, and with particular attention to those who were typically considered unwelcome’.

The ‘result’ of proposing a liberatory image of God may be very constructive towards a healthy life perspective. ‘When faith is healthy, the believer engages the God presence/transcendence as life-giving, life-affirming, and benevolent’ (Louw 2014:37; cf. Van Niekerk 1997:268).

2.2.4 Knowing God through the arts

Another source of perceptions of God comes from artists. ‘Art has come to be seen as the form of culture that is perhaps richest in spiritual vitality and imaginative depth – addressing and engaging us wholly (as the poet T.S. Eliot observed)’ (Brown 2005:127). Most theologians, true to their nature, communicate in ‘technical theological language’, and as a result the ‘heart of the message’ is easily lost. In his book *Dominee, Are You Listening to the Drums?*, Attie van Niekerk (1982) employs the writings of black South African poets as a significant entryway to recognise and appreciate the interaction between Christianity, Western civilisation and Africa. He (Van Niekerk 1982:24) makes a distinction between two thinking modes, a mainly African poetic, and a more Western, analytical mode. According to him, a balance between the intuitive and intellectual responses in theology is needed.

A facet of *poiesis* defined by Stackhouse (Bosch 2012:441) as “‘imaginative creation or representation of evocative images’” is required. What is necessary is to include ‘the kind of awareness and orientation to life that can be discovered by aesthetic and kinaesthetic experience’ (Stackhouse 1988:85). Stackhouse (Bosch 2012:441) affirms that without this, we misrepresent the question of contextualisation by focusing only on the complexity between theory and praxis. Bosch (2012:441) contends, ‘[p]eople do not only need truth (theory) and justice (praxis); they also need beauty, the rich resources of symbol, piety, worship, love, awe, and mystery’. There should be a ‘creative tension [between] *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poiesis*’ for models of contextual theology to succeed (Bosch 2012:442).

Reflecting on the Christian influence in Tolkien’s work, Boffetti (2011:199) writes that Tolkien believed that because all great art is created by seeking the truth, God replies to the artist’s quest for God with a unique gift of artistic grace. Further, art is seen as

a 'spiritual practise' and an experience of the sacred. When reflecting on God's grace, McKnight (2015:44) refers to 'God's artistic grace' and quotes Dorothy Sayers:

[T]he artist does 'not see life as a problem to be solved, but as a medium for creation'. The church, if it is going to be the church God designed it to be, must become a space for the full story of God's artistic grace – the story about where we were, where we are now, and where we will be someday.

Burrows (2005:497) identified poetry as more than a channel for expressing the church's style and identity; it can actually be considered to be the language of spirituality and theology. Language, however, also has limitations in expressing the innate and perceived knowledge of the divine.

The depth of human existence, as well as the world and God, needs a 'mythological way of speaking' (Van Niekerk 1982:19), such as poetry. David Kramer (2007) is well-known for his musical plays and Cape indigenous songs such as *Die Duiwel*. In this song, he sees God, the devil and heaven and earth through the eyes of a poor Karoo inhabitant: 'Nobody wants to believe me / heaven has no floor / God does not sit on a throne / heaven is not like that ... Don't be mistaken / about the flesh or the fish / everything has a bit of god / and you can't extinguish that flame' (Slabbert 2011:114).⁹ With reference to this song, Müller (2011:156) writes that concepts of God and our relation to God and the world, such as in panentheism, are also alive among ordinary and rural people.

However, not all poems are written in mythological language. A recent example is that of the South African singer Bouver Bosch's poem 'God'. Bosch is honest and raw in his perception and experience of God:

These days I don't talk so much with God anymore; not because I'm angry, but simply because I'm starting to feel I should be listening more. If you're getting more excited about your church than about your God, then there's a problem. Also when atheists start acting like some Christians, judging all who do not feel or believe as they do. Sometimes I don't know what's my case and my heart beats with effort. My soul is the captain of this ship, and while I'm navigating through rough waters, it is God's winds that are determining my course, even when I feel I'm sinking. I'm

⁹ *Niemand wil my glo nie / Die hemel hettie vloer nie / God sit nie op 'n troon nie/ Die hemel issie so nie* (l. 5-8) ... *Moet jou nie misgis 'ie/ Vannie vlees offie vissie / Elke ding het 'n stukkie god / En daai vlam kan jy nie blussie* (l. 41-45) (Slabbert 2011:114).

not asking you to like me, but that you will listen for a moment. Music is everything to me, but everything can leave one with nothing. What's the point when 10,000 people join in the singing at a concert, but I don't love myself. Sometimes I struggle just to be myself. Words can be such empty actions, and I often find myself in a place where I just talk, but where I'm not truly alive. Although I believe love conquers all, I have caused much hurt in many lives, and this I bitterly regret. God is the path, but sometimes it's as if God is in the way. And it's at this sad junction where I'm sharing my heart with you. Every day I register it when the dusk shouts His name, but at daybreak I steal His mercy. I don't always trust my heart, and perhaps I should follow my heart less; and should learn only to start loving that which can start loving me. Music is simply music, is just music, and if it starts meaning more, you should turn it down, or even stops listening to it. You see, God isn't only good when things are going well. God is always good. When a child is born, we think God is good. When my father gets cancer, God is still good. You see, I write music in order to survive. Not financially, but emotionally. And if we had not lost everything when I was 16 years old, and if we had not moved in with another family, and this generous man from Potchefstroom had not given me his guitar, I would never have discovered God musically. Personally I don't think God has much time for Afrikaans music, but He does love dancing very much. He dances to my false notes, to the joy that is in the world, and He dances because of my sincere notes, with tears in His eyes because of all the heart-sore we bring to one another. My heart is like a storm on the ocean. The waves toss my heart about, but there is peace in the thunder storm. The weather lights up with lightning because of the way I admire God.¹⁰

¹⁰ 'Ek praat nie meer so baie met God nie en dis nie omdat ek kwaad is nie maar meer net omdat ek voel ek moet meer begin luister. As jy meer opgewonde raak oor jou kerk as oor jou God sou ek sê daar is 'n probleem. Ateïste tree soos Christene op en beoordeel almal wat nie soos hulle voel of glo nie. Ek weet soms nie wat aangaan nie en my swaar hart klop moeilik. My siel is die kaptein van hierdie skip en waar ek nou oor die rowwe see seil is dit God se winde wat my koers bepaal al mag dit voel of ek sink. Ek vra nie dat jy van my sal hou nie maar net dat jy vir 'n oomblik sal luister. Musiek is my alles, maar alles het al ook gelos met niks. Wat help dit 10 000 mense sing saam by 'n konsert, maar eks nie lief vir myself nie. Soms sukkel ek net om myself te wees. Woorde is leë aksies en ek kry myself dikwels op 'n plek waar ek net praat en nie leef nie. Ek glo in liefde wen, maar ek het ook al baie seer veroorsaak in baie lewens waaroor ek bitter spyt is. God is die pad, maar soms voel God in die pad. En dis hier by 'n ongelukstoneel wat ek my hart met jou deel. Ek luister elke dag as die skemer Sy naam skree en ek steel Sy genade by die oggend son. En dan besef ek, ek weet nie wat ek soek nie maar ek weet darem wie ek is. Ek vertrou nie altyd my hart nie ek moet hom dalk minder volg en ek moet leer om net lief te raak vir dit wat lief kan raak vir my. Musiek is net musiek is net musiek en as dit meer is moet jy sagter sit of selfs ophou luister. Jy sien, God is nie net goed omdat dit goed gaan nie. God is altyd goed. 'n Kind word gebore, God is goed. My pa het kanker, God bly goed. Jy sien, ek skryf musiek om te oorleef. Nie finansieel nie, maar emosioneel. En as ons nie alles verloor het toe ek 16 jaar oud was nie en ons nie ingetrek het by 'n ander gesin nie en die barmhartige potchefstromer nie vir my sy kitaar gegee het nie sou ek nooit vir God ontdek het op 'n musikale manier nie. Persoonlik dink ek nie God het baie tyd

In the Foreword of *Vincent van Gogh and God: A Creative Spiritual Quest* (Edwards 1989), Nouwen (1989:ix) points out that the art of Van Gogh (1853 – 1900) has ‘deep theological and spiritual significance’. The well-known Dutch painter’s ‘life and work is a rich source for all those who search for a deeper knowledge of God’ (Nouwen 1989:ix). His God is ‘so visible in nature and people, so intensely compassionate, so weak and vulnerable, and so radically loving ...’. Van Gogh ‘expressed human suffering and spiritual longing with vibrant intensity’, according to Brown (2005:128). The theology of Van Gogh reflects his experience of God amidst his own imperfections (Edwards 1989:xvi, 71). Van Gogh ‘not only experiences God “as if” God were an artist, he experiences God’s “failed sketch” in his own failed sketches’ (Edwards 1989:71). In the same way that a mother might experience God not only ‘as if’ God is a mother, but as God’s mothering in her daily caring and upbringing of her children (Edwards 1989:71).

Edwards (1989:xv) contends that due to Western religions there is a strong preference for ‘word’ rather than ‘image’; ‘God as Word’ is emphasised and religion is understood as ‘hearing and obeying’. Alternatively, from the perspective of ‘God as Image’, religion finds expression in ‘seeing and creating’ (Edwards 1989:xv). While preference turned into prejudice, the work of Van Gogh has been disregarded as a theological source by Judeo-Christian theologians (Edwards 1989:xv; cf. Scheffler 2006; Wessels 2000).

A prominent theme in his art is the peasantry, and the absence of detail gives some of his works a dream-like quality. Unlike various interpreters of Van Gogh’s art, Zijlstra (2004:5) criticises a ‘mystical pantheistic worldview’ in his work. He identifies a ‘comprehensive creation theology’, and ‘both nature and mankind are sources of innerworldly transcendence’ in Van Gogh’s work (Zijlstra 2004:5). On the other hand, according to Edwards (1989:72), Van Gogh’s view of God has remarkable parallels with the God of Whitehead’s ‘process philosophy’ (see Van Niekerk 1997:229-230).

Whitehead’s philosophy paints a picture of a tender God, creatively alive within all things, offering richly textured possibilities for Beauty in an evolving universe. So it is with van Gogh’s canvasses of color and light. A tender, earthy love — imbued

vir Afrikaanse musiek nie, maar Hy is baie lief vir dans. Hy dans op my vals note, oor die vreugde in die wêreld en Hy dans oor my opregte note met trane in Sy oë oor al die hartseer wat ons aan mekaar bring. My hart is 'n storm op die see. Die golwe gooi hom heen en weer, maar daar is vrede in die donderstorm. Die weerlig bliksem hoe ek God bewonder.’

with vulnerability and mystery — this is the essence of van Gogh's art (Farmer 2013).

Van Gogh's God was not the patriarchal figure of his day, or an intractable layer-down-of-the-law ruler, but was, rather, 'one who is Love incarnate in the world' (Farmer 2013). In a letter to his brother Theo, he compares the mystery of life and love (the latter being 'a mystery within a mystery') to the ocean – which, due to the ebb and flow of the tide, is at once both ever-changing and always the same (Farmer 2013).

One of Van Gogh's best known paintings, *The Starry Night* (Figure 2.1), is exceptionally rich with interpretation, and a person is touched by Van Gogh's spiritual depth (Nouwen 1989:x). One of the most recognised pieces of art in the world, the contrasting styles used in *The Starry Night* can be said to calibrate between the natural and unnatural, dream and reality; with nature here being evocative of the divine. Indeed, Genesis 37:9 is linked by some to this painting, where Joseph speaks of his dream, saying '... behold the sun and the moon and the eleven stars made obeisance to me' – an early revelation of Joseph's later authority. Van Gogh, who grew up in a religious family, embodies the sky with the divine in this painting, according to art experts of the Van Gogh Gallery. They divide *The Starry Night* into three parts: sky, trees and hills, and village. But the swirling technique, emanating from the divine sky, bounds it all together into a divine whole, with the cypresses and church spire reaching up high, seen against the unifying yellows of lit windows and stars. 'Van Gogh brings God to the village', according to these art experts (Van Gogh Gallery, n.d.).

The colour that Van Gogh used in his painting, *Starry Night* golden light of the heavens, to symbolise divine love, is radiant yellow. The shining stars also bless the little cottages, surrounding the huge church, with this beaming yellow, which gives an intimate feel to the village. The church in the centre, however, appears dark and lifeless, according to Skye (2017:141-142 Kindle edition). '[V]an Gogh visualises the apostle Paul's belief that we have been given the treasure of God's light in ordinary 'jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us' (Skye 2017:142 Kindle edition).

The artist also paints God's unlimited presence in a deep indigo spanning the heavens and also touching the earth. This painting clearly represents the view of Van Gogh's soul, that God's presence in the heavens also reside in simplicity on earth, but that the establishment of the church is devoid thereof (Skye 2017:10 Kindle edition).



Figure 2.1 *The Starry Night* by Vincent van Gogh

Source: Writedesignonline

One can ‘find God’ not only in church, but in art and music and other aspects of human creativity as well. Of course, we also can find God in ‘nature’ – the world beyond human culture – as evidenced by a commonly held idea that ‘it’s easier to find God in a forest than in church’ (McColman 1997:2).

Traditionally, Christians recognise God’s revelation in scripture (*skriftuur*) and nature (*natuur*) (Ps 19) (Conradie 2006:17-18). Conradie (2006:20) states that an experience of nature is an experience of transcendence, something great or majestic, enduring and complex. It also deals with the experience of suffering, pain, and death. In De Gruchy’s (2009:11, 121) retrieval of Calvin’s legacy, he writes that Calvin claims that one could discern God’s magnificence in the cosmos without receiving God’s word.

But it remains difficult to picture God, even in taking cognisance of God’s revelation to the marginalised and despised and of their experience of God; of artists’ mainly¹¹ rich and honest sensibility of God; and ‘natural theologies, based on the sense of beauty which arises from contemplating the world’ (McGrath 1994:159). To picture God, or

¹¹ Not all artists are alike. The popular work of the graphic artist and evangelist Jack T. Chick are widely read and among the most controversial (cf. Rollins 2011). However, his conservative, evangelical, exclusive and fundamentalist theology is, to my mind, contra-productive.

speak of God, or to ask 'who is God?' is no easy task and one that requires great care, warns Myers (1999:24; cf. Lindijer 1990:6).

2.3 Symbolic language

According to the philosophy of Buber, God cannot be condensed into a concept or an accurate conceptualisation (McGrath 1994:212). The view of some well-known Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians on God presents a wholly different reality, being '... that it was better to say that God does not exist, because our notion of experience is too limited to apply to God' (Armstrong 2005:326). The *apophatic* tradition presupposes that God is unidentifiable and cannot be visualised – an approach which emphasises God's absolute otherness (Swinton 2011:300).

Durand (2015:16; 1976:10) does not go that far, but concludes that there does indeed exist a 'secret or mystery of God' (*Godsgeheim*). God is the '*mysterium tremendum* that appears and overwhelms; but he is also the mystery of the obvious that is closer to me than my own I' (Buber 1970:127; cf. Bauckham 2015:27). God is much more than the most highly profound articulation of God (Durand 1976:10). God does not allow God's self to be pinned down in such human categories as thought, language, or any other human structure, which are human acts of imagination (*verbeelding*) of what God is and which they record about God (Lindijer 1990:6; cf. Müller 2011:161). In the end, according to Müller (2011:135), all images of God are merely constructs of language, which either help or hinder us in our attempt to understand God. If only, Müller says, we could reach the point where we do not buy into the acceptance of merely a single image of God, but could leave ourselves open to the unspeakable, many-sided mystery of God.

Armstrong shares her excitement of reading Cantwell Smith's theology. Smith (Armstrong 2005:327) writes that 'our ideas of God were man-made ... that it was Western fallacy ... to equate faith with certain intellectual propositions'.

The secularized mind is terrorized by mysteries. Thus it makes lists, labels, peoples, assigns roles, and solves problems. But a solved life is a reduced life. These tightly buttoned-up people never take great faith risks or make convincing love talk. They deny or ignore the mysteries and diminish human existence to what can be managed, control, and fixed. We live in a cult of experts who explain and

solve. The vast technological apparatus around us gives the impression that there is a tool for everything if we can only afford it (Peterson 1989:64).

Our humanly made ideas of God are perhaps best explained by the words of the South African-born Netherlands artist Marlene Dumas (n.d.) in her description of art: 'Art is not a mirror. Art is a translation of what we do not know'. This description of art can serve as a metaphor for God. God is not a mirror that reflects God's godliness, but to speak of God is a 'translation of what we do not know'. It reminds of the well-known verse in 1 Corinthians 13:12.

We need more than words to speak about God. In reference to God, language is insufficient. 'When we say "God", that is only a symbolic approximation to something that we cannot grasp with our words' (Sölle 1990:37). Nicol (2012:35) writes that the god who can be substantiated and figured out, or explained, is not God. To speak about God is to constantly use a 'language of images', which can be understood variously, and it is possible to confuse it with a 'language of facts' (Deist 1991:8). To speak about God is metaphoric (McFague 1987:33; cf. Grenz 2001:8; Louw 1995:7; Kuitert 1992:37). A metaphor 'is an attempt to say something about the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, an attempt to speak about what we do not know in terms what we do know' (McFague 1987:33). Some metaphors of God are cosmic images, other are more personal (Van Niekerk 1997:162). The Bible with its Judeo-Christian tradition does not hesitate to describe God through anthropomorphic images (McColman 1997:15; Van Niekerk 1997:162). The function of metaphors is, primarily, not to provide explanations, but rather to create the sense of a concept (Brümmer in Ganzevoort 1994:239).

Berkhof (1979:50-53, 65-71) links the 'earthly character of revelation' to the 'symbolic language of revelation'. 'God expresses himself in, with, and through earthly realities ... This makes that reality symbolic, that is, coincide with another reality' (Berkhof 1979:67). Other views of God include that 'God is a quiet human', according to a member of a 'poor' rural congregation;¹² God is hidden, but not absent, one needs to discover God – and the discovery of God is a discovery of whom or what God is for someone (Lindijer 1990:6).

¹² On the question, 'what image of God do you have?' the respondent replied '*hoe sal ek nou beduie, Hy het 'n stil geaardheid.* (probe). *Want God is mos 'n stil mens*' ['How should I describe it, He is quiet of nature. Because God is after all a quiet person'] (Van Niekerk 1997:166).

On the other hand, theology would be silent, or absent, if it was not for the self-disclosure of the incomprehensible God (Durand 1976:10). God makes it possible to speak of God's self within the space and borders of God's revelation (Durand 1976:10). God reveals God's self in the 'cloth of cosmic creativeness' (Heyns 1981:6). In recognising that all our concepts of God are human made, we search for creations that are sound and devotedly feasible, 'bringing honour to God and promoting the welfare of creatures' (Case-Winters 1990:231). Or, as Johnson (1996:144) puts it, one needs to be attentive in discovering the good news of God in unexpected places.

2.4 The hiddenness of God

God reveals God's self in God's hiddenness. The concepts of revelation and hiddenness go together (Berkhof 1979:53-55). However, while a few presuppositions of the 'earthly character of revelation' appear in the Bible (e.g. Jn 1:18; Ex 19:22; Jdg 13:22 and 1 Cor 13:12), it is hardly ever particularly and directly mentioned (Berkhof 1979:52).

Exodus 33:18-23 reflects on the hiddenness of God in an amazing manner. This passage tells about Moses' daring request of God: 'Show me your glory', and God's answer, 'No one can see me and live' (McFague 1993:131; cf. Berkhof 1979:52). However, God allows Moses a 'glimpse of the divine body – not the face, but the back' (McFague 1993:131). In McFague's (1993:131) meditation on this passage, she describes it as a 'wonderful mix of the outrageous (God has a *backside*?!) and the awesome (the display of divine glory too dazzling for human eyes)'. God allows God's self to be partly revealed, for our sake.

'Three different dialectical relationships' are distinguished (Berkhof 1979:53-55):

- Revelation presupposes hiddenness
- Revelation reveals hiddenness
- Revelation assumes the form of hiddenness

All three forms of hiddenness are 'forced upon God, but actively accepted by him, and which he turns into revelation' (Berkhof 1979:54). They are especially found in the Old Testament. God's hidden presence (first form) mainly occurs in the later Old Testament writings in reference to 'the suffering of the righteous, of the faithful remnant, of the suffering servant' (Berkhof 1979:54). The second form is found

particularly in the songs of Psalms (e.g. Ps 77 and 139). And the most outstanding example is the prophet Isaiah's reflection on God's strength and redemption: 'Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God *and* Saviour of Israel' (Isaiah 45:15 NIV) (Berkhof 1979:54). According to Luther, the '*Deus revelatus* is precisely the *Deus absconditus*, the opposite of a *Deus publicatus*' (Berkhof 1979:54). The third form can be traced in the Deuteronomic and prophetic literature: because of his people's disobedience, God has no option but to be punishing, 'abandoning' and 'hidden' (Berkhof 1979:55). Bonhoeffer presents a contemporary description of God's hidden revelation in his letter from prison in 16 July 1944: 'God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us' (Berkhof 1979:55).

Manenschijn (2002:219) indicates the insubstantiality of God's existence. He contends we can either keep quiet, or we can speak of God in human images and stories, as in the Bible. If we opt for the last possibility, we should recognise that God exists only in the stories about God. These stories of God tell about a God who is not absent, but hidden. (See story of Esther in Lanham 2017.)

2.5 Where is God?

If God is not absent, but hidden, where is God found, experienced or believed to be? The question, 'where is God?' deals with the (perceived) relation between God and people; and the (emotional, cognitive and spiritual) distance between God and humans. God becomes 'visible' between the poles of *immanence* and *transcendence* (Van Niekerk 1997:171). These are metaphysical ideas and images of God which are interrelated with and influenced by a person's attitude towards life (self-view) and his or her worldview (Van Niekerk 1997:171). One of the important dimensions of believing in God is the relationship between the immanence and transcendence of God (Van der Ven 1993:219-223).

The question, 'where is God?' is especially relevant when people are marginalised, in dire straits, suffering, traumatised, poor, in pain, disabled and/or oppressed. In Van der Ven's (1993:172-176) discussion of theodicy, he focuses on the classification of Moltmann's religious ideas and images about suffering in terms of the doctrine of God.

Moltmann proposes two categories, the concepts in which God is seen as remote; and the image of a God who is near (Van der Ven 1993:173).

Schillebeeckx and Schoonenberg (Van der Ven 1993:173) propose the conceptual pair of 'absolute transcendence' and 'immanent transcendence'. 'Absolute transcendence refers to an infinite distance in the relationship between God and man and to the omnipotence and sovereignty of God implicit in this relationship' (Van der Ven 1993:219). And '[i]mmanent transcendence is a belief in an intimate relationship between man and God. It emphasises the presence of God, which because of His transcendence is most vivid and pervasive in and through his creatures' (Van der Ven 1993:219). 'Immanence' and 'transcendence' are therefore not automatically opposites (Van der Ven 1993:173). Alternatively, Stoker (2011) identifies four different types or basic forms of transcendence in Western culture. The four types are immanent transcendence; radical immanence; radical transcendence; and transcendence as alterity. Artists and writers provide the content to these forms in diverse ways, based on their individual views of the world and artistic background (Stoker 2011).

'God's unknowability and transcendence' are valuable concepts in describing God's glory, but it limits one's view of God (McColman 1997:14). To wholly emphasise God's otherness, is to view 'God [as making] no difference' and implies the impossibility of a relationship with God (McColman 1997:14). Therefore, the popular choice among theologians is the immanent transcendence of the Christian God (Pieterse 2014:2). Tillich objects to any one-sided importance of transcendence and of immanence: 'God cannot be identical to the world of beings, because this would forfeit the abysmal nature or the aspect of inexhaustibility of God' (Schüssler in Pieterse 2014:2). According to Balia and Kim (2010:122), the Christian God is 'transcendent and immanent, enmeshed in God's creation, open to being hurt and bruised by God's own creation, who suffers insults and humiliation, rejection and derision, and endures suffering in love'.

Case-Winters's (1990:226-227) perspective on God and power explains that immanence and transcendence differ slightly. She describes God's transcendental power as a wonderfully mysterious power which flows over all living creatures. This power is indeed God, 'transcendent precisely in the fullness of her immanence among us' (Case-Winters 1990:226-227).

The world view of theism, the view of 'God's personal care and concern for man' corresponds closely to the immanence and transcendence of God (Van der Ven 1993:219; cf. Berends 1997:19, 21). In deism God is only transcendent and 'an impersonal force' (Van der Ven 1993:219; cf. Berends 1997:20). The existence of God is acknowledged as an abstraction (Durand 2015:18-19). God dwells majestically in absent-mindedness and cannot be blamed for anything that happens on earth (Durand 2015:18-19). Pantheism recognises only God's immanence. God can be found in humans and all of creation. In short, it means 'God is all' (Müller 2011:155; cf. Lewis 2002:36).

The problem with my question, 'where is God?' as the heading of this section, may be misinterpreted. It may easily result in a fixed, non-negotiable, dogmatic conceptual and abstract choice of a God that can be manipulated, or, as Barth puts it, making God God's own prisoner (Bauckham 2015:26). Müller (2011:39) says that if God is localised by a person, then you have control over God. Müller (2011:40-41) (re)discovered God (in a new way). He compared this with Tillich's concept of 'the God beyond God'. According to him, to grasp God in words is currently not easy. God has become much better known to Müller in 'the Possible', 'the Unexpected', 'the Stranger', 'the Marginalised', 'the Idea', 'the Reality', 'the Movement', 'the Life'. He describes these metaphors of God as flowing and soft, which present God as more evasive and less encapsulated. I can identify with some of Müller's metaphors for God, for example, 'the Marginalised' and 'the Stranger'. The known concepts of God as 'Father', 'Almighty', 'Above', 'Higher Hand', 'Master of (others') fate', 'God's will' and 'Providence', do not fit the God Müller has come to know. McFague (1987:97-180) proposes metaphors of God as friend, lover and mother. God is no longer above, outside, masculine, strong and in control. The faith in an 'Almighty God' and accordingly 'God's will' lets down 'poor' rural Christian believers (Van Niekerk 1997:278).

Müller (2011:160) describes himself as a posttheist. The posttheistic understanding of God involves a reinterpretation of the traditional Christian faith as described by the confessions of faith (Müller 2011:162). The term posttheism is written without the hyphen, indicating continuity with theism (Müller 2011:163; Van Aarde 2009:2).

If the two words 'post' and 'theism' are compounded to form one meaning, then it is important to understand what 'post(-)' brings anew to 'theism'. It certainly does

not mean that the belief patterns that marked theism are things of the past. The 'post' in 'posttheism' is not simply a historical event in which one can move from 'theism' to 'post'-religiosity in the sense of a total disenchantment, or to 'strong atheism, which, in an age of reason, denies any existence of gods' (see Philipse who claims theism to be an 'epistemological tragedy') (Van Aarde 2009:2).

It is a new form of theism, also described as a 'neo-orthodoxy' (Van Aarde 2009:2). Rollins (2011:160) calls this new understanding of God the birth of a type of 'a/theistic' Christianity.

2.6 God is relational

The Judeo-Christian God is a 'living God'.¹³ God is alive, therefore personal and relational. To speak about God is not, first and foremost, a virtual articulation, but indicates an existential relation with God (Brümmer in Ganzevoort 1994:239). 'We shall speak only of what God is in his relationship to a human being' (Pessin 2009:213-215; cf. Buber 1970:180). It is not about God *per se*, but 'God and ...'. It is about God in particular relationships (König 1975: side cover). God is obviously more than His relations and deeds, but we do not know Him in and through any other way (König 1975: side cover).

The Bible continuously refers to God being in a relationship with us: about God being for us (*pro nobis*). Where references to God Himself are concerned, we find only confessions that everything that is 'unfathomable' and 'inscrutable' in God (Rm 11:33) cannot be in conflict with what has been revealed to us (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:4).

To speak about God differs from speaking in relationship to God (Bultmann in Manenschijn 2002:76). Humans cannot speak of God as an object, because God differs from all that is known to them (in being wholly different, from the Dutch *gans andere*); we can only speak to God in a loving relationship of faith (Manenschijn 2002:76-77). Buber stresses that faith in God is not grounded in philosophy, but in a

¹³The Bible presents God repeatedly as the 'living God'; it has a fundamental and all-inclusive meaning in the Bible (König 1975:150, 152). 'When you consecrate life you encounter the living God' (Buber 1970:128). The 'living God' is the only religious partner of a human according to the biblical tradition (Nürnberg 2004:88). See Küng 1978:659-673. See for example the following texts: Ps 42:2; Jr 10:10, 23:36; Dt 5:26; Jos 3:10; Dn 6:20, 26; Hs 1:10; 1 Sm 17:26; 2 Ki 19:4, 19:16; Is 37:4, 37:17, 57:5; Mt 26:63, 16:16; 1 Tm 3:15, 4:10; Heb 3:12, 9:14, 10:31, 12:22; Rm 9:26; 2 Cor 3:3, 6:16; Ac 14:15; Rv 4:9-10, 10:6, 15:7; 1 Th1:9; Jn 1:4, 5:6.

kind of direct experience. However, he disagrees with Rudolph Otto on God as being *numinous*, the 'wholly other', because God is then 'too remote and impersonal to be the proper object of that experience' (Pessin 2009:213).

Buber (1970) distinguishes between *I-Thou* and *I-It* categories of relations. The *I-It* category of relations refers to the relation between subjects and objects (McGrath 1994:211), while *I-Thou* relations refer to 'personal' relations between two active subjects, namely two persons (McGrath 1994:211; cf. Brunner in McGrath 1994:212; see Edwards 1989:63). His 'dialogical personalism' prevents the nineteenth century liberal (male) theologians' (active subjects) approach of viewing God as a passive object, 'It' (McGrath 1994:212). Similarly, Brunner (McGrath 1994:156) warns against objectifying God by words or propositions, in other words, of reducing God to an object, as opposed to a person. God is a 'Thou', an active subject (Brunner in McGrath 1994:212-213). This view, according to Brunner (McGrath 1994:212-213), allows God to take the 'initiative away from humans, through self-revelation and a willingness to be known in a historical and personal form – namely, Jesus Christ' (see chapter 3). This vision will make theology the human response to 'God's self-disclosure', instead of it being a 'human quest for God' (McGrath 1994:213).

As discussed in chapter 3, the Trinity is the copious influence behind all human relationships. The Trinitarian theology has placed a new focus on the relational facet of the Trinity, which is the absolute hope of the twenty-first century. 'God is not the solitary monad of popular imagination, or Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, or three individual "somethings". Rather, He is "a complex network of relations"' (Tennent 2010: Kindle Location 768-777).

God's relation to a human is always first, and a human's relation to God is second, and a consequence of the first (Brunner 1964:89). This relationship is reciprocal, never interchangeable (Brunner 1964:89). Furthermore, 'God is known in his relation to man ... and man comes to know himself in relation with God' (Brunner 1964:90).

'No speech, no word, is adequate to the mystery of God as a Person' (Brunner in McGrath 1994:156). It is therefore important to have a clear understanding of 'Person'. The concept of 'personhood' is incapable of describing the character of God; but to say God is also a person is allowed and necessary (Buber 1970:181). According to the Christian tradition, God is personal. The world can only be a creation if it is created

by a personal God. If God is an impersonal force, then a creation does not exist (Manenschijn 2002:80). God is also described as a 'personal creator' (Helberg 1998:226).

A person is defined as an independent individual, and relativised by the plurality of other independent individuals, which cannot be said of God (Buber 1970:181). God as the absolute person cannot be relativised (Buber 1970:181). To Lewis (1945:136), God is more than personal; God is 'beyond personality'. Küng (1978:679) agrees: God is not a person like a human being; God is more than a 'person'. But, 'God who founds personality cannot Himself be nonpersonal' (Küng 1978:680). To refer to God as a 'Person' does not mean God is equal to a human; there will always be an asymmetrical relation between God and humans. According to the prophet Hosea, when God's anger was compared with God's love for Israel, God said '... For I am God, and not man – the Holy One among you' (Hosea 11:9b NIV). 'The word person has less to do with substantiality than relationality; and much more to do with community than individuality' (Grenz 2001:4). God is personally present. It means God makes God's self present in the world in the freedom of God's love (Bauckham 2015:27).

There exists an existential relation between God and people (Pieterse 2014:3). God's presence in a person makes the presence between persons a spiritual and humane experience of love, listening, respect, and serving. God's relational nature with people (and the cosmos) is best described by God's Trinitarian character (see chapter 3).

The I-You relationship is intimate and consists of deeds like caring, trust, and empowerment. Participants in these relationships, discover their humanity and through mutual affirming discover the 'eternal You.' By contrast, the I-It relationship (which some have argued is prevalent due to racism, classism, and sexism) dehumanizes the Other. By identifying them as a commodity to be possessed, exploited, and disposed at the will of the 'I,' the 'It' is oppressed while the 'I' loses their essential humanity, creating a condition in need of liberation and salvation (Buber according to De La Torre 2004:10).

God's compassionate justice; God's self-giving love; and God's concern and care for people, especially to the needy and marginalised (The Confession of Belhar), make God's relationship with people intimate and reconciling, liberating and empowering, special and spiritual. God shares power that does not overpower, but empowers. God's power is God's love, which at one and the same time both gives and receives

in being communicated; it also encompasses and holds; and lives with and suffers with all creation (Reynolds 2008a:179).

We can call God, or rather a God image, 'human' that has to do not with the intellectual representation of God in our heads and hearts, but rather with experiences of God's loving kindness towards man. We do not think God, we experience Him. Thus we may experience God – whoever and however God may be in and of Himself – as our friend, lover, ally (Häring 2001:19).

An injury to one, in other words, to another human, is an injury to God. '[N]o one can be injurious to their brother or sister without wounding God himself', according Calvin's commentary on Gen 9:5-6 (Smit 2016:8). That God 'is not the enemy but the friend of humanity' and 'friend of true human freedom' (Migliore 1983:28, 43), directs the next section.

2.7 The acts of God

If we focus solely on the existence of God, on the question 'who is God?', and the mystical images and limited human made descriptions of God, we are limiting our understanding of God. We need 'to go beyond who God is to talk about what God is doing' (Myers 1999:24).

A difference between thoughts and the experience of God exists (Manenschijn 2002:219). God as an abstract idea represents a person's thoughts, God's transcendence, and God as liberator, one's experience of God's hiddenness (Manenschijn 2002:219). The God of the Bible does not relate only to people, but God allows God's acts to be revealed in the human reality. God's redemptive acts in the history of God's people and God's redemptive response to concrete situations of need are witnessed in the Bible (Nürnbergger 2004). That is why Wright (Bosch 2012:17) reasons, the Bible should rather be referred to as 'Acts of God' rather than the 'Word of God'.

Revelation is often understood as something that had been hidden and is now unveiled. However, revelation in the Old Testament is an experience of God's present commitment to be occupied with God's people in the future (Bosch 2012:18). God reveals God's self as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who was actively involved in the past; and is for this reason the God of the future (Bosch 2012:18). To emphasise

God's relation to people, God in the Old Testament is never called 'the God of a place, like the "God of Sinai" or "the God of Jerusalem"' (Helberg 1998:227). God is described as the 'God of people', like the 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel' (cf. Gn 28:13; Ex 3:16; 2 Sm 7:25-26) (Helberg 1998:227). More, God's stories of involvement with people, as described in the Bible, continue and link up with our stories today. 'God's story is the source of our motivation, our vision, and our values of mission' (Myers 1999:23).

The history that God makes with Israel is that of a theological concept, rather than a historical concept (Manenschijn 2002:187). God's self-revelation was not direct, like theophany, but indirect, through the acts of God in history (Pannenberg in Manenschijn 2002:187; McGrath 1994:156-157). According to Pannenberg (McGrath 1994:333), revelation is mainly a public and universal historical event, which is recognisable as an act of God. God became history, specific history and earthly history, to God's followers (Bosch 1979:73). Wijnveen (2009:10) summarises his reflection on revelation as history, described by different theologians as 'God discloses in the history of the world his great deeds (accessible for historic enquiry) for believers (or all of mankind) with the appropriate response of unwavering trust and hope in God'.

2.7.1 God's liberative action

Küng's question, 'If God exists, is God for or against people?' (para. 2.1), has been answered by the story of the faith of Moses and his small nomadic tribe in the thirteenth century before Christ (Küng 1978:666). The Israelite nomads lived and worked under harsh circumstances as slaves (e.g. Exodus 1 and 2). But their spiritual needs for meaning, acceptability and authority were even more fundamental than their immanent needs (Nürnberg 2004:90). The God of the people of Israel responds to their cry for freedom and human dignity as the 'eternal one', who intervenes in the history of a despised and oppressed people (Cardonnel in Fierro 1983:476). The character of God as liberator is clearly revealed in the Exodus narrative. God is not a keeper of slaves, but a God of freedom (Küng 1978:666). God is a liberator who unashamedly takes the side of the poor and oppressed in the story of Exodus. There exists an indisputable affinity between God and weakness (Fierro 1983:476). God is the 'migrant' God who descends to uphold the life of the Hebrew slaves (World Council of Churches 2012:160).

The Exodus event is the first of God's revelations and salvation (Fierro 1983:476). People experience, for the first time, God's saving action in their concrete liberation from oppression and the realisation of a new freedom (Fierro 1983:476). The revelation of God 'begins with the liberation of the most oppressed and tortured people, who thereby move prophetically from oppression to liberation' (Cardonnel in Fierro 1983:476). No wonder Wolterstorff (2008:79) describes the religion of Israel as a

religion of salvation, not of contemplation – that is what accounts for the mantra of the widows, the orphans, the aliens, and the poor. Not a religion of salvation *from* this *earthly existence* but a religion of salvation *from injustice* in this earthly existence.

The roots of the Judeo-Christian faith started with the Exodus narrative in which God, hearing the cries of the marginalised, enters history with an act of liberation (De La Torre 2004). De La Torre (2004) argues that any ethics originating from this faith that are trustworthy to the tradition should still be rooted in this liberating praxis. I believe that this should apply not only to the discipline of ethics, but to any spirituality and theology that strives to be praxis orientated, contextual, liberating, missional and relevant. But, according to Fierro (1983:479), the Exodus narrative is 'not a norm-giving memory', but an 'example-giving memory'. It is a 'liberative memory with regard to the possibility of insurrection' (Fierro 1983:479).

Gustavo Gutiérrez' work clearly reflects the communal element of liberation spirituality, as indicated in the chosen sub-title *The Spiritual Journey of a People* to his main work *We Drink from Our Own Wells*. His choice of the term 'journey' roots his work in the biblical context of the Exodus and highlights the journey of the community, rather than the individual, towards their new relational lifestyle with one another and with God (Ashley 2005:406).

However, when reflecting on God's act of liberation in the Exodus narrative, and in reading biblical texts of the people of Israel centuries later, one realises that they did not recognise that God 'stood for freedom and equal dignity for all people at all times and in all places' (Nürnberg 2004:90). The theology of apartheid is a more recent example (and misconception) of a similar justification of God siding with the Afrikaners, which resulted in acts of extreme systemic injustice and oppression against the

majority of South Africans. God's preferential option for the poor¹⁴ denies all exclusiveness, as if God is only concerned about the poor (Gutiérrez in Bosch 2012:446). The poor is a generic term for the marginalised in society, it is 'an all-embracing category for those who were victims of society' (Bosch 2012:447). The pronouncement 'God is on the side of the oppressed' does not mean it can be switched: 'The oppressed are on the side of God' (Zulu in Bosch 2012:454). Oppressed people may oppress and victimise others (e.g. Ec 5:7) (see Walatka 2013:81).

God's liberative action has shown God's presence in God's acts of justice-love, with justice-love summarising the learning (Torah) of the Old Testament, according to Bosch (1984; cf. Wolterstorff 2008:82). God is known through interhuman justice (Gutiérrez in De La Torre 2004) and God's love. If there is no justice present, God is not known and is absent. If Christians are called to do justice, they do it in obedience to love (Gutiérrez in De La Torre 2004). The presence of God is visible in the act of love (Rollins 2011:118). 'God is loved through the work of love itself (Matthew 18:20; 1 John 4:20)' (Rollins 2011:118).

For as 1 John 4:20 reminds us, how can we love God whom we cannot see, unless we first learn to love humans whom we do see? It is love toward the least among us, demonstrated through a relationship founded on justice that manifests love for God (De La Torre 2004).

2.7.2 *Missio Dei*

A theocentric reading and interpretation of the Exodus event emphasises God's liberative acts of justice-love in the history of human beings and presupposes God's missional character and God's relational personality. The revelation of God's plan to absolve and bless all people on earth is integrated in the historical context of civilisation. Tennent (2010: Kindle Location 2498-2500) observes that

[c]entral to the *missio Dei* is the understanding that through speech and actions, God is on a mission to redeem and bless all nations. In that sense Kevin Vanhoozer is correct when he argues that God's self-disclosure is fundamentally theo-dramatic. In other words, revelation does not come down separate from human culture and context, as in Islam. Instead, God enters

¹⁴ The phrase 'preferential option for the poor' was coined at CELAM III, 1979 in Puebla, Mexico (Bosch 2012:446).

into and interacts with human narratives and thereby is set within a dramatic, missional context.

The term 'missional is an expression of the global shift towards a theocentric (rather than ecclesiocentric) understanding of mission' (Love & Niemandt 2014:1; cf. Guder 1998:4; see Kaoma in Kim & Anderson 2010:287). Originally, for centuries, mission was shaped according to the western European church and culture's understanding of church planting – churches similar to the western cultural tradition (Guder 1998:4). Importantly, mission is not a human achievement. Mission is first and foremost an activity of God, it is part and parcel of God's nature. 'Mission begins in the heart of Triune God' (Keum 2013:4; 2018:2; cf. Bosch 2012:402). The revelation of God's plan to absolve and bless all people on earth is integrated in the historical context of civilisation. It is not detached from humanities everyday existence on earth.

Mission [is] understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another 'movement': Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world (Bosch 2012:399; cf. Keum 2018:2; World Council of Churches 2012:159; Guder 1998:5).

The mission of God – *missio Dei* – reveals God's character and refers to God's love and attention for, and God's action, engagement, and participation in the world (Bosch 2012:10; cf. Niemandt 2013:37). *Missio Dei* 'enunciates the good news that God is a God-for-people' (Bosch 2012:10). God is not only acting missional, but is in essence a missional God (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013; cf. Guder 1998:4). To perceive and understand 'God is missional', is similar to the manner we recognise 'God is love' (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013). (See chapter 8.)

One's own image is influenced by the image he or she has of God. If one believes in a sending God; one should be inspired to take part in God's mission and adopt a transformative missional spirituality. He or she will not be surprised to find in a mysterious way God living with the persons at the margins of society; and

[a] universal awareness of God's presence forces us to look for God in the places where we may be fearful to go—places of poverty, places of violence, places of

illness. And an awareness of God in a particular place calls us to look deeply and contemplatively at the places that reveal God to us (Hamma in Hernandez 2006:108).

The assertion of *missio Dei* reflects the belief in God as actively seeking life in its fullness for all, through righteousness, peace and harmony across time and space. Perceiving and revealing the exploitative and enslaving demons are part of being actively involved in God's liberating and reconciling work through the Holy Spirit (Keum 2018:11).

To be involved in mission is to be a part of the actual movement of love from God to people 'since God is a fountain of sending love' (Bosch 2012:400, 402; cf. Keum 2018:5). Simultaneously, God's people are empowered to be a 'community of hope' (Keum 2013:4). Because, what those of us who are marginalised uphold, is not an image of God as perfect, but of God as identified and loved for God's powerful 'freedom of vulnerability' (World Council of Churches 2012:159).

2.8 Conclusion

God is hidden, but not absent. Our human imagination and earthly language about God, and all the different metaphors describing God, are limited; they are constructions of a human kind. God allows God's self to be revealed in mysterious ways. But, were it not for this self-disclosure, within time and space, and the revelation of the inconceivable God, theology would have had no firm foundation, and, additionally, no right to exist.

In recognising the human concepts and constructs of God, I selectively choose views that honour God and promote human dignity. Our humanity is shaped by the image of God. God is the friend of our humanity. *Ubi cognoscitur Deus, etiam colitur humanitas* (quote from Calvin's sermon on Jeremiah 22) – where God is known, there humanity always comes into glory (Smit 2009:3). In other words, and according to the Reformed biblical message '... the honour of God is intimately interwoven with human salvation, with human life, well-being...' (Smit 2009:3). Any spirituality and/or theology that support inhuman behaviour and that is destructive to the well-being of all creation should be resisted.

God does not relate only to humans, God is described as closer to me than myself. God is personally present in acts of history – these missional, liberatory acts of justice-love say more than God's words do. The encounter between God and humans is not only dynamic, but also mysterious (Nouwen 1981a:136). 'God should be sought, but we cannot find God. We can only be found by him' (Nouwen 1981a:136).

God is free to enter and participate in the spatiotemporal reality of God's creation (Bauckham 2015:26-27). God's metaphysical qualities – like omnipresence and eternity – do not exclude their opposites (Bauckham 2015:26-27). God cannot discard God's transcendence of all creaturely limits, but God can have a presence within such limits. God has the freedom to be 'spatial, temporal, weak, passible, and so forth' (Bauckham 2015:26-27). Therefore, God's uniqueness, for that matter, allows God's self also to be imperfect and even disabled.

Linahan (2005:168) writes that to believe that God cannot experience agony diminishes the ultimate mystery of a love so earnest that it emptied itself and submitted to death on a cross. It doubts God's connection to the cross and the crucial proclamation that God is love. 'A God who cannot suffer is not *God*, but at best, a benevolent despot', according to Linahan (2005:168).

The character of chapter 2 rests on the various ways in which God is understood and experienced, and which is what directs my study. This chapter deals with, *inter alia*, the different images of God. '*But what if God has no image?*' Swinton (2011:300) asks. This question should remind us of the 'absolute otherness of the divine' (e.g. apophatic tradition). According to John 1:18 and Matthew 11:27 any 'ontological claims about God' made by humans are impossible, except for those that God decides to disclose (Swinton 2011:300-301). Swinton, Mowat and Baines (2011:12, 14) refer to the narrative of Mary an adult with multiple disabilities. She cannot know God in a conventional way and even Jesus is unknown to her. The question, *how do we know God?* is subsequently challenged by Mary's disposition. Her situation makes us aware of the spirituality we share through relatedness: '*I am spiritual because we are*'.

I have deliberately excluded any discussion of the revelation and incarnation of God in Jesus. The human nature and the brokenness of Jesus and Jesus' kenotic love will be given sufficient space and importance in this study (chapter 3).

CHAPTER 3 THE EMBODIMENT OF GOD

3.1 Bridging the gap

Chapter 2 deals with reflections on the revelation of God – different understandings and experiences of God. As emphasised in that chapter, God is the true friend of humanity and identifies with and relates to people (especially the most vulnerable, e.g., persons with disabilities) with compassion and justice-love.

God's identification with people – God's 'particular identification' with the world – goes beyond imagination, to a 'radical particularisation' (Bauckham 2015:32-33). God does not only identify *with* a 'worldly reality (Israel)', but identifies as a 'worldly reality (Jesus)' (Bauckham 2015:33). God gives God's self the 'identity of the human Jesus' (Bauckham 2015:33). 'Speaking of Jesus as being simultaneously "human" and "divine", "true man" and "true God", is the appropriate dogmatic expression of our faith in "Jesus" as the "Christ"' (Nipkow 2001:38). Jesus of Nazareth made God human and understandable (Du Plessis 2003:133). In Jesus, God became a person, and simultaneously a person that became human (Küng 1987:1-2).

Rather than considering incarnation as a 'one way event located in the past' – of God in the past, becoming flesh to dwell among us – Athanasius sees it as a 'purposive statement' emphasising the 'second transformative clause' (Behr 2015:80, 97). The Word becoming flesh is a 'transformation of all that to which the Word comes, bringing all things in heaven and on earth to the Father' (Behr 2015:97). In the course of time, in the writings of Paul, the focus would very much come to be on the church as the body of Christ, and not on the body of the earthly Jesus (Gregersen 2012:234). This chapter, however, will focus on the body of the historical Jesus as reflected mainly by the gospels and most specifically the gospel according to John. Consequently, it would be appropriate to describe Christianity as a 'religion of the body' (Creamer 2012:341).

God's intervention through the ages in the history of the world, and God's care and maintenance of the world, reach a climax with this dramatic incarnation (Naudé 2004:188). The historical incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth shows the depth and breadth of God taking care, to conserve and protect (Naudé 2004:188). Jesus does not present the only picture of God, but Jesus is definitely the clearest picture of all (Conradie 2006:236-237): 'Jesus is God's representative on earth, and through him God's presence on earth is thus presented' (Gregersen 2012:235). Incarnation

establishes a 're-union between God and human beings, in which the differences between divinity and humanity are retained in the flow of exchange between Jesus Christ and his sisters and brothers' (Gregersen 2013:260). The spiritual gap between humans and God is bridged by the incarnation of Jesus' fate (Evers 2015:309; cf. Gregersen 2015c:378). The gap not only represents the suffering of humans being alienated from God, but also other forms of suffering, such as in the narrative of Job and all evolutionary suffering (Gregersen 2015c:378).

Chapter 3 will focus primarily on the deep incarnation of God. Bonhoeffer's questions (in 1933) (Gregersen 2015c:363-364) on how Christ can be present for us today – which can only be clarified by 'who Christ is and will be forever' – will be dealt with in this chapter. The agency of the divine Spirit in life-creating energy and vulnerability within the sphere of the embodiment of God will be touched on. Last, a discussion on *imago Trinitatis* follows.

3.2 Incarnation

It is in Jesus Christ that the new image of God is revealed in answer to the question: Who is God? It is 'not in the first place an abstract belief in God, in his omnipotence etc.' (Bonhoeffer in Küng 1987:553). God's divine nature is presented in the substantial presence of the incarnate Christ, the human Jesus of Nazareth (Bosch 2012:524; McGrath 1994:304; cf. Bauckham 2015:28). The pivotal character of the Christian faith lies in the embodiment of God. This is the 'core of most Christian spirituality' (Bartlett 2005:364). Johnson (2011) confirms this statement in a more personal and passionate manner by writing that the experience central to Christian faith is that of the embodiment of God as love in the flesh – one which runs concurrent to our dealings with 'our brother Jesus of Nazareth'. The Christian faith is very radical and unique. 'One of the most radical statements that Christianity dares to make is that God became material' (Johnson 2010; see para. 3.3). Incarnation incorporates 'God's self-embodiment and God's self-identification' (Gregersen 2013:253). Gregersen (2013:253) acknowledges God's omnipresence in creation; but denies God's omnimanifestation in it.

3.2.1 John 1:14

John 1:14 is the *puteus-notus* of the incarnation of God. This verse is the ‘fundamental Christological tenet’ (Moltmann 2015:126) and, as Johnson (2011) puts it, the ‘most influential expression’ of it. The concept ‘incarnation’ derives from this famous verse of the gospel writer John: ‘The Word (*logos*) became flesh (*in carne*) and lived among us, and we have seen his glory’ (John 1:14). Deane-Drummond (2015:178) also believes that John’s words, ‘the *logos* became *sarx*’ and ‘in the *sarx* is seen the divine *doxa*’, are of primary theological significance in explaining incarnation. However, the term ‘incarnation’ is not found in the Bible (Azumah 2011:61).

John 1:14 has a unique historical character. This verse is nestled in the prologue to John’s gospel, with a ‘cosmological setting’ (Deane-Drummond 2015:177). Further, John 1:14 is an adaptation of an older Jewish hymn to Holy Wisdom, with an anti-gnostic character (Johnson 2011). This hymn opposes the thought that God briefly appears in Christ, remaining unaffected by the so-called smear of matter (Johnson 2011). It also discards the thought that Jesus’ humanity was merely a ‘cover up, a masquerade in borrowed plumes ...’ (Johnson 2011). Gnosticism rejects the body and regards it as a prison for the soul; it opposes incarnation (Van Niekerk 2012:371; cf. Gregersen 2013:259). This argument says: ‘Christ could not possibly have a body: (1) because the absolute cannot enter into a real union with the finite; and (2) because matter is evil, and the spiritual world is ever in conflict with it’ (Heick in Gregersen 2013:259). Johnson (2011), however, writes: ‘Far from the Greek dualism that envisioned the human being composed of separable body and soul, Hebrew anthropology knew only of the body-person, dust of the earth and breath of God in unbreakable unity’. In Jesus the body-soul dualism is bridged.

3.2.2 Logos

The incarnate Christ is the embodied *Logos* (Gregersen 2015a:2). *Logos*, as a title for Jesus in the Gospel of John, serves as the reference to the content of God’s revelation. It is a verbal echo of the verb’s meaning ‘to speak’ in Genesis 1, and in the many utterances of the prophets – such as word, message and more (Louw & Nida 1989:400). According to the Book of Hebrews, Jesus is the ‘sayings’ of God after the prophets tried to make God known (Du Toit 2000:133-134). It is as if the author of the Book of Hebrews says the following: so many things were written and said of God, but

currently, if we really want to understand God, we should look at Jesus (Du Toit 2000:133-134). Jesus is the final revelation of God to the world (Du Toit 2000:133-134; cf. Gregersen 2015b:234). Consensus is growing that Jesus was 'of the same substance (*homoosius*) as God' (McGrath 1994:250).

The title *Logos* is found six times in three different places in the writings of John (König 2001:160) and is unique to the Gospel of John. Cloete (2008:1201) explains further: *Logos* emphasises the spoken word, rather than the grammatical word, it refers not really to the external and written form, but to the inner and unseen thought. John probably refers to the realisation of the spoken thoughts of God in the creation narrative (Gn 1), but also to Jesus, the visible and audible Word of the unseen God (Cloete 2008:1201; cf. König 2001:162). Deane-Drummond (2015:179) sees *logos* as an extension of *sophia*, 'so that *sophia* becomes *logos* and *logos* becomes *sarx*' (cf. Johnson 2015:135; O'Collins 2015:65; Louw 2008:82). Or, as Gregersen (2015c:362) puts it, '*logos* and *sophia* must be one' (cf. Athanasius in Edwards 2015:160).

The unique relation between wisdom and God, e.g. in the Book of Proverbs, applies almost similarly to Jesus (König 2001:190). In the Old Testament wisdom personifies a woman; this also indicates the link between women and Jesus (König 2001:191; cf. O'Collins 2015:66; Proverbs 31). Augustine communicated the reality of incarnation by using, '*sophia* language which is grammatically and imaginatively feminine' (Johnson 2015:152):

Writing of Christ being sent into the world, he did not hesitate to say divine *Sapientia*: 'But she is sent in one way that she may be with human beings; and she has been sent in another way that she herself might be a human being.' In other words, Jesus Christ is the human being Sophia.

Johnson's (1992:51) 'idea that the Word might have become female flesh is not even seriously imaginable, so thoroughly has androcentric Christology done its work of erasing the full dignity of women as christomorphic in the community of disciples' proves to be imaginable over time.

We find fascinating images of God in the Bible as a woman, e.g. Ezk 16:6-14 (König 2001:191; Deist 1991:14-15) (see Gn 1:27; Hs 11:3-4, 13:8; Is 66:13 and Ps 131:2). Surprisingly, the patriarchal and androcentric roots of the Bible have feministic springs. The process and feminist theologian Case-Winters (1990:217) argues God is neither

masculine nor feminine; both women and men are created in God's image. Traditionally, male images of God are used, whereas she opts to speak of God in personified feminine images, in order to give the whole picture of God (Case-Winters 1990:217). Leene (2013:103) rightly contends that if God was masculine, then women would not be created in God's image (e.g. Gn 1:26, 27). Sameth (2016), a Reform rabbi, writes on the history of the *Tetragrammaton YHWH*. He claims that the Israelite priests read the letters *YHWH* backwards as *Hu/Hi* ('He/She'), giving the God of Israel a 'dual-gendered deity'. Wallberg (2016) agrees with the possibility that the *Tetragrammaton* may have 'male and female components', but this does not mean God is transgender. 'God transcends gender' (Wallberg 2016). Some people use the 'Middle English spelling of God', namely *Godde* on the internet. *Godde* is gender-inclusive and 'falls in between' 'God' and 'Goddess' (McColman 1997:17).

Like God, who is beyond gender, Jesus' masculinity is not a necessity in order to reveal God and not a precondition to being the Saviour (König 2001:191; cf. Eiesland 1994:10). We may view Jesus' masculinity as human, but Jesus is not literally and sexually speaking God's Son, because Jesus is not born from the Father (Leene 2013:103). Moltmann (1981:53) speaks of a motherly Father and a fatherly Mother (see Moltmann 1985:223). This makes God gender friendly, God's all-inclusive justice-love is presupposed. Downey (2005:624-625) argues that "'Father" is not God's proper name... Nor does the name "Son" exhaust the depth and complexity of God's Word disclosed in Jesus of Nazareth'.

The Word (*logos* in Greek and *dabar* in Hebrew) conveys 'God's active will at work in the world', according to Fretheim (O'Collins 2015:59). Deane-Drummond (2015:180) accepts the dynamic energy of the term 'Word', and that it entails more than a speculative abstraction. But she argues that this dynamism is more explicit in *dabar* in the Jewish tradition when it is compared to the abstract philosophical applications of the Greek *logos*. Her argument is sound, keeping the character of the old Jewish hymn of John 1:14 in mind. Nevertheless, the power of the Word of God is either/or revelatory, creative, transforming, saving and gifted (O'Collins 2015:60-62).

The Word Jesus is the beginning or author of creation, but also of re-creation, according to Cloete (2008:1201; cf. König 2001:191). Thus, Jesus is the living Word who revealed the deity to us (Cloete 2008:1201). The *Logos* was with God from the beginning, but it was also God (see Jn 1:1-2). John identifies *Logos* as 'He was God',

but he immediately relativises it with the words 'He was with God' (König 2001:163-164, 190). On the one hand, Jesus is God's self; on the other hand, Jesus is not identical to God (König 2001:163-164, 190). A similar pattern is found in Hebrews 1:1-4. John does not just say about Jesus '*This is God*' (Gregersen 2015b:235). To a certain extent, John is claiming '*Thus is God*'. 'Just as Jesus *was*, in the unfolding of his spatiotemporal life story, so God *is* – in the past, now, and forever' (Gregersen 2015b:235). Jesus, the divine *Logos*, is no substitute for the Father, but conveys 'the mind and heart of the Father who is greater than the Son (John 14:28)' (Gregersen 2015b:235). Jesus fulfils the prerequisite of being wholly transparent to God, e.g. John 14:9 (Gregersen 2015b:235). He is the only human being who lives in 'full resonance' with, and is transparent and in continuous atonement to, the will of God (Gregersen 2015b:234-237). God's nature and intention are especially characterised through the 'deeds, character, and theological identity of Jesus Christ' (McGrath 1994:170). Jesus did not replace God, but expressed God's nature (Gregersen 2015b:238-239). The incarnation reveals Jesus partaking in God's identity, nature, will and way (John 14:6) (Zahniser 2011:34). The incarnate existence of God in Jesus is revelatory and salvific (Bauckman 2015:32).

3.3 Deep incarnation

According to Macquarrie (Bauckham 2015:30), incarnation is a process which starts with the creation, that progresses in the presence and is self-revealing of the *Logos* in the 'physical and historical world'. The *Logos* becomes flesh and concrete. God became material, visible, exposed, and assumes flesh in an earthly Jesus. '*Flesh* means what is material, perishable, vulnerable, finite, the very opposite of what is divine' (Johnson 2010; cf. Louw 2008:398). According to Johnson (2011), *Logos* does not become 'human (anthropos), but flesh (sarx), a broader reality' (cf. Russell 2015:339). Gregersen (2015b:228) agrees, stating that there is no reference in the New Testament to God becoming human. Gregersen (2013:260) reminds his readers that the closest reference to that of a human being is in Philippians 2:6-7, wherein Paul refers to the *kenosis* of Christ by taking the nature of a servant. Christ's humanity is portrayed generally as 'being born in human *likeness*' and 'being found in human *form*' (Gregersen 2013:260). Christ is not just a 'solitary individual, but ... [a] person living in solidarity with other human beings and sharing the formal features of humanity with

them' (Gregersen 2013:260). Generally, *sarx* means 'the flesh of both animals and human beings' (Louw & Nida 1989:102; cf. Wolff in Manenschijn 2002:362). Likewise, the Hebrew word for flesh – *bāśār* – is 'transitory, weak and mortal', and 'refers basically to animal musculature, but by extension it can mean the human body, blood relations, mankind, living things, life itself and created life as opposed to divine life' (Harris et al. 1980:136). *Bāśār* refers not only to the weakness of mortal creatures, but also to their weakness in being faithful to God and to do the will of God (Wolff in Manenschijn 2002:362).

As indicated above, *bāśār* is rich in meaning and found in different contexts. All the different meanings are relevant and applicable to John 1:14 (Moltmann 2015:126-127). God's Spirit is poured into all the meanings of 'flesh' listed below (Moltmann 2015:129).

According to Moltmann (2015:126-127), *bāśār* means:

- the 'whole human being, body and soul', e.g. Ps 65:2 and Ps 145:21
- any body part of a human, e.g. Job 19:26, Ps 84:2 and Gn 2:24
- 'everything that lives, in its weakness, helplessness, transience and mortality', e.g. Is 40:6-7 RSV
- 'the whole human race, in community with all the living', e.g. Jr 25:31 and Gn 9:9-10.

And Moltmann (2015:127) is of the view that *bāśār* is best translated with 'life', particularly in the phrase *kol bāśār* (all flesh):

The human being is living in his or her totality; the human race is living in its community with everything that lives on earth. Everything living shares the fate of vulnerability, mortality, and transience. Everything living is promised a common future in the kingdom of God's glory: The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together (Isa 40:5 RSV).

Thus, it is vital to value and keep hold of the community of all living things (Moltmann 2015:127). We (human beings) are fellow creatures (part of nature), and only together will the glory of the Lord be visible (Moltmann 2015:127).

With the incarnation of God, God presupposes the nature of all the living (Moltmann 2015:128). God became a human, social, living and material being (Gregersen 2015a:7). God lived with and for others, was as vulnerable as sparrows and foxes,

was made out of stardust and earth, and was exposed to death and disintegration (Gregersen 2015a:7). Similarly, 'the divine *Logos* assumed an ensouled human person with human mind, will, and passions (not an omniscient superhuman being)' (Gregersen 2015a:7).

The wide scope of views and interpretations of God's incarnation have led to the 'birth' of the concept 'deep incarnation'. The Danish scholar Niels Gregersen coined (over a decade) this phrase as a theological concept to indicate the drastic divine contact with the smallest particle of living existence (cf. Gregersen 2015c:363; Russell 2015:339; Johnson 2011). Gregersen (2015c:371-372) structured deep incarnation within the borders of an 'evolutionary Christology', inspired by theologians like Karl Rahner, Thomas Torrance and Jürgen Moltmann. Gregersen (2013) defines deep incarnation as follows:

God's own *Logos* (Wisdom and Word) was made flesh in Jesus the Christ in such a comprehensive manner that God, by assuming the particular life-story of Jesus the Jew from Nazareth, also conjoined the material conditions of creaturely existence ('all flesh'), shared and ennobled the fate of all biological life-forms ('grass' and 'lilies'), and experienced the pains of sensitive creatures ('sparrows' and 'foxes'). Deep incarnation thus presupposes a radical embodiment which reaches into the roots (*radices*) of material and biological existence as well as into the darker sides of creation: the *tenebrae creationis*.

With deep incarnation, the accent is put on the uniqueness of Christ. This (deep incarnation) broadens the anthropocentric scope, with the focus being on 'biocentric' and 'cosmocentric' facets of Christology (Van Niekerk 2018:182). Johnson (2015:133) notes that it relates Christ to ecology and science. It is important to note, according to Bentley (2016:2), that this theology of incarnation is not pantheism. 'God is not incarnate *in* all other reality, but he is incarnate *for* all other reality', according to Bauckham (2015:32; cf. Van Niekerk 2018:182).

On the one hand, the inspiring, creative perspective of the radical embodiment of God makes God's liberative presence in, and intimate relation to, life intense – giving divine value to the quality of living; and providing ethical signposts to a just and transformed society. On the other hand, God's radical presence in flesh makes God part and parcel of nature's vulnerability, pain and suffering (Van Niekerk 2018:183). According to

Gregersen (2015a:7), in the face of all malevolence, Jesus the Christ as creature personally and directly embraces God's whole creation.

Incarnation here means to understand human and creaturely conditions from an internal firsthand perspective, and not only from a lofty third-person perspective beyond the engagements, struggles, passions, and anxieties of being a human-in-the-world-with-others (Gregersen 2015a:8).

Lisa Isherwood (2004:148), the feminist liberation theologian, considers that what incarnation calls us to is a deep connection related to the physical ('bodies') – and not the metaphysical. Isherwood (2004:148) puts the emphasis on bodies that materialise as a 'place of revelation and moral imperatives', making it important for the flesh to be heard. She suggests that flesh should become word, instead of the other way round. 'The flesh made word enables us to find a voice and to make our desires known' (Isherwood 2004:148). As a feminist liberation theologian, the kick-off point for theologian reflection is the experience (Isherwood 2004:148). In chapter 6 we will hear about the experiences of persons with disabilities.

3.4 Jesus' powerlessness and vulnerability

Nothing is more fragile, vulnerable and totally dependent than a newborn baby, whether as a human or an animal. The work of Vincent van Gogh points to a 'theology of the child, a theology of the family cradle' (Edwards 1989:81). God, who is found in a cradle, symbolises the 'germinating force of humanity, as love' and the 'meeting place of the Divine and human, of vulnerability and love' (Edwards 1989:81).

God came into this world as 'a helpless and fragile new born baby' (Forbes 2007:156). He became the 'all-powerless God', completely dependent on human care (Nouwen 2007). The gospel according to Luke accentuates God's vulnerability and frailty in Jesus (cf. Van Niekerk 2012:370). Luke portrays a picture of an angel announcing the Saviour's birth to a few marginalised shepherds. They will find a sign: a baby wrapped in cloth and lying in a manger (Lk 2:12). The 'sign' highlights the 'symbolism of helplessness' (Van Niekerk 2012:370). 'The sign offers us a new perspective. God is a baby weak and defenceless' (Wilson 2004:36). The sign is a 'symbol of God's weakness', echoes Coffin (2003:17). Furthermore, according to the culture and custom of those days, babies were swaddled. 'After that first experience of daylight,

children have all their limbs swaddled, a severer bondage than that of any domestic animal', according to the historian Plinius (Müller 1995:2).

In Jesus, God is pictured in bondage. We find a limited God in Jesus, according to Creamer (Swinton 2011:290). 'It is clear that in the incarnation God took upon God's self limits; emptying God's self of power in order to bring about the redemption of the world' (Phlp 2:5-11) (Swinton 2011:290). In Jesus, God allows God's self to be embodied with the limits of humans. Bonhoeffer (McGrath 1994:226) writes most strikingly about God's divine self-limitation:

God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us ... The Bible directs us to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help.

God is the true friend of humanity, as seen in chapter 2. God's friendship with humankind shows God's solidarity with human beings, which is best revealed in the suffering and vulnerability of Jesus. Jesus was sent by God to be with and alongside all creatures, to embrace their suffering (Gregersen 2015b:240). God's vulnerability is driven to the edge in Christ (Balía & Kim 2010:122-123). 'Jesus Christ is God's wound in the world. In the suffering Jesus, God embraces the suffering of the world for the sake of humanity' (Balía & Kim 2010:122-123). Jesus is the 'fellow-sufferer who understands', according to Whitehead (Polkinghorne 2015:359; cf. Swinton 2011:293; Balía & Kim 2010:123).

Jesus lives among us as the lowest of the low. John 1:14 means literally 'Jesus came and pitched his tent amongst us' (Van Niekerk 2012:370). Interestingly, Paul refers to our bodies as tents in 2 Corinthians 5:1. The metaphor of a tent as a body indicates everyone's susceptibility. 'Our bodies are vulnerable, exposed to the powers of nature, wind and weather; bodies that could be contaminated with viruses and venom ...' (Van Niekerk 2012:370). Human bodies are, or can become, frail, weak, disabled and are finite. In fact, from the perspective of deep incarnation, all living beings share the 'fate of vulnerability, mortality and transience' (Moltmann 2015:127).

The rationale behind the incarnation is 'to touch and heal the world of *sarx* while transforming it' (Gregersen 2013:259), because 'bodies matter to God' (Johnson 2015:145). Therefore, God presupposes the totality of nature's vulnerability by 'becoming human, [so] that it may be healed, reconciled, and glorified' (Moltmann

2015:128). McFague (1993:161) agrees, and she summarises Jesus' ministry as 'liberating, healing and inclusive'. No wonder that the deep meaning of Jesus' ministry strongly focused on the down-to-earth, physical well-being of people, on Jesus' compassion and social justice (Johnson 2015:142, 145).

Jesus accentuated the dignity of all bodies, not only those of the beautiful and energetic, but also of the broken, dishonoured and dying (Johnson 2015:145). Actually, Jesus was sent particularly to the marginalised (e.g. Lk 4:16; cf. The Confession of Belhar). In Matthew 25:31-46 one reads of Jesus' embodiment of a human in serious need. Most examples refer to bodily needs, e.g., hunger, sickness, nakedness, etc. 'Jesus' whole life, his way of dealing with the poor, his actions, his integrity, his simple daily acts of generosity, and finally his complete self-giving, is precious and reveals the mystery of his divine life' (Pope Francis 2013:197). Jesus shares his humanness with other human beings and the whole of creation. 'God has descended into our human reality with all its problems' (Heitink 2001:155).

God's deed of incarnation is not only an expression of loving solidarity with all people, but an essential feature of Jesus' loving practice throughout Jesus' life (Bauckham 2015:33-34). To love someone can be a dangerous act and loving relationships sometimes end in broken hearts. E.A. Webb (2012:200) writes that God's incarnation in Jesus is therefore an unsafe undertaking – giving of oneself makes one vulnerable and fragile because there are no guarantees of good and well-intentioned responses (see Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:123). Rollins (2011:112) writes about the tendency of humans who want to escape this world and become like gods. But according to the gospel narratives, the 'Incarnation tell[s] us that if we want to be like God, then we must be courageous enough to fully and unreservedly embrace our humanity' (Rollins 2011:112).

3.5 The passion of Jesus

Christ's voluntary surrender to the weakness of being born and dying on the cross was the calculated break-through of God in the history of humanity (Nouwen 2001:31-35). Jesus' story of passion began with the incarnation, his birth (Bosch 2012:525). But 'Jesus' death on the cross should not, however, be isolated from his life' (Bosch 2012:525; cf. Gregersen 2015b:249; Moltmann 2015:1, 124). Jesus' life did not only

start in a manger and end on the cross. God's love, which was revealed with the birth of Jesus, continued throughout Jesus' earthly journey, reaching its climax on the cross at Gethsemane and resulted in Jesus' dynamic resurrection. We have a more or less detailed account of Jesus' bodily existence, both as a biological and as a social being, thanks to the Evangelists (Gregersen 2012:234). And the reason why little attention was paid to the body of Jesus (as opposed to that paid to the church as the body of Christ), according to Gregerson (2012:234), was because Paul was less interested in the 'earthly Jesus'. Instead, it was the Evangelists who provided the detailed account of the bodily life of Jesus on earth – biologically and socially, Jesus' actions, travels, meetings and sayings – from the beginning, to the end of suffering on the cross (Gregersen 2012:234).

The deep incarnation of Christ is not complete without a deep cross and resurrection (cf. Deane-Drummond 2015:196; Gregersen 2015b:248; Guðmundsdóttir 2011; Johnson 2011). Johnson (2011; cf. Johnson 2015:145-146) writes about the crucified God in loving solidarity with the suffering of people:

The end of Jesus' life in death and resurrection provides yet another chapter in the astonishing narrative of God's immersion in matter. No exception to perhaps the only ironclad rule in all of nature, Jesus died, his life bleeding out in a spasm of state violence. Theology has always seen in the cross the love of God writ large: the Son of God entered into suffering 'for us.' Contemporary theology is replete with the idea that in Christ God suffered not just once on a certain Good Friday, but suffers continuously through history, in solidarity with the ongoing agony of the human race. Crosses keep on being set up in history. Ecce homo: behold the human being, with tear-stained, starving, tormented faces. The crucified God suffers with human beings, and will continue to do so until we take all the crucified peoples down from the cross.

Unlike Johnson, not all feminist theologians find Jesus' suffering and crucifixion to be redemptive, and according to them it could simply justify abuse against women as 'their cross to bear' (E.A. Webb 2012:199). Their emphasis is on Jesus' life, in which women, the poor and oppressed were embraced; and on Jesus, who embodies inclusive justice (E.A. Webb 2012:199).

For obvious reasons, the '*abusive use of the cross*' (Brown & Parker 1989) serves as fuel in the justification of oppression and marginalisation of victims of the abuse of

power (cf. E.A. Webb 2012:201). But by reclaiming the cross as a deed of hope, it becomes a source of empowerment to sufferers (cf. E.A. Webb 2012:201).

Recently, a number of feminist theologians have said that they found 'in Christ's suffering real solidarity with their own suffering' (E.A. Webb 2012:199). This is like Anna Mercedes (2011), who refers to the cross not only as the passion of Christ, but to incarnation itself (E.A. Webb 2012:200). Mercedes views the incarnation as kenotic, in revealing God's fundamental nature of self-giving (E.A. Webb 2012:200). Theologically speaking, the act of *kenosis* describes the renunciation of power and privilege – with the 'self-emptying of God' being expressed in both the incarnation and crucifixion, e.g. Phil 2:1-11 (Rollins 2011:168; cf. Maximus in Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:65). Like Bonhoeffer, Mercedes also believes when a person meets the self-giving Christ, her or his identity is completed by self-giving (E.A. Webb 2012:200; cf. Volf 1996:24-25, 47; Van Niekerk 2018:184). Paradoxically, her or his power lies in the weak, powerless and selfless love depicted by the cross of Golgotha.

Jesus is the 'pathway to liberation', according to the liberation theologian Jon Sobrino (Speidell 1987:251), in that 'he is the one who *becomes* the Son of God' to show us 'the way of the Son, the way one becomes Son of God'. It follows from this that the primary test Jesus puts to his followers is to duplicate his way of being in themselves and in their lives. Leonardo Boff pictures believers to be the followers of Christ who has already reached that goal. The 'imitation of Christ ... connects us to Christ and allows him to act in us' (Boff in Speidell 1987:251).

The feminist theologian Wendy Farley, in contemplating the suffering of Christ, employs the metaphor of a door (E.A. Webb 2012:203). Her reference to suffering as being 'a door to Christ' should not be seen as an instruction to imitate Christ's suffering, but rather as an announcement of the involvement of Christ in the agony of human life (E.A. Webb 2012:203). 'Christ does not invite us through this door so we can be like him. He stands at this door so he can be like us', according to Farley (E.A. Webb 2012:203; cf. Van Niekerk 2018:185).

The cross reveals the character of God as the 'Compassionate One' (E.A. Webb 2012:201), the 'suffering God' (Guðmundsdóttir 2011:155). It is on the cross that God identifies with those who are suffering; the cross discloses God's weakness and vulnerability (Louw 2008:99, 441). Because of love, God volunteers to suffer with other

suffering people, giving them hope and strength (Louw 2008:99, 441; see Southgate 2015:208). 'On the cross, Christ becomes the absolute outsider', in being 'left naked, alone, dying' (Rollins 2011:27). It is this which indicates God's complete self-suffering and self-giving love, through Christ, for the sake of people, especially those suffering, the outsiders and marginalised. God discloses Godself as the God of 'compassion' in the cross of Jesus Christ (Koopman 2013:48). 'Some theologians would even go further and state that in Jesus Christ we meet God as the vulnerable God, even the disabled God' (Koopman 2013:48). Coming from a different angle, of a person living with a disability, Nancy Eiesland (1994:102), contends that Jesus Christ is neither the suffering servant, nor the conquering Lord, but the disabled God.

The disabled God embodies to see clearly the complexity and the 'mixed blessing' of life and bodies, without living in despair. This revelation is of a God for us who celebrates joy and experiences pain not separately in time or space, but simultaneously (Eiesland 1994:102; see Moschella 2015:102).

Christ binds different bodies into one body, through his suffering on the cross, who refers to the unity of the body and the Eucharist: '[T]he one bread stands for the *crucified* body of Jesus Christ, the body that has refused to remain a self-enclosed singularity, but has opened itself up so that others can freely partake of it' (Volf 1996:47). Volf (1996:47-48) correctly refers to the New Testament writer Paul's understanding of the Christian community (e.g. 1 Cor 10:17) as 'the *one body in the Spirit* with many *discrete members*', but there is more to say if one reads this not through an ecclesiastical hermeneutical lens, but rather, at face value, as a result of Jesus' bodily crucifixion.

In her reflection on Christ's suffering, Guðmundsdóttir (2011:142) differentiates between the passive and active aspects of the cross. As a feminist theologian she describes Christ's identification with suffering women as the 'passive aspect of the cross' when their suffering is comforted by God's company. The active aspect of the cross refers to the resurrection: it is empowering, women are able to resist oppression, and it provides liberating hope (Guðmundsdóttir 2011:142). These passive and active deeds of God are also applicable to others who are marginalised, e.g. people living with disabilities, who struggle to live a life of human dignity.

Peter Rollins provides a realistic view of the empowerment of humans living in darkness and angst. He (Rollins 2011:112) regards the resurrection as

the state of being in which one is able to embrace the cold embrace of the Cross. If the Crucifixion marks the moment of darkness, then the Resurrection is the very act of living fully into this darkness and saying 'Yes' to it. The faith that is born in Resurrection does not enable us to escape these deeply troubling anxieties; it provides the power to face up to them.

Marilyn McCord Adams portrays Christ, during three stages, as a 'horror defeater' (Gregersen 2015b:245-247). She understands horror 'as those aspects of creation (premature death, unjust suffering, and suffering without meaning, natural evils) that cannot be redeemed within the lifetime of a sufferer' (Gregersen 2015b:245). The first stage is to 'establish a relation of organic unity' between a person's horror participation and his or her intimate relationship with God (Gregersen 2015b:245). Christ is also exposed to these horrors (Gregersen 2015b:245). McCord Adams pictures the body of Jesus as not being perfect and sharing the same 'biological needs and drives' as other bodies (Gregersen 2015b:245). The second stage is the 'healing and otherwise enabling [of] the horror-participant's meaning-making capacities so that s/he can recognize and appropriate some of the positive significance laid down in Stage 1' (Gregersen 2015b:246). The third stage refers to 'recreating our relation to the material world so that we are no longer radically vulnerable to horrors' (Gregersen 2015b:247). She believes this task cannot be achieved by only the 'human nature of Jesus or by the incarnate Logos' (Gregersen 2015b:247).

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is presupposed (Gregersen 2015b:248). Otherwise, it would not be possible to 'talk about Christ suffering with the horrors of the members of the human race?' (Gregersen 2015b:248). The double event ('in tandem' – Gregersen 2015b:248) of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ indicates the 'tremendous divine dynamic that drives toward the transformation of all things into their true and abiding form. Nothing that *is* remains just as it is once it is accepted by Christ and transformed in him' (Moltmann 2015:120-121; cf. Johnson 2015:134; A. Kelly 2006:85). The resurrected Christ is an important source of realistic hope; a hope which 'enables us to imagine what is possible in the midst of the broken reality' (Jüngel in Koopman 2013:48). It is precisely the Christian conviction about Jesus' experience – of vulnerability, suffering and 'the ultimate specific disability of god-forsakenness' – during these events that, for people with disabilities, underscores the realistic hopefulness of 'heavenly solidarity' (Koopman 2013:48). Hull (2001:228) reminds us

of the 'blindfolded Christ' (Mk 14:65 and Lk 22:64). 'The dead face of Christ witnesses to the laying down of his life in the nothingness of death. The blindfolded face represents the living Christ who enters into the experience of literally blinded people, and becomes their brother' (Hull 2001:228; see Mt 25:40).

Eiesland (1994:99) writes that it was through the resurrection of Jesus that the disciples really understood the importance of the earthly life of Jesus.

In the resurrected Jesus Christ, they saw not the suffering servant for whom the last and most important word was tragedy and sin, but the disabled God who embodied both impaired hands and feet and pierced side and the *imago Dei* (Eiesland 1994:99).

The importance of the 'physical impairment of Christ', should be recognised as the 'truth of incarnation and the promise of resurrection' (Eiesland 1994:101; see Coyle-Carr 2014). This encourages a new conception of wholeness and a 'symbol of solidarity' (Louw 2008:100; Eiesland 1994:101). However, Swinton (2011:284) questions Eiesland's suggestion of the disabled resurrected body of Jesus: Jesus was more able to do things as before, he could walk through walls and disguise himself. Even more amazing, was that Jesus could rise from the dead. Jesus was 'scarred and battered, but not disabled'. (See chapter 7.) But Jesus' wounds will always be a reminder of Jesus' solidarity with the marginalised and a serious call to the church to stand up for the rights of the oppressed:

Because Jesus, with His pierced side, is always on the side of the broken. Jesus always moves into places moved with grief. Jesus always seeks out where the suffering is, and that's where Jesus stays. The wound in His side proves that Jesus is always on the side of the suffering, the wounded, the busted, the broken (Voskamp 2016:18).

Johnson (2015:147; Johnson 2011) argues that the resurrection of Christ's body has a lot to do with physicality, but that it cannot be compared to the story of Lazarus. Jesus' body was not revived in order to continue the biological way of life as we do in our current shape (Johnson 2015:147; cf. Green 2011:287-288). With Jesus' ascension and resurrection, Jesus' body and mind were drastically transformed into and extended as a social body, which is at home in God and universally accessible (Gregersen 2012:234). Luther gives emphasis to the 'social body of Christ' – the '*totus Christus* – Christ and community in one body' (Gregersen 2013:253). And, he (Luther)

speaks of Christ as the 'comprehensive person (*maxima persona*) who is "immersed" in everything' (Gregersen 2013:253). A few years later, Gregersen (2015b:248-249) writes,

the bodiliness of the risen Christ is not like a spatiotemporal being who is transported from here to there, from the grave in Palestine to a place up in the sky. It is exactly the extended body of Christ that is risen from the grave in order to be present as a comprehensive body, living for and suffering with all other bodies, living or dead.

Johnson (2010) offers in this respect Rahner's observation that in the incarnation, 'the divine Logos became flesh, and in the consummation of his finite reality he does not strip off this materiality but retains it eternally'.

Davies (2014:171) recognises the intermittent corporeality of the resurrected Jesus, for example, with regard to the *noli me tangere* expression. This Latin expression refers to the words of the resurrected Jesus to Mary Magdalene in John 20:17. Bieringer (2005:39) translates the expression from the original Greek text with 'Do not hold me'. Mary Magdalene should not seek a bond and closeness with Jesus during the period of Jesus' ascension and return, but with the community of faith in the Spirit (Bieringer 2005:41). The risen Christ is also omnipresent, working through his Spirit (Louw 2008:218). And, from a pneumatological perspective, persons are empowered by Christ's power of resurrection (Louw 2008:271).

When Jesus left the disciples at the ascension, Jesus' body 'disappears and goes into God and into his church' (Gregersen 2012:243). Jesus will never return physically from God's throne (Gregersen 2012:243). This throne refers to every place where God reigns. The resurrected Christ is compared with the kingdom of God – which cannot be observed, but is among us (e.g. Lk 17:20-21) (Gregersen 2012:243). Ritschl (Goppelt 1981:51) emphasises the present kingdom, which is 'within you' (Luke 17:20 RSV).

From the divine point of view, the kingdom is the highest good to which the love of God wishes to lead people; from the human point of view, it is the ethical community of the human race that is realized in mutual cooperation through love (Goppelt 1981:51).

As indicated above, Jesus, as a body for others, is in the midst of the church, especially with the Eucharist (Gregersen 2012:243; cf. Harren 2009). 'The sharing of Jesus in

our humanity and our receiving and sharing the broken bread, brings us into bodily relationship and unity: we are one body in Christ' (Naylor 1996). Under the heading 'sacramental bodies', Eiesland (1994:107-108) writes about the Eucharist that it is in Christ's call upon followers for the 'remembrance of his body and blood at table, [that] the disabled God calls us to liberating relationships with God, our bodies and others'. As a social body, Jesus Christ is 'present in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, i.e., the church' (Eiesland 1994:107-108). Jesus' body is transformed from a biological and cultural body to an extended body, which establishes, through the Spirit, a living connection between God and humans, and is accessible worldwide (Gregersen 2012:243-244).

The resurrection of Christ is not an event of the past, but a 'vital power' and 'irresistible force' which fills the world and brings forth beauty (Pope Francis 2013:206) – with the references to power and force presupposing the work of the Spirit. Or, according to the view of Keum (2013:8), the Spirit can be seen as the 'continuing presence of Christ'.

While Jesus on the cross makes the passion and compassion of a suffering God known (*theologia crucis*), the resurrection of Christ overwhelms one with a living and faithful God (*theologia resussectionis*) (Louw 2008:441). 'Resurrection establishes life as a courage to be; it transforms life into the new mode of the fruit of the Spirit (pneumatology) in order to promote human dignity, justice and the *shalom* of the kingdom of God' (Louw 2008:441).

3.6 The divine Spirit is both life-giver and vulnerable

Luke is the only synoptic gospel writer who describes the ascension, linking Easter with Pentecost (Gregersen 2012:235). Luke, also the writer of the Book of Acts, anticipates the outpouring of the Spirit 'upon all flesh' (see Greek text of Acts 2:17), with the last words of Jesus to his disciples being: "And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high' (Lk 24:49)" (Gregersen 2012:235). According to Paul's encounter in Acts 2:33, Jesus' exalted body is totally non-objectifiable and 'is the source from which flowed the Spirit of Pentecost' (Davies 2014:171).

With the presupposition of the resurrection of Christ in the suffering of Jesus, the 'life-giving energy of the Spirit' (Gregersen 2015c:371) is anticipated in the process. After the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, Jesus was raised to life by the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Keum 2013:8).

[W]hile the Son of God really dies together with his fellow creatures, thus fully sharing creaturely conditions, the Spirit is the divine life-giver who raises and renews Jesus and restores creatures, whose lives – like that of Jesus – have been destroyed under the pressure of physical decay, biological death, psychological anguish, and the failures of human sin (Gregersen 2015c:371).

Moltmann distinguishes between the incarnation of God's Son and the outpouring of the divine Spirit. He writes, '[t]he incarnation takes place in one-Jesus Christ-for-many; the outpouring of the Spirit takes place in many so that they may be united with one head, Christ' (Moltmann 2015:129). The divine Spirit is not physically observable, it does not become flesh, and works in the world in mysterious ways (cf. Moltmann 2015:129; Pope Francis 2013:209). Athanasius was convinced that the Holy Spirit was definitely not a creature, but '... the one in whom all creatures are created and transformed': "The Father creates and renews all things through the Son and in the Holy Spirit" (Edwards 2015:162). The divine Spirit, however, is dedicated to the cosmos in a 'personal way' (Van den Bosch 2014:846). According to Rogers (Van den Bosch 2014:846), 'the Spirit is a Person with an affinity for material things. The Spirit characteristically befriends the body'.

The interdependence of pneumatology and Christology should also be recognised in the discourse of the embodiment of God in this chapter. One cannot picture the deep incarnation as a facet of Christology only, but also as that of pneumatology (Deane-Drummond 2015:196; cf. Edwards 2015; Gregersen 2015c; Johnson 2015 & 2013; Moltmann 2015 & 1992). Pneumatology is placed between creation (as it is now) and re-creation (as in the future, full of hope) (Deane-Drummond 2015:196). Not only is the 'symbiosis of Spirit and Christ' necessary to the understanding of the person and activity of Christ; it also avoids a perspective of 'exclusive Christo-centrism' or 'false autonomy of the Spirit' in theology (Balia & Kim 2010:24-25; cf. Gregersen 2015c:372; Polkinghorne 2015:359). '[T]he inseparable relationship between Christ and the Spirit [is] expressed in different ways such as the "anointing of the Spirit" and the "accompaniment of the Spirit" suggesting that there is no part in Jesus that is not

touched by the Holy Spirit' (Manohar in Balia & Kim 2010:24). According to Keum (2013:8), Jesus was empowered at his baptism (e.g. Mk 1:10) and commissioned for his mission (e.g. Lk 4:14, 18) by the Holy Spirit (cf. Gregersen 2012:239). The Holy Spirit is the decisive agent in Jesus' life, and throughout Jesus' earthly life, lives in Jesus and moves Jesus forward (Gregersen 2012:237).

The significance, nature and activity of the Spirit are enriched by other religions, for example Hinduism (Balia & Kim 2010:24, 51-55). Like *ruach*, the Hindu concept of *atman* pictures the 'Spirit as enlivening and vivifying breath and vital energy of all that lives, linking the action of the Spirit to that of the life-giving creator and life-restoring liberator' (Manohar in Balia & Kim 2010:24). The Holy Spirit is the giver of new life, who transforms humans into the image of the creator (God) and the Redeemer (Jesus Christ) (Migliore 1983:73). The Spirit constantly moves to promote human transformation and to fulfil the whole creation of God's kingdom with justice and peace (Migliore 1983:73). As Gregersen (2013) puts it, '[w]ith the resurrection of Jesus through the life-giving power of the divine Spirit also the humanity of Jesus (and in him the whole assumed *cosmos*) gains a permanent place in the eternal divine life'. According to Moltmann,

[t]he eschatological condition of creation is the hope that inspires the current condition of creation: in the cross of Christ, the Spirit is committed to the historical condition of this world, where the Spirit displays the power of life that points toward the restoration and the affirmation of creaturely existence. The Spirit's renewal creativity is not only limited to Jesus, but to the whole of creation (Van den Bosch 2014:848).

According to Paul, the divine Spirit is the power that strengthens and comforts a person (Eph 3:16) and silently prays on behalf of the sufferers (Rm 8:26) (cf. Louw 2008:253).

The focus on the activities of transformation, empowerment and creativity of the divine Spirit would be one-sided if nothing was said about the Spirit's agency regarding co-suffering with creation, and being vulnerable in creation, most specifically with human beings. Currently, the emphasis has moved beyond a salvational and ecclesiastical pneumatology, with the Holy Spirit also being recognised in terms of tangible human issues (Van den Bosch-Heij 2013:67). In her pneumatological exploration, Deborah van den Bosch (2014:835) provides a constructive proposal in pairing the Spirit and vulnerability. Generally speaking, the Spirit covers everything, from the suffering in all

creation to God's fatherly love (Gregersen 2015c:371). 'The Spirit suffers with the suffering, is grieved and quenched, and rejoices when creation rejoices', according to Moltmann in Van den Bosch (2014:846). The Spirit not only relates to creation, but also to the vulnerability of creation, showing the Spirit's deep feeling and vulnerability (Van den Bosch 2014:846).

But, more specifically, one may pneumatically understand vulnerability not only as 'creaturely life' open to harm and distress, but also find an exacting quality, e.g. 'love and mercy', in the occurrence of vulnerability (Van den Bosch 2014:850).

That is because the Holy Spirit puts human life in touch with [the] cross and resurrection of Christ. Creation needs the Spirit to see the depth of the cross, and to be introduced to the impaired, crucified Christ who demonstrates a new understanding of vulnerability (Van den Bosch 2014:850).

This implies a 'restored vulnerability through God's love and grace' (Van den Bosch 2014:851).¹⁵

3.7 *Imago Trinitatis*

Chapter 2 reveals something of God's mysteriously divine character, but which, historically, also reveals a living relational 'personality' – mainly of a justice-loving relation with humans. This chapter delves deeper and reflects on the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ; God becoming matter and flesh. The implications of Jesus' co-suffering with creation, specifically Jesus' solidarity and compassion with human beings, particularly the oppressed and marginalised, are dealt with. However, while bodiless, the divine Spirit's empowering, restorative, life-giving agency and the Spirit's realm of vulnerability are recognised in the embodiment of God.

Obviously, God, Jesus and the Spirit are currently not visible to persons. Luke's historical and theological reflection on Jesus' ascension suggests Jesus' presence differently, i.e. in a different dimension. Burger (2011:45) writes that Jesus' ascension to heaven does not indicate a physical identifiable place somewhere in the universe; instead, after Jesus' work was done in a visible human body, Jesus returned to Jesus' life in Tri-unity with God and the Spirit. Their existence is real and near, but not visible

¹⁵ Van den Bosch (2014) based her proposal on reformed theologians, e.g., Placher, Jensen, Reynolds and Culp's approaches, and specifically Moltmann's pneumatology on vulnerability.

to the human eye. The reference to a cloud indicates a symbol of divine presence, e.g. Ex 13:22; Lk 9:34-35 (Verzan in Mihoc 2010:64; cf. Burger 2011:44). In Acts 1:9 the cloud indicates the presence of both God and Jesus (Burger 2011:44).

The Book of Acts introduces a new era, an era during which the focus moves from the works and deeds of Jesus, to the disciples (Burger 2011:46). Jesus' apparent absence places the spotlight fully on us, since we are in a certain sense pressured to continue Jesus' mission (Burger 2011:47).

A greater dynamic whole exists between God, Spirit and Jesus; a symmetrical, relational, subordinated Trinity (cf. Leene 2013:90-91) is presupposed. The subordination is reciprocal (Leene 2013:94). It is not only as the Son, as human, that Jesus is subordinated to the Father – God's self subordinated everything. The Father is subordinated to the Son and the Spirit; the Son to the Father and Spirit; and the Spirit to the Son and Father (Leene 2013:94; cf. McGrath 1994:252). One may say the ultimate goal of their activities leads to the coming kingdom. According to Moltmann (Grenz 2001:43), God is not the only active subject bringing the kingdom – the Father is dependent upon 'the sending, surrender, and glorification of the Son, as well as the completed work of the Spirit'. Von Balthasar (1991:17) emphasises the distinct yet inseparability of the Trinity:

In Christ, for the first time, we see that in God himself there exists - within his inseparable unity - the distinction between the Father who gives and the gift which is given (the Son), but only in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

However, despite our serious attempts at explaining the character of the Tri-unity of God, be it subordination, inseparability and/or distinctions, there are things beyond human conceptualisation (cf. Basil the Great in Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:69). "Father", "Son", "Spirit" are names that designate relationships, rather than who God is in God's fullness' (Downey 2005:625).

In the previous chapter (para. 2.2) it was indicated that a facet of *poiesis* may enhance theology and spirituality. Icons are regarded as 'theology and spirituality in colour'; it does away with any 'objective distance between ... material and the spiritual' (Chryssavgis 2005:353). The icon, a representation or symbol of an invisible presence inspires a higher awareness of the unfathomable, when contemplation thereof causes a sudden experience of awe (Veldsman 2011:4).

The icon of the Holy Trinity (Figure 3.1) painted by the famous Russian, Eastern Orthodox iconographer Andrei Rublev (*circa* 1425) (Reimer 2008:167-169; cf. Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:69; Hernandez 2006:83) serves as an example.

Iconography asserts corporeal reality in all its frailty, vulnerability, and dependence as the mandatory experience for salvation. By reflecting on the popular icons of the Trinity, Nativity, and Resurrection, we see boundaries dissolve. The dissolution of boundaries between the perceived dichotomies of mind and body, the sacred and carnal, as well as theory and experience, reveal embodiment rather than ability as the prerequisite for human fulfilment (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:106).

The icon reflects St. Sergious of Radonezh's (father of Russian Orthodoxy) theology of the Trinity and his 'missionary theology' (Reimer 2008:168, 176). The painting depicts the Old Testament narrative of the three angels' visitation of Abraham and Sara, according to Genesis 18:1-2 (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:69; Reimer 2008:168, 176). The narrative is allegorically interpreted by the artist as an iconographical image of the Trinity (Reimer 2008:168, 176).



Figure 3.1 *The Trinity* by Andrei Rublev

Source: trinityiconographers

'The three angels are an image of God in his Trinity' (Reimer 2008:172). The icon (also named the 'icon of hospitality' – Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:123) pictures, unity and harmony, defined by the interrelatedness of the three figures, as well as their implicit invitation to the viewer to enter into the relationship ... we who are in the image and likeness of that Trinity are defined as well: we are potential

participants ... Humanity participates in the 'community of being' that is divine Trinity (Zizioulas) (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:69).

The figures are enjoying a meal, suggesting 'the transformation of the fundamental human need for sustenance into a sacred event. ... By serving each other, by caring for our multifaceted bodies, by engaging in relationship, we become living icons, more human to be more like God' (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:111). Alternatively, Nouwen (Hernandez 2006:83) has been struck by the open space between the two figures in the front, and in front of the cup. Nouwen (Hernandez 2006:83) sees this also as a symbol of 'the narrow road paved with suffering'. The true meaning of fellowship as relationships lie in facing the reality of suffering.

In the previous chapter reference was made (para. 2.7) to the matter that God is known through God's personal relationship with humans. According to Moltmann (Grenz 2001:45; cf. Robinson 2011:157-158), the relationship humans have with God cannot be described as being between God and 'servants' [or] 'children' but [as] 'friends'. 'The term person is not a biblical one, although it was used very early in Christian theology ... [P]ersonhood was primarily linked to the concept of the *imago Dei* in the book of Genesis' (Thomas 2014:382).

The anthropological term 'person'¹⁶ is commonly used to describe the plurality and oneness in the Trinity (Gunton in Leene 2013:56; Leene 2013:56; see para. 2.6). Grenz (2001:16) emphasises the suitability of '... the threeness within the one God – that is, the relationality of the three persons of the Trinity'. The concept *perichoresis* ('mutual interpenetration') describes the relation of the three persons in the Trinity (McGrath 1994:253-254; cf. Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:111; Moltmann 1985:223-224). It is an image often used to convey the idea of 'a community of being', in which each distinctive individual person penetrates one another (McGrath 1994:253-254; cf. Leene 2013:62-66; Grenz 2001:43-44). This concept provides a relevant and liberative model for human relationships within communities (McGrath 1994:253-254; cf. Grenz 2001:44-45). 'Human beings are *imago trinitatis* and only correspond to the triune God when they are united with one another' (Moltmann 1985:216; cf. Hefner 2000:86-87).

¹⁶ Tertullian introduces the Latin term *persona* (meaning different functions and roles of an actor by using a mask) from the Greek word *hypostasis*, and it is translated into English as 'person' (McGrath 1994:250).

No wonder that Leene (2013:154-155) prefers to speak of *imago Trinitatis* instead of *imago Dei*. 'Thus if human being-in-relationship is correctly identified as the reflection of God's being-in-relationship, it is not inappropriate to say that the human as *imago Dei* is in fact *imago Trinitatis*' (Campbell 1981:15; cf. Leene 2013:156; see Gunton 1998:208). Smail starts his article, 'In the Image of the Triune God' with the remark (attributed to Christoph Schwöbel), 'For Christians *imago Dei* means *imago Trinitatis*' (Smail 2003:22).

Generally speaking, if God is understood relationally, as in the doctrine of Trinity, our humanity is also understood as relational (Smail 2003:22). Gunton (1998:208) is correct in rejecting a mainly individualistic approach in construing the human image. He agrees with Barth's linkage of the image with co-humanity. 'Humans are fully social beings, and a description of a human being as an integral body would be necessarily incomplete if it did not take into account this social interdependence' (Vogelsang 2014:309). We are who we are in our relationships with one another. This is a strong reminder of the well-known African concept *ubuntu*, which, lately, is often misused, seemingly misinterpreted or abused in our South African context.

Moltmann finds the solution to his critique of a traditional 'abstract monotheism' in the 'social doctrine of the Trinity' (Grenz 2001:44). He names the traditional approach a 'political and clerical monotheism', which leads to 'political and ecclesiastical totalitarianism' (Grenz 2001:44). Moltmann rejects the belief in a 'divine monarchy', or as stated elsewhere, a 'single subjectivity' of the Trinity, because it justifies religious and political domination (Grenz 2001:45). According to Migliore (1983:32-33), the manner in which people manage their social affairs is influenced by the way they understand Godly power. He reckons the dignity of humans is developed through their view of God. Moltmann (1985:216) not only opposes the Western monotheistic concept of God in theology, but also the individualism that aligns with anthropology.

According to the Christian ethos, believers are called to be accountable to their fellow humans. According to Hefner (2000:73-74), being created in the image of God encompasses both possibility and accountability, with the 'God meme' being inclusive of the fact that becoming human consists of relationship – with others and all of creation, which means it is with God. This opposes the 'conscious spiritual individuality' definition of personhood.

When *imago Dei* is viewed as a product of creation theology, the concept of ‘person’ is reduced; it should at least take the doctrine of the Trinity into account (Thomas 2014:383). ‘Theological anthropology’ and ‘theology of creation’ in the conceptualisation of the *imago Dei*, should correlate with the ‘Christological transformation and eschatological horizon in the *imago Christi*’, according to Moltmann (1985:225-226; cf. Thomas 2014:383). The Christian approach to personhood is centred on the life of Jesus as the true likeness of God (e.g. 2 Cor 4:4) (cf. Thomas 2014:383; Moltmann 1985:225).

Thomas (2014:383) is of the opinion that the *imago Dei*, as reflected in Genesis 1, is too closely associated with power and dominion, even if it is kind-hearted. According to him, Jesus’ compassionate relationship with the weak and fragile should be at the centre. Jesus’ power lies in Jesus’ weakness (Thomas 2014:383). For the same reason as Jesus, Paul rejoices in his weakness e.g. 2 Cor 12:9-10. However, according to Schwöbel (Leene 2013:145), being a person through *imitatio Christi* (imitating Christ) and *conformitas Christi* (conformed to Christ) is incomplete if it is not Trinitarian.

The *imago Trinitatis* reflects the mutual dependency between persons, who are relational beings, with relationships with God, their neighbours and the whole of creation (Leene 2013: v, 210-211). A person who is connected only to his or her ‘status as a created creature’ is inadequate, however appealing this may be to ‘theological anthropologies based on mere theism’ (Thomas 2014:394). ‘Instead, as human beings and persons we participate in the dynamic interaction of the triune God with God’s own world’ (Thomas 2014:394; cf. Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:111).

Genesis 1 tells about the ‘pre-eminence of human kind’, all about us as the self, that is made in God’s image; while Genesis 9 states the ‘prohibition of murder’ is an indication to us that ‘*the other person* is in God’s image’, it is about the ‘human Other’ (Sacks 2015:201-202; cf. Wolterstorff 2008:94-95). ‘One who is not in my image is nonetheless in God’s image’ (Sacks 2015:201-202). When referring to the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’, Calvin (Smit 2016:4) writes:

Scripture notes a twofold equity on which this commandment is founded. Humanity is both the image of God and our flesh. Wherefore, if we would not violate the image of God, we must hold the human person sacred – if we would not divest ourselves of humanity, we must cherish our own flesh. The Lord has been pleased

to draw our attention to these two natural considerations as inducements to watch over our neighbor's preservation – that is to revere the divine image impressed upon them, and embrace our own flesh.

Our dignity stems from being glorified in being created in God's divine image (World Council of Churches 2012:163). This credit is not founded by our abilities, capabilities or disabilities and has not been earned by us (World Council of Churches 2012:163). This dignity is different to the normal idea of being 'dignified' and encompasses a social element that calls us each to affirm and uphold the dignity of all others (World Council of Churches 2012:163).

The image of God is not intrinsic to human nature, but rather to the relationship with us that God initiated through creation. Our relationship with God surpasses everything material of human existence (World Council of Churches 2016:3). Persons are born with bodies and are confronted with their own imperfections and others' limitations, as well as being challenged by uneven relations. The 'human being' is a 'relational being', 'because 'our bodies constitute the very possibility of engagement with one another in this world or any other ...' (Murphy in Van den Berg 2008:125). Reynolds's (2008a:177) understanding of us being in God's image in relational terms supports his sensitivity towards persons with disability. At a conference on 'Theology, Disability and Human Dignity' at Stellenbosch University, he said, '[f]ull personhood is neither diminished by disability nor confirmed by ability. Instead, it is a factor of the interdependent relationships we share with one another as creatures loved into being by God and in the image of God' (Reynolds 2013:23). (See chapter 7.)

But not all theologians are like Reynolds, Barth, Bonhoeffer and Berkouwer – all of whom emphasise the centrality of the relational dimension of being in God's image. Also, not every theologian is like Campbell, Grenz or Johnson, who makes an analogy between the relationships among people and the relationships within the Trinity. In his comprehensive study on the image of God, Kilner (2015:167) writes in detail on the misunderstandings around God's image, including that human attributes defining God's image, for example 'relationship', '... is not what it means to be in God's image'. He avoids a 'reductionist' view of God's image, saying '... there is much more to human beings and to being in God's image than relationship' (Kilner 2015:194). He is of the opinion that cultural influences, existentialist philosophies and other theological biases play an important role in making certain views of the image of God more appealing.

Kilner (2015:9) proposes a way of speaking of God's image in the same way as biblical authors. To summarise his understanding, Kilner (2015:9) writes:

Ultimately, the image of God is Jesus Christ. People are first created and later renewed according to that image. Image involves connection and reflection. Creation in God's image entails a special connection with God and an intended reflection of God. Renewal in God's image entails a more intimate connection with God through Christ and an increasingly actual reflection of God in Christ, to God's glory. This connection with God is the basis of human dignity. This reflection of God is the beauty of human destiny. All of humanity participates in human dignity. All of humanity is offered human destiny, though only some embrace and will experience it. Christ and humanity, connection and reflection, dignity and destiny - these lie at the heart of what God's image is all about.

Similarly, König (2017:30-31) reminds his readers that Christ is the image of God and believers should adopt God's image (e.g. Eph 4:24; see Col 3:10, Rm 8:29 and 2 Cor 3:18). The book of Genesis refers to a 'human made in the image of God' only as a proposition, but in the letter to the Ephesians (chapter 4), this becomes part of a demand (König 2017:30). Paul regularly exhorts believers to live like God and Christ (König 2017:31).

3.8 Conclusion

Chapter 3 focuses on the embodiment of God; it is mainly a discussion on the (deep) incarnation of God in Christ. Theology is placed in the sphere of humanity by the humanness of Jesus. Jesus, as a biological and social being, puts him on a par with human nature, in direct contact with other human beings. Jesus' bodily existence makes Jesus' life and living inevitably fragile and vulnerable, but also one in solidarity with the ongoing misery of humans. 'Brokenness and woundedness are part of what it means to be human. Weakness and vulnerability are part of the strength of our spirituality'¹⁷ (Christensen 2006:xi). Coyle-Carr (2014:n.p.) invites us to 'revel in the fact that God has chosen flesh, real, fragile, warm, hairy human flesh to reveal the character of God and accomplish reconciliation in the world'.

¹⁷ Michael J. Christensen refers to Henri Nouwen's spirituality of imperfection.

Believing in, worshipping and/or following the embodied God means that God is participating in 'human spirituality in an embodied way' (Ferrey 2010:12). From the beginning it is obvious that humans participate in the 'mystery of Revelation in and through their bodiliness mystery of Revelation in and through their bodiliness' according to Prokes (1996:78). 'Human beings are an embodied soul and an ensouled body. As a created whole, a human being is designed for the cause of *doxa*: to reflect divine destiny (*telos*), a humane mode of living (Calvin: *la principale fin de la vie humaine*)' (Louw 2014:12). Murphy (2002:ix) writes:

[W]e are our bodies – there is no additional metaphysical element such as mind or soul or spirit. But, secondly, this 'physicalist' position need not deny that we are intelligent, moral and spiritual. We are, at our best, complex physical organism, imbued with the legacy of thousand years of culture, and most importantly, blown by the Breath of God's Spirit; we are Spirited bodies.

Approached from the Semitic perspective, the traditional dichotomy between body and soul and/or the extension of a trichotomy between body, soul and spirit are unknown (Louw 2014:13; Van den Berg 2008:119-120). In the Old Testament, no distinction is made between the physical and spiritual nature of humankind (Prokes 1996:58).

Stereometric reasoning¹⁸ allows for the Semitic view of a person as an integrated unit within the whole cosmos. ... It does not view a person in terms of isolated, different parts, but as a functional unit (whole) within a network of relationships ... [It is] relational and systemic (Louw 2014:13).

Any one of the concepts which are used interchangeably in Hebrew poetry to describe what a human is – heart, mind, soul, spirit – also refers to the totality of that life (Louw 2014:13).

'People are in God's image – they have a connection with God and are intended to be a reflection of God – as embodied beings and not apart from their bodies' (Kilner 2015:277). A person is more than food and clothing (Mt 6:25). If you want to see the literal person, look through the eyes of God (Schottroff & Stegemann 1982:79). The corporeal facet of God's image is equal to all people, and being in God's image leads to the special worthiness of the sacredness in every person (Kilner 2015:290; cf.

¹⁸ According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, stereometry means 'having, characterised by, or representing a readily measurable solid form or volume e.g. a house can have variety of interior but the outside is invariably a stereometrics body'.

Green 2011:293-294). 'As we delve into our corporeal nature to encounter its complexity, diversity, and vicissitudes, we experience God in us and with us. We are who we are because of who God is' (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:59). The more we 'imagine the reality of the divine as fully possible ... we can slowly be divinised by that reality' (Ignatius of Loyola in Hernandez 2006:29).

Humanity as a whole is characterised by equality and unity (Kilner 2015:290). Socially marginalised people, like persons with disabilities, should not identify themselves according to their circumstances and the labels used by their oppressors (Kilner 2015:290). '[I]n the loving eyes of God ... there are no marginal cases of being "human"' (Reinders in Kilner 2015:290). Elsewhere, Reinders (2013:35-36), a disabilities ethicist, asks the rhetorical question: '[W]hat in the eyes of God is the difference between human beings who are marked as 'disabled' and human beings that are not so marked?'. Diagnosing disabling conditions may be necessary for therapeutic reasons, but from a theological perspective, it is irrelevant (Reinders 2013:35-36). (See chapter 7.) But to deny anybody their human dignity, not only the kind-hearted marginalised persons, but also the evil-hearted, are against the will of God.

On the basis of the eternal will of God we have to think of *every human being*, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable, as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father; and we have to deal with him on this assumption. If the other person knows that already, then we have to strengthen him in the knowledge. If he does not know it yet or no longer knows it, our business is to transmit this knowledge to him. On the basis of the knowledge of the humanity of God no other attitude to any kind of fellow man is possible. It is identical with the practical acknowledgement of his human rights and his human dignity. To deny it to him would be for us to renounce having Jesus Christ as Brother and God as Father (Barth 1960:53).

Through our 'diverse and vulnerable humanity' (e.g. status, gender, ability, age etc.) God reveals God's self and God becomes known to us, according to Tataryn and Truchan-Tataryn (2013:61). Further, our humanity is divinised through Christ's humanity (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:61). Jesus' presence in everybody gives them their unique dignity as 'created in the *imago Dei*' (Robinson 2011:175).

The embodiment of God with the incarnation of Christ gives God the status of a human. This Godly event gives people a divine status as true humans (e.g. Phlp 2, 2 Pt 1:4 (cf. Athanasius in Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:58-59; see the discussion of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox term *theosis* (theopedia)). 'God becomes human in order to turn us from being unhappy and proud gods into true human beings who accept their lowliness' (Luther in Moltmann 2015:120). A contemporary view on this would be that, 'when modern human beings renounce their unhappy "God complex" (as the psychoanalyst H.E. Richter called it), they become more human, and in their human vulnerability and mortality experience the nearness of the incarnate God' (Moltmann 2015:120). Being created in the image of God makes every person special in the eyes of God, but that does not make us God. Deland (1999:52) reminds us of our mortality, limits and imperfections.

Chapter 4 deals with the phenomenon of spirituality, which should be understood as relational and embodied, based on *inter alia* the *kenotic* love of Jesus' and the agency of the divine Spirit.

CHAPTER 4 EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY

4.1 What to expect

This is the last chapter of Movement 1. In the introduction to this Movement I shared my initial understanding of spirituality and anticipated the relation between inspiration and spirituality. This chapter will build on the introduction and give a more detailed treatise of the phenomenon of spirituality. Used interdisciplinarily, the different understandings of spirituality can be found on a wide spectrum, and there is no generic definition. However, an integral aspect of spirituality is the search for meaning in life. Everybody embodies spirituality. The growing interest in spirituality is due to postmodernism.

Any spirituality that is otherworldly and not grounded in the incarnation is dysfunctional. The spirit presupposes a deep link with the body because of God's Spirit, which is 'poured out on all flesh'. It is therefore appropriate to use a 'spiritual embodied anthropological' approach in defining spirituality. Spirituality is also known for its self-transcending character.

Waaijman (2006:2-3) identifies deductive and inductive methods in describing spirituality as phenomenon. The deductive method starts from a theological, dogmatic perspective, which surfaced in the late nineteenth century. The inductive method starts from the human experience of life; this perspective has its origins in the 1960s. I will follow an abductive method (combining the deductive and inductive; open ended), focusing mainly on an interweaving of a 'search for meaning in life' and the 'agency of the divine Spirit'.

The relational quality of spirituality towards the self, others, the world and God is widely acknowledged. Henri Nouwen's identification of three movements toward wholeness represents a person's relations as '*inward* (self)'; '*outward* (others)' and '*upward* (God)', and is a handy hermeneutical lens to describe a person's spirituality. I will give much attention to Nouwen's Christian spirituality. His spirituality is best defined as a journey to wholeness through human brokenness – a spirituality of imperfection. Last, the *kenosis* of the Spirit, entering the human position of brokenness, will be touched upon.

4.2 The phenomenon of spirituality

Lately, there has been an emergence of the spirituality discourse, which expands widely into the different spheres of both popular and scientific society (Kourie 2009:148-149; 2006:19, 21, 22; cf. Cloete 2012:70; Manning 2012:96; Schneiders 2005:1; 2003:163; see Tanyi 2002:500). The discipline of spirituality has found its *niche* in academia, as anticipated by Kourie (2009:149; cf. Lesniak 2005:8; Sheldrake 2005a:vii). 'Spirituality' is a 'buzz word', as well as an 'umbrella term', a 'tapestry' covering various dimensions (Kourie 2015:1; Stevens & Green in Louw 2008:49; Kourie 2006:19, 22; cf. Conradie 2006:17). There are both narrow and broad understandings and interpretations of spirituality and the term is used by different disciplines, *inter alia* theology and religion, psychology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, the natural sciences, ecology, physics, linguistics, art, cyberspace and virtual reality, medical science, education, political discourse and business¹⁹ (Louw 2014:41-42; 2008:35-36, 56; cf. Kourie 2006:19-20; 2015:2; Lesniak 2005:9). The philosopher and economist Bouckaert (2011:25) describe the intense interest in spirituality as the 'emergence of a spiritual wave'. Spirituality is both a fashionable phenomenon and a pursuit that rises above the known and ordinary:

Spirituality is a lot like Elvis Presley—for spirituality, too, is everywhere. From churches and synagogues to crystal shops and New Age bookstores, and from Promise Keeper rallies to Buddhist meditation classes, American culture is permeated by organizations, institutions, and business devoted to fostering the spiritual quest—a quest for meaning or belief or experience that transcends the daily grind, that transcends the world of such mundane affairs as science and technology, or government and business. The transcendent, nonrational, soulful realm of spirituality seems to be increasingly popular in our day (McColman 1997:7).

Regrettably, spirituality has become a commodity offering, *inter alia*, quick fixes to current problems. This requires wariness and discernment (Kourie 2015:5; Perrin 2007:24).

Generally speaking, spirituality 'refers to an individual's overall beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life' (Boswell et al. 2001:21). The search for meaning in life,

¹⁹ A decade ago, to my surprise, in the bookstore of Stellenbosch University's business school, I found a publication by Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall titled *Spiritual Capital: Wealth We Can Live by*.

'a life that matters', is an integral aspect of spirituality; with numerous references in research linking spirituality to meaning (Wessels & Müller 2013:2). Kourie and Ruthenberg (2008:77) use as an alternative to the word 'experience' the term 'lived-life', to give it a 'grass-roots' character. For example, in Ruth Tanyi's (2002) analysis 'towards clarification of the meaning of spirituality', she used literature (76 articles and 19 books) spanning a period of 30 years. Resulting from her research, Tanyi (2002:506) proposes a useful definition for the nursing profession:

Spirituality is a personal search for meaning and purpose in life, which may or may not be related to religion. It entails connection to self-chosen and or religious beliefs, values, and practices that give meaning to life, thereby inspiring and motivating individuals to achieve their optimal being. This connection brings faith, hope, peace, and empowerment. The results are joy, forgiveness of oneself and others, awareness and acceptance of hardship and mortality, a heightened sense of physical and emotional well-being, and the ability to transcend beyond the infirmities of existence.

A sensible definition of spirituality requires a broad approach in order to include its multidimensional character, complexity, diversity, subjectivity, personal and intangible nature (cf. Bouckaert 2011:26; Kourie 2006:19; Tanyi 2002:500; see Waaijman 2007:1; Conradie 2006:17). Generally, '[s]pirituality refers to the *raison-d'être* of one's existence, the meaning and values to which one ascribes. Thus everyone embodies a spirituality, be it nihilistic, materialistic, humanistic, or religious' (Griffin 1988:1; cf. Kourie 2015:4; 2006:19; Tanyi 2002:506; Waaijman 2002:55).

We should therefore not be surprised when, for some people, spirituality lacks a metaphysical dimension. The well-known South African palaeontologist Jurie van den Heever (2017:128) states that for scientists the word 'spirituality' has nothing to do with faith, and suggests the term eco-morality (*ekomoraliteit* in Afrikaans) in order to avoid a metaphysical connotation. Eco-morality refers to respect for the earth and its natural resources; moral behaviour towards all that lives and accountability when there is misuse of natural resources (Van den Heever 2017:127).

The theologian Spangenberg prefers the term *natuurspiritualiteit* (in Afrikaans; translated as natural spirituality); humans should realise they are part and parcel of everything that lives and has lived (Van den Heever 2017:128). Spangenberg's natural spirituality should not be confused with the concept of *aardse spiritualiteit* (in Afrikaans;

translated as earthly spirituality). With this term, Conradie (2006:252) not only acknowledges a transcendental dimension, but also puts the primary emphasis on the experience of transcendence. In using the term ecospirituality as embodied spirituality, Lakoff and Johnson (1999:566) place the emphasis on a nurturing attitude towards the self, others and nature: 'Embodied spirituality is more than spiritual experience. It is an ethical relationship to the physical world'. According to Grey (2005:262), the mystical element of Christian ecospirituality, i.e. respect for God's creation and God's presence in it, is maintained by scripture, art and poetry.

The growing focus on and interest in spirituality can be ascribed *inter alia* to the paradigm shift brought about by postmodernism (Kourie 2009:152; cf. Sheldrake 2005d:498-500; see Du Toit 2000:18). Howard (Cloete 2012:72) describes postmodernism as a period of uncertainty during which 'the crisis of meaning' brings about a rethinking of paradigms that shape understanding and lives. Furthermore, Cloete (2012:72) postulates that an awareness of humankind's fragility, the relativity of knowledge and our paradoxical ability to simultaneously create and destroy, form part of the post-modern consciousness. These ambiguous and ambivalent demands cannot be met by the entertainment and consumer culture that is associated with modernism, and therefore encourage the pursuit of spirituality. Contrary to modernism, post-modern Christian living is characterised by the merging of the spiritual and secular (Sheldrake 2005d:499). 'Spirituality creates a free, post-modern space for the personal quest for meaning, connectedness, and transcendence', according to Bouckaert (2011:26). The 'subjective openness' and 'multiform meaning' of spirituality attract people who neither associate with 'secular, anti-religious philosophies of life', nor a 'pre-modern, closed religious system that claims a monopoly on truth and salvation' (Bouckaert 2011:26).

4.2.1 Towards a working definition of spirituality

There is no 'generic spirituality', all spiritualities are 'particular ... grounded in historical-cultural contexts' (Sheldrake 2005a:vii; cf. Lesniak 2005:7; Schneiders 2003:167; 1989:684; see Kourie & Ruthenberg 2008:82-85). It is a difficult task to formulate a definition of spirituality (McGinn 1993:1; cf. Tanyi 2002:500). To define spirituality is as complex as describing 'experience' (Schneiders 2005:1). It is an ambitious and illusionary exercise to describe a comprehensive understanding of spirituality; '[b]ecause there is a plurality of spiritual experiences, so there will always be a plurality

of definitions' (Bouckaert 2011:31). The plethora of thoughts and images of God, as discussed in chapter 2, can be compared to the various facets of spirituality, and both need 'to remain open-ended' (McColman 1997:18).

There are interpretations of spirituality which I am uneasy with. Unfortunately, spirituality is narrowly associated and/or biblically interpreted with 'piety' and 'otherworldliness' (De Beer 2008:1037; Kourie 2006:19, 22; see 1 Cor 3:1; 2 Pet 1:5-7). On the contrary, according to Louw (2008:54-56) *eusebeia* which is translated with 'devotion, piety and godliness', best defines spirituality in the New Testament; it indicates a 'new lifestyle' of *coram Deo*. He understands piety that 'desires not only to nurture faith, but also to care for God's entire creation'. Louw notices in 1 Tim 3:16 that *eusebeia* is connected with Jesus' incarnation, with the Spirit's vindication thereof. Paul accentuates *eusebeia* in fighting the dualistic heresy between the spiritual and physical (e.g. 1 Tm 4:2-4).

The word spirituality (*spiritualiteit* in Afrikaans) means 'incorporeal' and 'immaterial' (*onstoflik* and *geestelik* in Afrikaans); 'something to do with religion and immaterial affairs' (*wat te make het met godsdiens en geestelike sake* in Afrikaans), according to a definitive Afrikaans dictionary (HAT 2015:1224). It is interesting that this narrow understanding of the word is still to be found in modern Afrikaans, despite the active discourse on and richness of the term spirituality. Suspicion arises when 'spirituality' is associated with or synonymous to 'otherworldliness', 'individualism', 'sentimentality' and the 'separation between immaterial and the corporality' (De Beer 2008:1037). Michael Gorman (2013:151) also shares his unease with the popularity of an otherworldly spirituality:

For many people including Christians of various kinds the word spirituality connotes an experience of the transcendent even specifically of God or Jesus that is not connected to life in the world. Its purpose so to speak is to transport people out of the trials and tribulations of the world through mystical experiences, an interiority focused on the self or god/God within, or an eschatological orientation that pays scant if any attention to social ills. Although recent scholarly interpretation of Christian experience has opposed such approaches to spirituality, much popular spiritual writing and some Christian music (both traditional and contemporary) reinforce such sentiments. The resulting spirituality is often otherworldly, escapist and even narcissistic.

Furthermore, the dualistic perspective of a 'sacred and holy' spirit *versus* a 'profane and sinful' body can be 'toxic' (McColman 1997:11). In his book *Humanisme Intégral* (1936), Jacques Maritain's description of a 'profane spirituality' or 'spiritual humanism' (Bouckaert 2011:31) is worth mentioning:

He thought that modern humanism's shortcomings would lead to a renewed interest in spirituality, not as a return to the sacred spirituality of medieval society but as a quest for a profane *spirituality* that does not remove the spiritual to a separate level but rediscovers it as a component of political, social, economic, and scientific activities (Bouckaert 2011:33).

Spirituality can be caring or harsh (Perrin 2007:25), while Kourie (2015:4) differentiates between 'authentic and inauthentic' spirituality. According to the liberation theologian Jon Sobrino (Walatka 2013:78), an 'authentic spirituality must be *holistic* and *historical*. "Spirituality" does not have to do with what is "spiritual" in contrast to one's body or historical life. Instead, "spirituality is the spirit of a subject – an individual or a group – in its relationship with the whole of reality".' Sobrino's holistic perspective differs from the earlier 'spiritual theology' which focused on ascetical and mystical ways to perfection' (Walatka 2013:96 endnote 10).

A universal characteristic of spiritualities lies in the etymology of the word spirituality; it refers to the Latin word *spirare*, translated as 'breathing', which suggests a 'principle of vivification and animation' (Bouckaert 2011:31; cf. Emmons 2006:63, McColman 1997:9). The breath of life includes the whole cosmos. According to the biblical faith the Spirit is the 'Vivifier', 'who breathes life into the exuberant universe' (Johnson 2015:152). Everybody 'receives "the breath of life" from God's Spirit (Gen.2:7), just as do all things and the earth itself ... (Ps 104:39)' (Moltmann 2015:129; see Keum 2018:5). The word 'spirit' also relates to the Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek *pneuma*; both symbolise *inter alia* breath (of life) (O'Collins 2015:63; Christensen 2006:vii; cf. McColman 1997:9; Movement 1 Introduction; see Noffke 2005:592-594). It 'refers to the source of life within us – that which animates the body so it can breathe in the first place' (McColman 1997:10, 12). The original meaning of the Hebrew word *nephesh* was possibly 'to breathe'. 'The noun appears to denote "breath" in Gen 1:30' (McColman 1997:10, 12). Briskin (1998:17) translates *nephesh* with 'living soul' or 'human being animated by breath' (cf. Louw 2008:78). In Genesis 2:7 the connection between *nephesh* and 'breath' is suggested (Harris et al. 1980:588) and is sometimes

translated with the word 'soul'. The word *nephesh* is mostly rendered in the Greek translation (LXX) by the *psyche* (Harris et al. 1980:590; cf. Louw 2008:78). In Psalm 63:1 *nephesh* is 'used in parallel with *bāšār*. NIV interprets this as a figure for totality' (Harris et al. 1980:589). The spirit presupposes a profound link with the body (McColman 1997:12, 15). According to Moltmann (1992:195), 'all flesh [is] spiritual', because of God's Spirit which is 'poured out on all flesh'.

In a process of describing, or rather, understanding spirituality, it is necessary to take cognisance of a 'spiritual embodied anthropology' (Van den Berg 2008:118) – and Lesniak (2005:11) confirms that 'embodiment is the way of being spiritual in the world', a spiritual embodiment. The 'spiritual' and the 'material' are related; likewise the 'biological' is on a par with the 'spiritual' (Hull 2003:23).

Louw (2014:12) suggests a 'paradigm shift from metaphysical and substantial thinking to stereometric thinking' (para. 3.8) in a 'theological anthropology', and contemplates a

stereometric approach to anthropology ... that every aspect of our being human represents the whole of life as determined by the transcendental realm of the human spirit. The whole is represented in every aspect. However, to merely calculate all the different parts together, does not imply that the whole of life is represented. The whole is always *more* than reason and the 'body' more than *psuchē*. Both body and soul are more than *spiritus* or flesh (*sarx*). Human beings are an embodied soul and an ensouled body. As a created whole, a human being is designed for the cause of *doxa*: to reflect divine destiny (*telos*), a humane mode of living (Calvin: *la principale fin de la vie humaine*).

Spirituality should not be separated from lived experience, according to Schneiders (2005:1) and Waaijman (Fortin 2016:38). The living body is the centre from which everything is experienced as well as the centre from where the expression of that experience occurs (Fortin 2016:44) – '[s]pirituality is an activity of human life' (Schneiders 1989:682). It is only through the actions of a human's body that the expression of the spiritual can take place – if we did not have language we would not be able to think, and thinking, in turn, depends on physical processes (Noffke 2005:594). Anthropologically speaking, spirituality is basically a unique attribute of each person; one can compare it with a person's unique personality; and

the capacity of persons to transcend themselves through knowledge and love, that is, to reach beyond themselves in relationship to others and thus become more than self-enclosed material nomads (Schneiders 2003:165).

Self-transcendence is defined 'as reaching beyond personal boundaries and attaining a wider perspective, which finds meaning in life's experience', according to Coward (Tanyi 2002:503; see Frankl 2004:115). Kourie (2006:24) emphasises the fundamental significance of the 'concept of *self-transcendence*' in every type of spirituality and its functioning in everyday life. '[Spirituality] is the self-transcending character of all human persons, and everything that pertains to it, including, most importantly, the ways that perhaps infinitely malleable character is realized in everyday life situations' (Woods in Kourie 2006:24).

Schneiders (2003:166) quotes Peter van Ness, who defines spirituality as 'the quest for attaining an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is'. With 'what one truly is', he understands as 'all of the self to which one has attained'; and 'everything that is', stands for 'reality apprehended as a cosmic totality' (Schneiders 2003:166). Compared to Van Ness's broader definition, Schneiders (2005:1, 2003:166) defines spirituality more specifically, but like Van Ness also secularly friendly, as 'the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives'. Schneiders (2005:1, 2003:166) identifies in her definition four elements that require further explaining:

- Spirituality is an 'ongoing experience or a life project' – it is not abstract, not a dogma, and neither an ideology nor a set of principles. 'It is personal lived reality.'
- The 'ultimate purpose [of] life is integration' – it is holistic, coherent and the merging of body and spirit, heart and mind. It is not a collection of practices or ritualistic behaviour (e.g. attending church services); and 'not an episodic or accidental event' (such as coming upon an exquisitely beautiful sunset, or an accidental drug overdose).
- The 'process of self-transcendence' is not a narcissistic life, or self-destructive behaviour, e.g. addiction.
- 'The entire project of spirituality is orientated toward ultimate value', whether this is the Supreme Being, the thriving of humanity, the integrity of creation, and

justice for all and other values. But spirituality requires discernment since some perceptions of its ultimate values are detrimental.

4.3 Christian spirituality

According to the general understanding of Schneiders (2003:168; cf. Schneiders 2005:1) of Christian spirituality

the horizon of ultimate value is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ in whose life we share through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christian spirituality is the life of faith, hope, and love within the community of the Church which we put in mind of Christ by participating sacramentally and existentially in his paschal mystery. The desired life-integration is personal transformation in Christ which implies participation in the transformation of the world in justice for all.

Traditionally, according to Sheldrake (2005a:vii), Christian spirituality epitomises a 'conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit', within a faith communion. Downey (2005:624; cf. Pretorius & Niemandt 2018:2) emphasises that '[a]ll Christian spirituality is *ipso facto* trinitarian spirituality'.

The adjective 'spiritual', coined by the apostle Paul, indicates a relation to spirit; while spirituality (substantive; spiritual with the suffix -ity), engages 'the quality of being related to spirit' (McColman 1997:12; cf. Schneiders 2003:166; Waaijman 2002:1). Christian spirituality involves being related to and 'inspired' (see Movement 1 Introduction) by the relational triune God – but it is more than that since it includes our 'relationship with the whole of reality' (Sobrinho in Walatka 2013:78,79; cf. Atchley 2009:2). Richards (Louw 2008:53) defines true Christian spirituality as 'living human life in union with God'. 'Life in the Spirit' refers to living with, and being influenced by, the Spirit in the totality of a life as it is lived (Moltmann 1992:182). Spirituality is concretely lived when Christian faith has been merged fully with our being in its full humanity. Spirituality implies that all the aspects relating to our being human have been interlinked with each other and as such it would improve the 'quality of human integrity' (Louw 2008:53-54). The wished-for linking of all aspects of a life leads to a 'transformation in Christ', which, in turn, can do no other but to expand into the surrounding world and bring about justice for all (Schneiders 2003:166). Christian spirituality is therefore a sign of hope and a faith that embodies our everyday realities

(Louw 2014:41). The New Testament puts love at the centre, making it more important than either the knowledge or the mutual enlightenment in spiritual progress (Leech in Louw 2014:41). Spirituality encompasses more than inner feelings, it is, rather, about the unity of an interlinked humanity and its expressed action (Louw 2014:41); a holistic approach (Kretchmar in Louw 2014:41). It is spirituality that makes our lives meaningful and moves us to action; it stimulates, motivates and gives dynamism to life's journey. It provides the energy for life in its fullness and calls us to commitment to resist all forces, powers and systems which deny, destroy and reduce life (Keum 2018:2, 8).

Moreover, there are other dimensions to Christian spirituality, and one may refer, for example, to the 'spirituality of Jesus'; the 'Christocentric spirituality'; and, 'Christian humanism', according to Bouckaert (2011:35):

- Jesus' spirituality focuses strongly on Jesus' ministry to the marginalised; and discloses 'new ways of interpreting and doing the will of God in life and work'.
- The Christocentric spirituality was initiated by Paul and the disciples. It emphasises Jesus' 'resurrection and second coming'; Jesus' 'exemplary function of his life (*imitatio Christi*)', and encourages a 'missionary project of creating a Christian civilisation throughout the world'.
- The main 'concern [of Christian humanism] is how to realize peace and justice in the world, how to save the planet from ecological disaster, how to restore social trust and communication, how to respect the dignity of life' (Bouckaert 2011:35). 'In Christian humanism the human person is viewed as a co-creator who participates with God's creation in an active manner' (Moore 2005:192). The South African theologian John de Gruchy is a confessed Christian humanist *par excellence* (see De Gruchy 2006). He (De Gruchy 2009:13) views 'Christian humanism as an alternative to both Christian fundamentalism and secularism'.

The three dimensions of Christian spirituality frequently show interrelatedness amongst Christians (Bouckaert 2011:35). There are also 'healthy and rigid' types of Christian spirituality as well as different spiritualities in the same Christian tradition and/or denomination (Schneiders 2003:166).

4.4 Relational spirituality

The relational character of spirituality towards the self, others, the world and God (Supreme Being) is widely acknowledged (Schneiders 2003:165; McColl, Bickenbach, Johnston, Nishihama, Schumaker, Smith, Smith & Yealland 2000:817; cf. Wessels & Müller 2013; Bouckaert 2011:31; De Villiers 2006:5; Faull & Hills 2006:733).

In her book *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, Elizabeth O'Connor (1968) writes about the importance of the church's engagement with the self, others and God (journey inward) as a foundation for addressing the needs of the wider society (journey outward). Influenced by O'Connor, Nouwen (Christensen 2006:vii-viii) states:

The journey inward is the journey to find the Christ dwelling within us. The journey outward is the journey to find the Christ dwelling among us and in the world. The journey inward in communion requires the disciplines of solitude, silence, prayer, meditation, contemplation, and attentiveness to the movements of our heart. The journey outward in community and mission requires the disciplines of care, compassion, witness, outreach, healing, accountability, and attentiveness to the movement of other people's hearts. These two journeys belong together to strengthen each other, and should never be separated.

In *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (1975) Nouwen attempts to reflect his 'most personal thoughts and feelings on being a Christian' (Van der Merwe 2016:40). Nouwen identifies a third movement, namely 'journey upward'. Hernandez (2006:71) describes Nouwen's three movements as a 'trilogy of coinherence' and Van der Merwe (2016:589, 595), a 'triad of "movements" toward wholeness'. The movements represent a person's '*inward* (self)', '*outward* (others)' and '*upward* (God)' relations; these match respectively with the 'specific constructs of *psychology*, *ministry*, and *theology*' and are interrelated (Hernandez 2006:2, 4, 26). This 'integrative framework' reflects Nouwen's 'ministry of soul care and spiritual formation' (Hernandez 2006:75). Hernandez (2006:26, 33) focuses on ministry as Nouwen's outward journey with the basis text of Matthew 22:37-39 (the commandment of love) in mind. He refers to a '*spirituality of ministry* (love of God) and a *ministry of spirituality* (love of others)'; it forms the heart of 'the ministry of service to Christ for the full benefit of others'. Van der Merwe (2016; 2015:41-55) emphasises, with regard to the outward journey, Nouwen's 'theology of weakness'; his 'way of vulnerability'. With Nouwen's inward journey, Hernandez (2006:24, 25) chooses to reflect on the co-

inherence of psychology and spirituality: a 'psychospiritual unity'. He states '[o]ur search for wholeness simply cannot be divorced from our movement toward holiness since knowledge of God and the knowledge of the self are always bound to commingle in every Christian's inward journey experience'. On the other hand, Van der Merwe's (2016:56-73) version of the inward journey focuses on 'the way of embodiment'. Van der Merwe shares Henri Nouwen's developing thoughts about an embodied spirituality; unfortunately, he did not write a book on it. According to Van der Merwe (2016:72),

Nouwen came to realise that real spiritual life is an embodied life, calling for a new spirituality of the body. He knew that the Incarnation – God becoming flesh – means that God enters the body, so that if you touch a body, in a way you touch divine life.

Hernandez (2006:4) focuses on the upward or 'Godward' journey by discussing the indivisible relationship between *theology* and spirituality. Van der Merwe (2015:74-90) describes the journey as 'the way of mystery'. Michael Ford (1999:4) confirms Nouwen's devotion:

Contemplation was at the heart of everything for Henri Nouwen. It was a discipline of dwelling in the presence of God. Through fidelity in prayer, he could awaken himself to the God within him and let God enter into his thoughts and emotions, into his hearing, seeing, touching, and tasting.

The Dutch Reformed Church's framework document on the missional nature and calling (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:11) confirms:

[s]pirituality is a journey within, but also to outside ourselves – on the one hand it is a journey into your inner being and world, on the other hand it is also a journey to the outside because it is all about a lifestyle befitting this journey.

I assume the church omits the upward journey, as in the case of O' Connor, because it regards it as obvious. Nevertheless, I have used Nouwen's three journeys as a guideline in formulating questions for the empirical section of this thesis (see next chapter).

4.5 A spiritual journey of imperfection

Nouwen understands his spiritual life as a lifelong journey home (Christensen 2006:xi); and it is an imperfect journey. Sheldrake (2005c:388) highlights the metaphor of spiritual life as a multi-staged journey that is commonly adopted in Christian spirituality. This metaphor indicates a constantly changing, lifelong process of transformation until one reaches the richness of experiencing life in union with God.

The numerous conflicting views on the spiritual life can be confusing (Hernandez 2006:81). Some of this confusion arises out of the different locations and times attributed to the spiritual realm. Sheldrake (2005c:388) mentions that the term 'ascent' suggests a separate spiritual realm, as well as creating a picture of ascending stages. He consequently questions this metaphor, on the grounds that:

- Although the characteristics of different stages (for example, union and repentance) are present throughout, this is also to a varying degree in each stage;
- Fundamentally the 'end' (union with God) is also the starting point. This is because God's grace is required for the spiritual journey and should therefore not be considered as higher; and
- A stage-model supports the notion of a hierarchy of spiritual and moral values, indicating distinction and superiority of the contemplative lifestyle.

Hernandez (2006:81) expresses the view that many have adopted an idealistic, radical stance in their earnest attempt to promote a holy lifestyle. The majority of these proponents ignore the sovereignty of the cross and the element of suffering, which are central to the authentic Christian experience. Henri Nouwen (1975:17) followed a different approach to that of many historically great saints and rejected the measurement and systematisation of spirituality. In contrast to this, many medieval Christians seem to have been fixated on the hierarchy of a spiritual progression, as evidenced in the imagery of the 'ladder' and 'ascent', in portraying the 'journey to God' (Hernandez 2006:90).

However, according to Sheldrake (Hernandez 2006:82, 91), numerous persons will straightforwardly affirm that 'growing to God' includes a developing acknowledgement that we are far away from perfect, and holiness is more usually associated with

disappointment and the acknowledgement of imperfection. The spiritual path is not direct, but filled with distraction and disharmony (Christensen 2006:xi).

We should, however, examine the texts relating to 'ascent' to avoid generalising elements thereof (Egan 2005:129). For example, in Saint John Climacus's 'Ladder of Divine Ascent', he gives an account of the way of tears. He asserts that our hearts are glass houses for God and that our tears show our 'fragility, woundedness and brokenness'. In this symbolism, God comes through the 'broken window' or bleeding wound in our heart to heal our souls and our world in order to identify with us through this ultimate, compassionate deed. God understands that vulnerability is the only path to holiness because he made Himself vulnerable through the crucifixion. This lesson on 'tears' unearths how fragile and imperfect life is, and thus reflects depth theology (Chryssavgis 2002:370-371). Perhaps one may refer to a spirituality of imperfection as 'deep spirituality' (a phrase used by Hernandez in Christensen 2006:x), in relation to 'deep incarnation'. Both presuppose a radical understanding of embodied life and existential vulnerability.

Rohr (2016) writes that spirituality is not about perfection. In human and spiritual development, the route followed does not run straight ahead. For humans, perfection lies only in being able to encompass, forgive and accept imperfections. The human sense of self-worth is unwilling to submit to its innate 'brokenness and poverty', Rohr says. Paradoxically, it is the realisation of our imperfection that is the beginning of freedom and grace. Freedom is gained when the pretence of being something that we are not, is abandoned. The spiritual path does not run straight, but is a zig-zag journey that constantly deepens the 'conscious relationship of being chosen, of being a beloved, of Someone loving me more than I love myself, of Someone who is more me than I am myself' (Rohr 2016; see Christensen 2006:xi).

Followers of Jesus can identify with Hernandez (Christensen 2006:x), who embodies Nouwen's spiritual journey with its movements as 'a spirituality of imperfection', which is defined as follows:

a relational spirituality of intimacy with God and a faithful wrestling with God that gradually ripens into a mature communion or 'completeness' with the Divine; this, rather than a conforming spirituality of moral perfectionism and victory over sin that progressively takes on the characterological likeness to God's perfect nature. Inward transformation does lead to outward conformity to God's image and

likeness, but moral striving for such perfection is the antithesis to Nouwen's spirituality of imperfection.

The heart of Nouwen's Christian spirituality is best defined as a journey to wholeness through brokenness (Van der Merwe 2015:20, Hernandez 2006:76). His seemingly 'paradoxical' spirituality reminds one of Jesus' power that one finds in Jesus' weakness, and the apostle Paul's affirmation that he finds in his vulnerability and weakness divine power (2 Cor 12:9-10). Nouwen's spiritual journey was known for its vulnerability. He was aware of his spiritual limitations, of the woundedness, anguish, loneliness, conflicts, and frustrations that exemplified his imperfect life. He was 'a "saint" with feet of clay and a heart of gold whose completeness in Christ is through transparent imperfection of all-too-human self' (Christensen 2006:xi). Nouwen internalised and lived a 'theology and spirituality of imperfection that featured the recurring themes of struggle, suffering, powerlessness, and weakness' (Hernandez 2006:93). What Nouwen (1981b:21) articulates, is a life of spirituality and the ordinary life – the latter with all its sorrow and joy – fully combined to become one and the same life.

For Nouwen, authentic wholeness contains all and every human weakness (Van der Merwe 2015:20). Brokenness is described as 'a way of being human in this world, which is the way to wholeness', according to Buechner (Hernandez 2006:76). Sheldrake (1986:223) confidently states,

[t]he moment that we feel we have arrived, are complete, or indeed that there is, potentially, a moment when such will be the case (when we change from movement to maintenance) we are furthest from God. Holiness has a great deal to do with the realization of imperfection and even failure and thus of the need for continual conversion.

While reflecting on the parable of the prodigal son, Nouwen (2010:68) contemplates, 'There is no way to God except for the way that Jesus took'.²⁰ No wonder Nouwen (Hernandez 2006:79) regards the way of God as the way of weakness. He (Nouwen 2001:33, 35) accentuates that God intentionally intervened in human history through the acts of Christ's birth and death on the cross in order to manifest his vulnerability. Karl Barth (1956:190) verifies:

²⁰ *'Er is geen weg tot God buiten de weg die Jezus ging.'*

God's unprecedented act was a downward movement, counter to self-protection and self-preservation. It was a movement from 'the heights to the depth, from victory to defeat, from riches to poverty, from triumph to suffering, from life to death.

As noticed, neither Nouwen nor Hernandez coined a spirituality of imperfection. Through the ages a spiritual theme has endured: the spirituality of imperfection (Kurtz & Ketcham 1992:2). This eternal spirituality concerns itself with the inherently flawed essence of human nature. It embraces imperfection and mistakes as part of our truth and recognises the paradoxes embodied in humanity. This spirituality is concerned with the grey area between the polarities of 'everything' and 'nothing', of 'less than gods' and 'more than beasts'. This school of thought recognises that it is within these areas that we embrace our 'woundedness' and come to terms with our imperfections; that we shift away from blaming and towards acceptance and that we recognise that we can only fully understand healing if we understand pain. Spirituality aids us in noticing, acknowledging and finally accepting our flawed being (Kurtz & Ketcham 1992:2).

The following is an interpretation of the perspective of Kurtz and Ketcham (1992:20-29) on imperfect spirituality:

- The spirituality of imperfection suggests that the original utterance of prayer is a cry for help. It is a plea that calls to God for help and assistance. Thereby we acknowledge that we, humans, cannot control our lives and need help, and hereby spirituality is born.
- It is important to admit that we are ignorant of the cause of our problems and do not have answers. Therefore we do not know how to control our lives. At this point a catharsis is necessary which enable a process of ridding of all previous assumptions. This process is valuable because it brings us to a point of surrender, and prepares us for a new openness and a fresh beginning, guided by a higher presence.
- By now we have questioned what we presumed about 'God' before. Upon discovering that we, by letting go of control of our lives, are not 'God', we make the most important leap in the process. The true identity of spirituality now causes more questions than answers and we discover that this identity cannot

be proven and defined. Spirituality is 'elusive, ineffable, unbounded; it does not involve demands for perfection; it is rooted in paradox; it is a cry for help' (Kurtz & Ketcham 1992:27).

- Another spiritual journey manifests itself as the '*negative way*' which goes down divergent paths to explore and discover what something is not. This path often contributes to a more intimate discovery of something much greater and more powerful than ourselves as well as our efforts to capture it. It is important to note that we should not compare and judge other journeys, as doing so poses the risk of spiritual hubris. Naturally, the most valuable outcome of this path is true humility. By grace we will arrive at a point where we become spiritually evolved and enriched by life in all its aspects.
- The spirituality of imperfection identifies itself with being 'fluid' where religion identifies itself with being 'solid'. To be 'fluid' means to be moving, and therefore being subject to continuous change. We cannot control this change, and because we are at times subjected to uncertainty and suffering, our lives will be spiritually imperfect.
- It is important to understand that uncertainty and suffering become the tools with which we shape our experiences. These trials that we expose ourselves to are very intimate and personal and as such are rarely expressed in words with ease.
- That being said, we discover that the spirituality of imperfection reveals a more realistic world to us. 'It begins with acknowledgement and acceptance of the dark side, the down side, of human experience. Rather than seeking ways to explain away or ignore suffering and pain by focusing on sweetness and light, the spirituality of imperfection understands that tragedy and despair are inherent in the experience of essentially imperfect beings' (Kurtz & Ketcham 1992:28).

It is in brokenness and imperfect spirituality that the glory of God is revealed. To acknowledge one's imperfection does not encourage in any way the romanticising of our flaws or to pity ourselves. It is important to recognise that, due to Nouwen's spiritual sagacity, it was his courage and willingness to face brokenness in the light of the power

of the gospel that became the main theme of his life, instead of imperfection (Hernandez 2006:94).

But, as a 'wounded healer', Nouwen's spiritual life embodies the power of *kenotic* love, and he inspires us to follow Jesus. Jesus calls those of us who are sent to live a life of self-abandonment (*kenosis*) and to carry the cross (*necrosis*) (Mk 8:34) (Keum 2018:38-39; cf. Keifert 2017:265). This does not mean practising acts of self-chastisement or abstinence. Rather, as described by Bonhoeffer, it is a life directed at those who are marginalised, one in solidarity with those who suffer (Keum 2018:38-39). It is only when we share the pain of love for others that we meaningfully empty ourselves and carry our cross. This comes at a high cost (Keum 2018:38-39; see last chapter of thesis).

Christian spirituality should be understood as 'embodied, this-worldly, and based on the incarnation and cruciform existence of Jesus' (Kreminski 2015). Those who live a Christian spiritual life should know 'to become more like Jesus is to become truly human' (Kreminski 2015).

4.6 Conclusion

Usually, the focus is on the self-emptying of Christ and the impact it has on God's relations with creation (see Richard 2005:395) – while it is the *kenosis* of the Spirit that adds value to Jesus' self-emptying. It adds depth to and transforms the spiritual engagement, negating the limits of space and time which had circumscribed Jesus in that historical time, according to Linahan (2005:172). With the entry of Jesus into humankind's greatest need in loneliness and death, God becomes more boldly present in every broken situation because of the succouring presence of the Spirit (Linahan 2005:173).

The Spirit is fundamental to the understanding of Christian spirituality, but is not the focus of spirituality (Cocksworth 2005:594-595). The agency of the divine Spirit is visible in creation, in other words, the focus of the Spirit's power lies on the impact it has on creation. Spirituality is frequently seen as a consequence of the inspiration of the divine Spirit (cf. Wessels & Müller 2013:3). No wonder that wind is a metaphor of the Spirit. One cannot see the wind, but only the result of it, e.g., a waving flag. The poem *Who has seen the wind* by Christina Rossetti comes to mind:

Who has seen the wind?
Neither I nor you:
But when the leaves hang trembling,
The wind is passing through.

Who has seen the wind?
Neither you nor I:
But when the trees bow down their heads,
The wind is passing by.

The Spirit is the fount, indeed the creator, of life, which, according to the Bible, is the breath of God (*ruach Yahweh*) that makes all that lives come alive (Linahan 2005:173). Thus, the Spirit is the 'creative power' of God; the essential giver of energy. The Spirit is also the 'saving power' with which God freed God's people from slavery. Beyond this, the Spirit is the 'prophetic power' that allows people to speak on behalf of God. But this power that is the Spirit of God has been, from the very beginning, also a 'kenotic power' (Linahan 2005:173).

The final chapter of this thesis (chapter 8) focuses on the importance of a missional spirituality, of journeying with anybody who is also sent to what is mainly the off-roads of society; and finding God amongst people who are marginalised. Spirituality is a life-long journey; it is neither an abstract way of thinking, nor a pleasure trip to an isolated island, but a broken journey. As Yaconelli (2002:13) summarises:

Spirituality is not a formula; it is not a test. It is a relationship. Spirituality is not about competency; it is about intimacy. Spirituality is not about perfection; it is about connection. The way of the spiritual life begins where we are now in the mess of our lives. Accepting the reality of our broken, flawed lives is the beginning of spirituality not because the spiritual life will remove our flaws but because we let go of seeking perfection and, instead, seek God, the one who is present in the tangledness of our lives.

This concludes 'Inspiration', the first Movement of the thesis, with chapter 2 *Understanding and experiencing God*, chapter 3 *The embodiment of God* and chapter 4 *Embodied spirituality*. Movement 1 has laid the foundation for the rest of this research. The second Movement, 'Investigation', builds on the first; it constitutes an empirical reflection on spirituality of persons with disabilities, starting with a chapter on the methodology of the research followed in this study.

MOVEMENT 2 INVESTIGATION

The French word *recherche* refers to both research and the work of a detective (Mouton & Marais 1988:156), in other words, to investigate. An Oxford dictionary description of the word research is '[t]he systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions'.

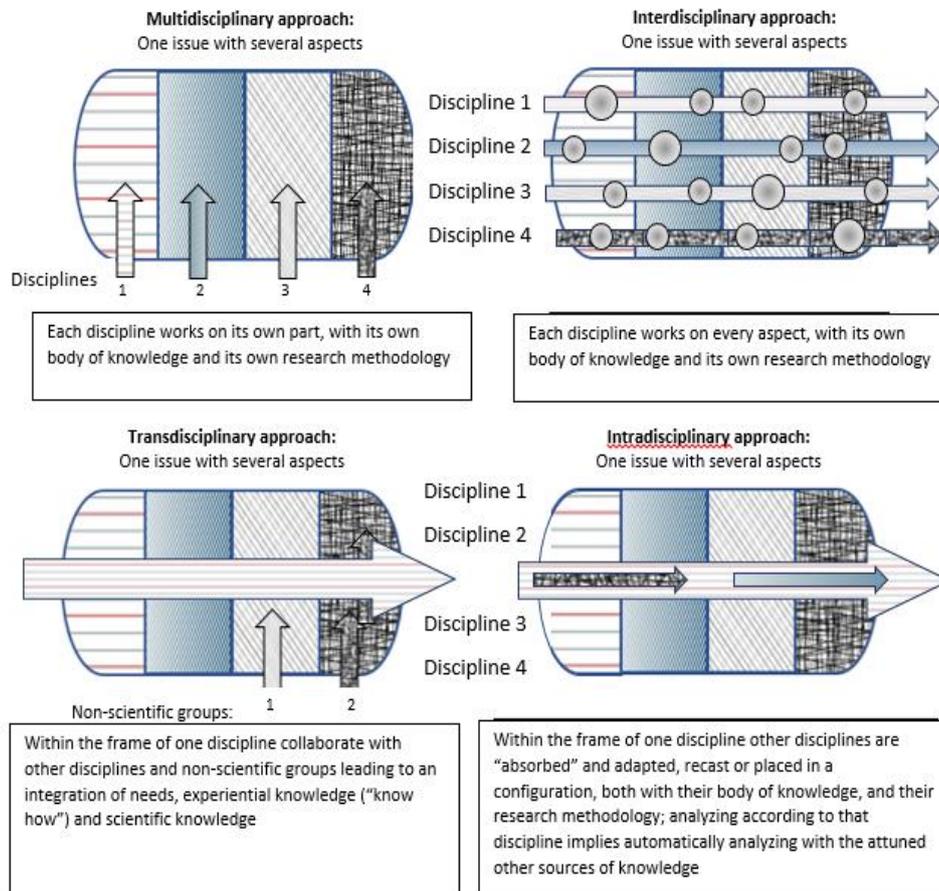
Empirical theology

Interdisciplinarity is defined as a 'cooperative relationship between two disciplines' (Van der Ven 1993:97). When utilised in theology, however, the latter runs the risk of becoming an unequal scientific partner of a more prominent empirical science (cf. Kromrey 2002:19–21; Van der Ven 1993:97-101). Faix (2007:125) regards an intradisciplinary approach as a 'basic prerequisite for cooperation between theology and the social sciences'. (See diagram 5.1.)

Theology exemplifies traits of intradisciplinarity (Van der Ven 1993:101). The concept intradisciplinarity refers to a discipline that borrows and integrates concepts, methods, knowledge and techniques developed by another discipline (Van der Ven 1993:101). Similarly, according to Klaver, Van Elst and Baart (2014:760), 'intradisciplinarity means that within the frame of one discipline, other disciplines are absorbed, both with their body of knowledge and their research methodology'. There are ample examples of the intradisciplinary model, e.g. the relationship between biology and chemistry (biochemistry); neurology and psychology (neuropsychology); linguistics and sociology (sociolinguistics) etc. (Van der Ven 1993:101). And, similarly, elements of other disciplines are integrated in theology, e.g. philosophy (Aquinas), psychology and philosophy (Tillich) and sociology (Metz) (Van der Ven 1993:101).

Diagram 5.1 Four disciplinary approaches

Source: Klaver, Van Elst & Baart (2014:758)



Empirical theology as proposed and coined by Van der Ven (1993) in practical theology is widely recognised today. He opts for an intradisciplinary model, which 'requires that theology itself become empirical, that is, that it expands its traditional range of instruments, consisting of literary-historical and systematic methods and techniques, in the direction of an empirical methodology' (Van der Ven 1993:101).

As with practical theology, missiology has a practical orientation towards reality and people, which makes the disciplines assignable to applied research (Kromrey in Faix 2007:114). 'For decades, missiology and practical theology have understood themselves as applied sciences, but in recent years, there have been several efforts to develop their respective methodological foundations' (Faix 2007:113). Faix regards empirical theology as a methodological foundation for missiology.

Empirical theology provided the methodological foundation for the empirical section of this study. I have undertaken this research as theologian and missiologist, integrating knowledge and techniques developed by the human sciences.

CHAPTER 5 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

5.1 Research design

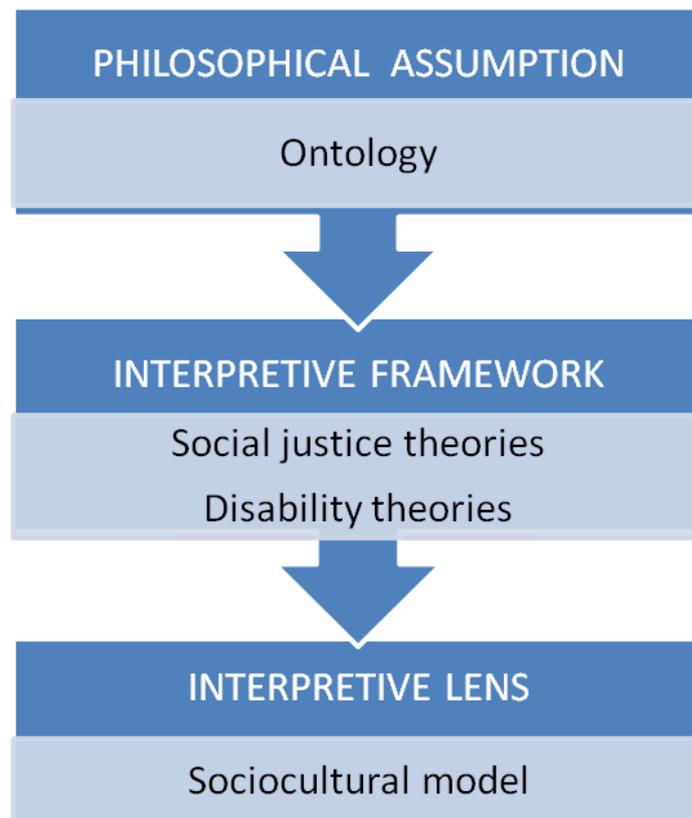
Empirical research was conducted by means of a qualitative approach. 'Qualitative research seeks to understand the actions and practices in which individuals and groups engage in everyday life and the meanings they ascribe to their experience' (Osmer 2008:49-50). Creswell (2013:15; cf. Wester 1991:39-40) contends, '[w]hether we are aware of it or not, we always bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research'. The researcher can take the capacity of missional agent for compassionate justice by employing a descriptive approach to obtain a deep understanding of the phenomena of interest (Louw & Eigelaar-Meets 2017), because a primary feature of qualitative research is social justice (Creswell 2013:4). According to Creswell (2013:131), this approach can give a voice to 'underrepresented groups'. 'We conduct qualitative research when we want to *empower individuals* to share their stories, hear their voices ...' (Creswell 2013:48). However, Louw and Eigelaar-Meets (2017) do not regard empowerment to be a reason for the choice of design, but for the benefit of the outcome of research.

The qualitative process is mainly dynamic, holistic, open-ended, individualistic and flexible compared to the quantitative approach that is more static, particularistic and inflexible (Lamnek in Van Niekerk 1997:82). The research process of this study (diagram 2) can be described in terms of the working definition of qualitative research, according to Creswell (2013:44):

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change.

Wessels and Müller (2013:6) have noted the lack of research projects that focus on spirituality, as a result of the strong association between research and quantification and objectivity. Research on the phenomena of disability and spirituality favours a qualitative approach (Creswell 2013:21; Hodge 2001:204; cf. Klaver et al. 2014:759). Every perspective that is revealed during enquiry is recorded (Van Niekerk 2014:184; cf. Mouton & Marais 1988:163). Researchers gain insight into the meaning participants create in their lives, and its influence on spiritual wellness (Aten & Hernandez 2005:274) by highly personalised information (Reed in Hodge 2001:204) shared during conversational interviews (Addendum 1). It is helpful that this material also reflects information that cannot be easily measured, such as participants' thoughts and feelings.

Diagram 5.2 The research process



5.1.1 Research process

The research study is shaped by the philosophical assumption of ontology, one of the basic beliefs of the transformative paradigm. A transformative paradigm puts emphasis on the life experiences of marginalised communities such as people with disabilities (Mertens 2009:48). ‘The *ontological* issue relates to the nature of reality’ (Creswell 2013:20), or ‘the essence of being’ (Louw 2014:6). Distinctive of ontology, multiple realities will come to be represented by themes that emerge from the perspectives of the participants in the study (Creswell 2013:20, 21; cf. Landman 1988:24).

Table 5.1 Paradigm of ontology (Creswell 2013:21)

<i>Assumption</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Implication for Practice (Example)</i>
Ontological	What is the nature of reality?	Reality is multiple as seen through many views	Researcher reports different perspectives as themes developed in the findings

Philosophical assumptions are related to frameworks of interpretation (Creswell 2013:22-23). The social justice theories are utilised as interpretive framework for social advocacy – questions pertaining to social change are addressed (Creswell 2013:23). In this instance, transformation regarding the social issue of equity as a basic human right of persons with disabilities has relevance. Furthermore, a disability interpretive lens is employed with a view to focusing ‘on disability as a dimension of human difference and not as a defect’ (Creswell 2013:34). The sociocultural model as opposed to the medical model²¹ is thus followed. For people with disabilities ‘reality is based on power and identity struggles’, associated with the tension between privilege and oppression (Creswell 2013:37). Social action is required in order for individuals

²¹ The deficit or medical model regards disability as a problem in the individual that needs a cure (Creswell 2013:24, World Health Organization 2001:20; cf. Creamer 2012:340; Do Razonio 1997:428).

with disabilities to enjoy full participation in everyday life (World Health Organization 2001:20).

5.1.2 Phenomenological study

The word *phenomenon* is derived from the Greek *phaenesthai* that means “to flare up, to show itself, to appear” (Moustakas 1994:26 cf. Van Manen 2014:27; Groenewald 2004:44; Landman 1988:22). The naturalist perspective, that reality is regarded as critically objective, is challenged by the phenomenological approach of Edmund Husserl (1858-1938) (Kourie 2009:165).

Husserl rejected the belief that objects in the external world exist independently and that the information about objects is reliable. He argued that people can be certain about how things appear in, or present themselves to, their consciousness (Groenewald 2004:43).

‘The aim of phenomenology is the return to the concrete, captured by the slogan “Back to the things themselves!”’ (Groenewald 2004:43; cf. Evans 2015:271; Waaijman 2002:536). An understanding that certain knowledge is based on natural phenomena, eliminates the problem of relating objectivity with reality. Furthermore, information derived from sensory experience of people in their natural way of being, interpreted through reason and logic, forms the exclusive source of knowledge for phenomenological investigation (Kourie 2009:165; cf. Groenewald 2004:45). According to Verma and Beard (Landman 1988:75), phenomenological theories ‘share the assumption that subjective experiences are meaningful and reliable data for understanding reality’. It explains the core of a ‘particular type of event or activity for a group of people’ (Osmer 2008:52).

Phenomenology is a qualitative research method which focuses on lived experiences. ‘Essentially, phenomenology is about experience itself. The beginning, middle and end of phenomenological method is the experience’ (Evans 2015:271). Max van Manen (1990) is a leading proponent of phenomenological theory and methodology. He has been attracted to phenomenology, because of its ‘reflective philosophical thoughtfulness especially that seemed to respect the reality of our experience-as-lived, the living of lived experience, and the meaningfulness of our lives’ (Van Manen 2014:13; cf. Compaan 2015; Groenewald 2004; Greene 1997; Holloway 1997).

Phenomenology is committed to the descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analysis. Descriptions retain, as close as possible, the original texture of things, their phenomenal qualities and material properties. Descriptions keep a phenomenon alive, illuminate its presence, accentuate its underlying meanings, enable the phenomenon to linger, retain its spirit, as near to its actual nature as possible (Moustakas 1994:58-59).

Qualitative research by way of phenomenology requires 'sensitive interpretive skills and creative talents from the researcher' (Van Manen 2014:41). Unlike other qualitative methods, phenomenology does not need 'repetition', 'comparison of outcomes, trends, and the indexing of data' (Van Manen 2014:29). And the inclusion of existing theories developed to explain human behaviour is optional (Lindegger 2006:463).

Phenomenology is about reflection and discernment. Phenomenology

is caught up in a self-reflective pathos of reflecting, discerning meaning in sensing the world of things, others and self. ... Meaning is already implicated in the mystery of prereflective reflection of seeing, touching, being touched, and being-in-touch with the world, and the enigma on reflecting on the phenomenality of all this (Van Manen 2014:17-18).

By means of a phenomenological research study 'the common meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences*' of spirituality is described (Creswell 2013:76). Worth noting is that answers to phenomenological questions about God originate from the inner experience of humans, instead of dogmatic abstraction (Compaan 2015:58). With a view to developing a deeper understanding (Creswell 2013:82, Mertens 2009:181), participants' subjective (and therefore personal) perceptions of spirituality are emphasised (Mertens 2009:181).

Of particular usefulness in this study is the hermeneutic phenomenology approach. 'A key component to hermeneutic phenomenology is not only describing the phenomenon under investigation, but also interpreting the meaningful experiences of those being studied' (Manning 2012:99). The purpose of the investigation is to explore the meanings persons with disabilities ascribe to the phenomenon of spirituality (Creswell 2013:81, Manning 2012; Do Rozario 1997; cf. Şimşir, Boynueğri & Dilmaç 2017; Cassar & Shinebourne 2012; Boswell et al. 2001), with a view to promoting social justice.

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Research participants

Polkinghorne (Creswell 2013:81, 149) suggests a sample between five and twenty-five participants. K. Kelly (2006:289) recommends six to eight participants in a homogeneous sample and/or when the duration of interviews are expected to be a few hours. Hycner (1985:295) states that phenomenological research requires a limited number of participants and reminds of the obvious focus on qualitative and not quantitative issues. 'Qualitative researchers typically work with – and actually prefer – small nonrandom samples of information-rich cases that they can study in depth' (Durrheim & Painter 2006:139).

'[T]he phenomenon dictates the method (not *vice-versa*) including even the type of participants', according to Hycner (1985:294). An individual was eligible to participate in the study exploring the phenomenon of spirituality of persons with disabilities, if he or she:

- was an adult who had some form of disability;
- was conversant in either Afrikaans or English; and
- acknowledged the existence of God or a supreme Being.

My original intention was to involve respondents from a rural and/or remote geographical area in South Africa. I found a contact person after I identified a small town in the Northern Cape. The contact person identified participants according to the selection criteria, but only one individual was prepared to participate. The other persons who declined the request were suspicious; because in the past outsiders apparently made promises that were not honoured after they left. The one interview that did take place was subsequently utilised as a trial run for the actual study.

Eventually participants were selected by means of convenience (K. Kelly 2006:288) and snowball technique (Durrheim & Painter 2006:139) sampling. First the Western Cape Association of Persons with Disabilities (WCAPD) was contacted and a champion was identified, who linked the researcher with suitable potential participants. Seven individuals at a residence for persons with disabilities were interviewed. The interviewees then recognised other individuals who had the potential to enrich and deepen the research with their life stories, and six more individual interviews followed.

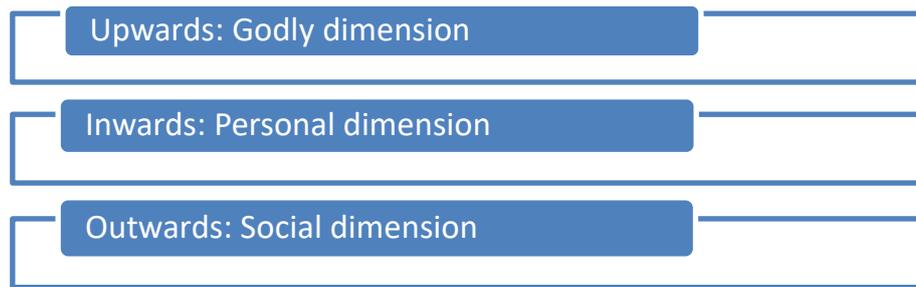
Informed consent was requested according to the prescription of the academic research ethical procedures of the University of Pretoria.

Table 5.1 Participants' demographic characteristics

INTERVIEWEE	AGE	GENDER	HIGHEST EDUCATION LEVEL	DISABILITY	AGE OF ONSET
1	26	Male	Grade 12	Quadriplegia	19
2	60	Male	Grade 11	Quadriplegia	22
3	38	Male	Post-matric diploma	Quadriplegia	26
4	29	Male	Post-matric diploma	Quadriplegia	17
5	71	Female	Grade 10	Hemiplegia	Birth
6	56	Male	Grade 12	Quadriplegia	36
7	55	Male	BA Diploma	Quadriplegia	26
8	39	Female	BA Hons	Paraplegia	13
9	59	Male	Post-matric diploma	Paraplegia	27
10	50	Male	Grade 10	Amputation	14
11	64	Male	Grade 7	Amputation	55
12	47	Male	Grade 8	Paraplegia	21
13	23	Female	Grade 12	Paraplegia	Birth

5.2.2 Data collection

In phenomenology, a time of attentive 'wondering' (Van Manen 2014:36, 27) precedes the inquiry stage in which questions are formulated by means of 'reflective insight, knowledge and narrative ability' (Van Manen 2014:37). Contemplating the definition of spirituality of Henry Nouwen (para. 4.4), a semi-structured interview schedule of open-ended questions came into existence with a view to exploring participants' experience of disability and spirituality. Its outline can be illustrated as follows:



The essential empirical research question is: What meaning does a person with a disability give to spirituality, as experienced on a personal journey with others, and with God or a Higher Hand? The actual questions put to the interviewees may have been variations of the main research question (cf. Kvale 1996), and were developed after an intensive literature study on spirituality. (See chapter 4.)

A conversational interview lends itself to natural interaction with people and makes interpretation of answers less abstract, in opposition to dealing with questionnaires, tests and experiments (K. Kelly 2006:297). Phenomenological interviewing aims for the collection of spontaneous narratives about 'the ordinary experience that we live in and that we live for most, if not all, of our day-to-day existence' (Van Manen 2014:311, 28; cf. Moustakas 1994:10, 114). The research team had individual interviews with thirteen participants at places of convenience. The duration of interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes.

The research facilitators compiled a written narrative of each participant's interview, and added field notes where applicable. Field notes is a record of sensory experiences during the interview as well as thoughts and ideas during collection of information (Groenewald 2004:48; Do Rozario 1997:431). The fieldwork report that was compiled appears in Appendix 1.

5.2.3 Explicitation of data

Phenomenological researchers prefer to use the term 'explicitation' instead of 'analysis'. Explicitation of data describes 'an investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while always keeping the context of the whole' (Hycner 1985:300 endnote 1; cf. Groenewald 2004:49; Kruger 1979:127). Alternatively, data analysis generally implies the "breaking into parts" and therefore often means a loss of the whole phenomenon' (Hycner 1985:300 endnote 1; cf. Groenewald 2004:49).

The first phase of explicitation took place when the researcher convened a meeting of a focus group (Do Rozario 1997:430) consisting of a theologian / pastoral therapist, three psychologists, and a FAMSA²² counsellor. Each group member was provided with a copy of the thirteen interview accounts and field notes a week before, and requested to note personally significant meanings and/or themes. A three-hour meeting of the focus group allowed for eight participants' narratives to be discussed. Members handed in their written notes on each of the remaining five participants' descriptions, and these were merged into the focus group record of contemplation. The synergy of the group process generated thoughts and ideas, and the richness of unique meanings, as well as some themes, emerged (Finch, Lewis & Turley 2013:212). Kruger (1979:127-128) refers to utilising the intermittent involvement of other professionals during this phase to seek agreement on units of meaning, i.e. specific meanings which emerged spontaneously.

The procedure of explicitation happens in five 'steps', according to Groenewald (2004:49-51):

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction (cf. Hycner 1985:280-282; Kruger 1979:128)

While the researcher brackets personal biases as far as possible, he or she reads each interview transcript with an open mind with a view to developing a sense of gestalt for each participant. The researcher is very much aware of the uniqueness of every interviewee in terms of his or her experienced life-world.

2. Delineating units of meaning (cf. Hycner 1985:282-284; Kruger 1979:128-129)

With this step expressions of meaning related to the phenomena of disability and spirituality are extracted separately for every participant. A transcript is repeatedly read, as well as the list of meaning units in order to be eventually left with the essence of experienced meaning for each interviewee.

3. Clustering of units thematically (cf. Hycner 1985:284-290; Kruger 1979:130)

The units of meaning for all the participants are clustered together in terms of particular themes that emerge. A back-and-forth process ensues between checking and/or comparing units of meaning for the individual interview with the list of (sometimes overlapping) themes. This ensures that the essence of meaning is captured.

²² Family And Marriage Society of South Africa

4. Summarising each interview (cf. Hycner 1985:291-292; Kruger 1979:130)

The researcher ensures that the summary of the interview is a true reflection of the inner landscape of experiential meaning for every participant. (A validity check is performed by checking with the interviewee that the essence of meaning was appropriately revealed, and if not, modifications are made.)

5. Composite summary of general and unique themes (cf. Hycner 1985:292-294; Kruger 1979:130-131)

In conclusion, general themes that were revealed during the cycle of explicitation as well as the unique variations reflecting personal experiences related to disability and spirituality, are summarised. And at this point, the participants' experiences of meaning are transformed into scientific discourse.

The following steps of the phenomenological explicitation process is reflected in chapter 6: summary of individual participant interviews, field notes and summary of ideas generated by the focus group on each interviewee, and the composite summary.

5.2.4 Validation

Validity refers to the accurate representation of data and consequently a truthful reflection of the meaning making of participants (Hycner 1985:297). Although it was not possible to return summaries of individual interviews to the respective participants to confirm correctness of meanings by way of a validity check (para. 5.2.2 point 4), a strength of this study is both interdisciplinary and researcher triangulation (K. Kelly 2006:380). During the investigative process various professionals from different disciplines were involved. Besides the primary researcher, the research facilitators responsible for the interviews and the subsequent narration thereof, are seasoned researchers from Sociology. And four professionals from Psychology and another from Theology made contributions through the activities of the focus group. This collaboration over time holds some measure of consensus with regard to the flow of material. Furthermore, the confluence of different perspectives on disability and spirituality and the themes that emerged with time, supports the credibility of the research (Hycner 1985:298).

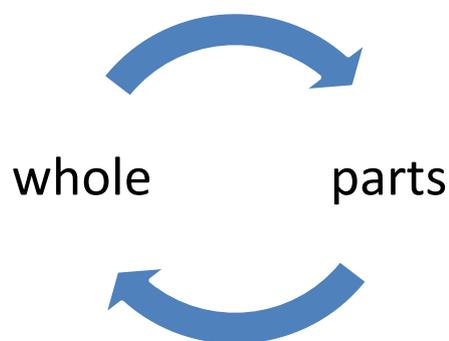
MOVEMENT 3 INTERPRETATION

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is a significant act of research; it is about the understanding and interpretation of information (Holroyd 2007:2). According to Schleiermacher (Schmidt 2014:10) '[h]ermeneutics is the art of understanding'; as such it is the 'philosophy of understanding', which enables and assists the researcher to give meaning to human phenomena (Holroyd 2007:2, 10). The word 'hermeneutics' is derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*. 'The noun *hermeneia* means the utterance or explication of thought' (Holroyd 2007:2).

Hermeneutics suggests that there are no 'measurable behaviours'; but investigation is triggered by 'encounters, lifeworlds and meaning' instead (Holroyd 2007:2). Holroyd also states that the need for hermeneutic understanding is most probable when persons endure disruptive experiences. For example, experiencing ill health can motivate a person to search for meaning.

Diagram 6.1 The hermeneutic circle (simplified)



The phrase 'hermeneutic circle' is mentioned in most discourses of hermeneutics. This concept refers to understanding being dependent on how the meaning of the parts (e.g. the words of a sentence) and of the whole (e.g. the sentence itself) feed into each other in a to and fro action, as it were (Schmidt 2014:4). Schleiermacher suggests using a first reading with a view to gaining an overall sense of meaning and in this way unlocking this 'circular' mechanism to get to the meaning. Thereafter, the focus is on

each part individually – all the time with reference to the whole, and moving to and fro
– until meaning reveals itself (Schmidt 2014:4; see Osmer 2008:23).

CHAPTER 6 STORIES ABOUT DISABILITY AND SPIRITUALITY

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 starts with the importance of listening actively to stories of persons with disabilities: this action can be empowering for both the storyteller and the listener. When persons with disabilities tell their own stories, listeners get an opportunity to respect them for being the “authors” of their own lives’ while they convey knowledge about their individual capabilities that define their uniqueness (World Council of Churches 2016:5). Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004:9) confirm this view with reference to stories relating to trauma and growth (para. 6.3.13). That is because the structuring of such narratives compels survivors to face, and to fashion meaning from, their experiences – a process which allows for the retelling (or re-experiencing) of what had happened. These (retold) narratives of severe mental or physical pain and consequent growth may also bring about growth for those who listen. Consequently, ‘[t]hese stories transcend individuals, and can challenge whole societies to initiate beneficial changes’ (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004:9).

The research question: ‘What meaning does a person with a disability give to spirituality as experienced on a personal journey with others and with God or a Higher Hand?’ was, as indicated earlier, not asked directly during the interview. Aspects and dimensions of a holistic and relational spirituality (personal, social, and Godly) were rather addressed.

This chapter consists of the written narratives of each of the 13 participants, as well as applicable field notes for some of the interviews (para. 6.2). Each narrative is introduced with a summary of the participant’s biographical details. The narrative is followed by a summary of the reflections of the focus group on a participant’s unique experiences related to disability and spirituality. A discussion of general and unique themes of meaning that emerged from the conversations is then provided (para. 6.3). The chapter is concluded by a composite summary of findings on the research topic (para. 6.4).

6.2 Participant interviews

Interviewee 1

Age	26 years
Gender	Male
Highest Educational Level	Grade 12
Type and Level of Disability	Quadriplegia (C6)
Age of Onset of Disability	19 years

While he was studying engineering at a college, he had a car accident. He was unconscious for three weeks due to swelling of the brain. His mother was his single most important source of inspiration and assistance for the three years he stayed with her. He also enjoyed the support of his friends for the first six months after the accident. Thereafter they gradually 'left' him.

During this time his relationship with his mother started to deteriorate – he was in a dark space in his life and decided he needed to get out of home to establish a measure of independence. He therefore moved to The House²³ where he has been residing for four years now. This move improved the relationship with his mother who is still his main source of inspiration and emotional support.

His self-image is a tricky issue. He had a big frame (116 kg), was very active and played rugby at provincial school level. He finds it extremely difficult to accept the radical transformation in his physical appearance and condition (70 kg). He avoids mirrors and consciously blocks out emotions. One way to make him feel better is the use of alcohol, although he admits this is no solution. In addition, he frequently accesses YouTube – he often views inspirational religious sermons.

Accepting his disability is a difficult, gradual and continuous process of learning to deal with the associated challenges and obstacles, and it requires patience. Listening to music, and writing about diverse themes are two ways of filling his days, as well as often dreaming of 'what could have been' and 'how his life would have been'. The greatest and most severe loss due to his disability is the irrevocable forfeiture of his

²³ Residence for adult persons with physical disabilities

dreams for the future.²⁴ He is still struggling to come to terms with this reality because his greatest passion was, and still is, to help people and organisations in many ways; something he did before the accident (by doing volunteer work, like lifesaving).

His longest and closest friend from his home town, as well as friends at The House and his mother, represent his sustainable support system which is precious to him. There are not many sources that offer and add meaning to his life – he sums it up as ‘only those I love and love me’ and who show interest in him.

He finds people to be destructive and ‘stupid’ (for example, the assistants / carers at The House). He is intolerant of so-called political correctness of the ‘world out there’ and its consequences. He finds other people’s behaviour towards disabled people unacceptable – from his experience, people tend to belittle the disabled by often ignoring them and would rather speak to abled people in a social setting (such as a café) and stare at²⁵ the disabled person’s condition – this makes him angry and frustrated.

He has an experience of God as showing him lots of unconditional love, irrespective of his behaviour and sins. Praying is very important to him because it calms the storm raging in his inner self. (‘When I pray I can kill the storm brewing in me.’)

Also, very importantly, God’s presence and praying facilitate acceptance of his condition and reality: ‘what must happen, must happen’. It brings an overall sense of calmness.²⁶ When he prays he asks God to open up the path he must follow to deal with his challenges.

He is presently not involved in organised religion (church) and generally has a jaundiced view of it. He was brought up in the *NH Church*²⁷ and was forced to attend and was confirmed. After the accident he was visited and supported by members of the *NG Church*.²⁸

He described his current level of excitement regarding the future as ‘not positive’, but more positive in terms of long term prospects. He regards his future expectations / dreams as ‘normal’, i.e. to meet a partner, have kids, and grow professionally. (He did

²⁴‘Ek moes dit wegpak.’

²⁵‘vergaap’

²⁶‘rustigheid’

²⁷ Afrikaans: Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk

²⁸ Afrikaans: Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk

a number of law modules, but terminated his studies.) In the long run he would like to become financially independent and sustainable in order to assist his mother for whom he has unbridled admiration and gratitude.

Field notes

The interviewee displayed an overall negative attitude towards 'other people'.

Focus group

The relative young age of the participant in relation to the severe functional impact of his disability was noted. The accident happened when he was 19 years old, and he is currently 26 years of age and as a quadriplegic is severely restricted in terms of movement.

The process of acceptance requires patience. He has not yet come to terms with his disability. His physical appearance is a significant issue. He not only lost a lot of weight; he is now bound to a wheelchair while he was physically active before. He avoids looking at himself in the mirror, and he gets cross when people with a disability are either stared at or ignored. He also perceives his carers to be treating him with disrespect. So he struggles with self-acceptance within a relational world that is also not accepting of him as a person with a disability. And he mourns the dreams that are not to be, for example, to live out his passion to be of help to others.

His mother and friends were his safety net after the accident. His physical move away from his mother later ensured that she is still his main source of emotional support. Presently he derives meaning from love as the active ingredient of reciprocal relationships with a few friends.

The interviewee feels angry and frustrated. He has not given up, he is 'fighting' worthlessness. Avoidance, use of alcohol, and daydreaming are seen as ways he defends himself against the harshness of his reality. Alternatively, he copes by listening to music and inspirational sermons, praying, and writing.

As a child he was forced to go to church. Now that he has a choice, he no longer attends. Although people from the church assisted and supported him after the accident, he has a negative view of organised religion. He does however watch inspirational sermons on YouTube and prays to God. As is the case with his mother, he experiences God as unconditionally accepting of him 'just' as he is – with sin and

all. Prayer is an important activity: it has a calming effect, helps him to accept the reality of living with a disability and an opportunity to ask God for guidance.

He contemplates the notion of normalcy. According to him, he has 'normal' dreams, the dreams many individuals of his age have, i.e., to have a stable relationship with a partner and have children, and be financially independent.

Interviewee 2

Age	60 years
Gender	Male
Highest Educational Level	Grade 11
Previous Occupation	Professional Soldier
Type and Level of Disability	Quadriplegia (C7)
Age of Onset of Disability	22 years

The participant stopped working in 1980 when he was injured in a landmine explosion in the former Rhodesia – the accident caused the loss of both his legs above the knees. Due to the loss of his legs he deals with a sense of feeling 'top heavy'. He described himself as relatively independent. He has limited use of his hands, and owns a car that has been modified considerably. This adds to his mobility and integration in mainstream society: 'I go to a pub on Fridays and to shopping malls'.

After the accident he was hospitalised for seven months. Two decades of 'jolling' followed after his discharge. He was flushed with money attributable to military compensation, his pension, and personal policies.

He was totally dependent on friends as his support system since his mother left him at the age of four, and he subsequently spent his school and formative years in an orphanage. According to him, this was a hard and uncompromising experience – but something that stood him in good stead when years later he was confronted with, and had to accept and deal with, the trauma that eventuated in his disability.

For seven years from 2000, he worked as a security officer in the close circuit monitor rooms of a casino. At the moment he is employed as a receptionist at a disability

centre. However, he is worried about the prospect that he will probably have to terminate his job as receptionist due to medical advice – the extended periods of time he is required to sit, is too long.

His friends help him to make sense of life and give meaning to it. Although he receives substantial support from friends both within and beyond The House, he stressed that him assisting his close friends is equally important in living a meaningful life. For example, he supports ex-soldiers who have to deal with post-traumatic stress. This supportive involvement with others has had a pivotal role in propelling him towards maintaining a constructive attitude towards life.

A positive attitude towards life in general is his coping mechanism to go through every day. Although life is sometimes uncomfortable and tricky, he stays positive. This optimistic disposition he ascribed to the reality of losing his mother at the tender age of four – taught him to embrace a positive and accepting philosophy towards life. According to him, he never blamed his mother for abandoning him, although this loss as well as losing his legs, sometimes brought the question, ‘why me?’, but then he also often says to himself, ‘why *not* me?’

He regards himself as popular among both abled and disabled people. He regularly gets invited to celebrations, such as weddings. This makes him feel ‘good’ about himself and he views his popularity to be linked to his positive attitude and inclination to be helpful, and wanting to be part of many people’s and families’ lives.

Overall, his personal experience of a sense of loss in society / the community due to his disability is getting progressively less severe. The only real sense of loss is his inability to secure a decent professional career and associated income.

‘There is a Higher Hand that is doing so much good for me.’ He was unequivocal in his understanding of the presence of the Almighty. His image of the Almighty is, it ‘brings warmth when I am cold and shade when I am warm; all over it brings brightness to my life’. The main impact of the presence of this higher force / Almighty is that it keeps him doing good and in a positive frame of mind. All the good things that happen to him and that which he receives²⁹ are due to the presence of a Higher Hand. This

²⁹‘die gawes wat ek ontvang’

keeps him from being negative: 'if I am negative I will draw negative energy into my life'.

He neither attends church, nor participates in any structured religious ritual.

He has distinct dreams about the future. He wants to undertake a European tour to track down his ancestors in Holland and visit other countries of interest to him.

Field notes

It is clear his faith is an intensely personal experience and understanding.

He obviously is a very sociable person that finds strength and inspiration and meaning to life from interaction with people.

Focus group

This participant has accepted more than one loss in his life. His childhood – having been abandoned by his mother at age four and growing up in an orphanage – 'prepared' him for what he was eventually confronted with in terms of disability: he lost his legs and some functionality of his hands as a result of a landmine explosion. The saying, 'what does not kill you, only makes you stronger' comes to mind.

He paints a positive picture of his life 38 years after the accident. His financial means maintain a fulfilling life. Despite his quadriplegia, he sees himself as relatively independent. He is mobile due to a modified vehicle that allows access to 'mainstream society'. He shops in shopping malls, and for him the pub is a place to socialise with people, rather than to drown sorrows. He has been supported by his friends all along, but friendship is a two-way street. As they support him, he also supports them. He is a helper and is involved with friends who deal with the aftermath of trauma. He also finds meaning in his job, but if he has to resign due to medical reasons, his social world will shrink notably.

He is an extrovert who draws life energy from others around him. The participant is comfortable among abled-bodied or disabled persons, because he knows he is well-liked. That this results in him feeling good about himself, reminds of how self-concept is brought about: we view ourselves through the eyes of others.

The interviewee has an internal locus of control.³⁰ He has decided to be positive. He has decided to reframe his disability constructively in terms of his past. He has decided to make the best of his present circumstances, although he is honest about the times he does think about the 'why me?' question and the professional career and associated income that he never would have.

He does not participate in organised religious activities. His expression of faith is not linked to some or other structure, it is a highly personal experience. Images of sensory comfort and positive energy are associated with the Almighty. And the Almighty is linked to a feeling of security. In this way the Almighty infuses the participant with optimism and altruism.

It was noted that the interviewee would like to go trace his ancestry in Holland. Is this perhaps linked to the need to know his roots, because he was deserted by his mother? Be that as it may, he has ideas for the future.

Interviewee 3

Age	38 years
Gender	Male
Highest Educational Level	Post-Matric Diploma
Previous Occupation	Various occupations abroad in the hospitality and security sectors
Type and Level of Disability	Quadriplegia (C4/5)
Age of Onset of Disability	26 years

Currently he is a silent partner in a kitchen fitting manufacturing business. He became a partner just before he had the accident. When he dived into the sea at a holiday destination, he hit a sand bank and broke and damaged his spine / neck. He described his disability as 'total' – i.e., he needs to be assisted with eating, bathing and dressing.

³⁰ 'The extent to which people believe they have power over events in their lives. A person with an *internal locus of control* believes that he or she can influence events and their outcomes, while someone with an *external locus of control* blames outside forces for everything' (Fournier 2016).

He described the path he has travelled since he became disabled, as 'unsure, dark (and) filled with deep anger and an unwillingness to accept what happened to (him)'. The first three to six years after the accident he continuously contemplated a way to commit suicide. He compared himself to his friends and realised how he would not be able to achieve the expected milestones of life they would, like marriage and having children, as well as securing gainful employment. But he was physically unable to take an overdose of tablets, and friends and family would not leave him alone next to a pool. During this period he did forgive God for allowing the accident to happen to him, but his choice was still not to live anymore.

As part of his refusal to accept his disability and its impact on his quality of life, he started exploring the option of stem-cell treatment. He described this process as difficult due to its controversial nature in South African society and especially within the medical fraternity. Eventually he succeeded in locating a doctor that did the procedure. The improvement in the level of disability post-treatment is about 10%. He now has a measure of control of hand movement and is able to manipulate his wheelchair.

Prior to his accident he avoided people in wheelchairs; he thought they were weird and smelly. After the accident this negative perception and view of disabled individuals continued; and he isolated and insulated himself from the outside world, dealing with an overwhelming and all-consuming anger. He described his perception of himself during this period as that of a half or incomplete person and he could not look at himself in the mirror.

He has progressed. He has made peace with his body, and also with his relationship to the opposite sex. This happened when he misconstrued the attention he was given by a specific woman, and her intentions. From her point of view their relationship was purely platonic, but while dealing with this disillusionment, he realised that she helped him to start integrating himself with the world outside. Close friends played and still play an essential role in this healing and slow process of self-acceptance.

The first years of disability were a period of being strongly anti-God and anti-religious. The turning point in his life came when he contracted a serious illness and was placed in an induced coma. As he regained consciousness, he experienced a vision of three distinct figures. The attending doctor told him categorically that it was not antibiotics

that saved him; and according to the interviewee, he had a 'near death experience' which was the pivotal moment that he became convinced of the existence of a 'Higher Hand'. He believes this experience after the spell of pneumonia initiated his acceptance of and subsequent engagement in a spiritual life. He described his relationship with God before his accident, as well as prior to his near death experience, as something external to him, a ritualistic following without meaningful content and inspiration.

He described organised religion (church) as something that means nothing to him. After the accident, when church elders visited him, he became anxious, and he still does not like their presence. He described every new experience (for example, a visit to the Kalahari Game Reserve recently) as a confirmation of the omnipresence of the Almighty.

He is much more positive about the future now. He is no longer concerned about his personal well-being and he does not think about suicide any more.³¹ He now concentrates on what he can manage to do, rather than on what he cannot do. However, functionality still remains a struggle at times.³²

He has clear future goals and dreams – to propagate the practice of stem-cell transplants in SA, and to have a girlfriend in his life. If the latter happens, he would consider it as a Godsend intervention.

Field notes

His new found positivism is evident in a fresh attitude towards life.

Focus group

Due to a diving accident twelve years ago, the interviewee had complete loss of physical functionality and therefore self-sufficiency. He gained some functionality of his hands as a result of stem-cell treatment. This allowed him control of his wheelchair.

Before the accident, he had an unfavourable perception of people in wheelchairs, and he consciously avoided them. Following the accident, he was unable to look at himself in the mirror; he perceived himself to be a 'half' and 'incomplete' person. He has grown to accept his bodiliness though and his perspective on disability changed radically.

³¹'Ek wil nie meer doodgaan nie.'

³²'By tye is ek gatvol en teleurgesteld.'

Relationships, particularly with friends, facilitated his self-acceptance. Coming to terms with his heterosexual identity was a very significant step of his social adjustment.

The participant is open about the emotional journey to eventually arrive at the place of accepting his disability. It was a gradual process that was not easy and it took time. The first stage was depression: 'dark and deep' go with 'insulation and isolation'. A phase of mourning the total loss of realising his dreams followed: inner rebellion, anger and forgiveness. God did not cause the accident, but the interviewee had to forgive God for allowing it to happen to him. His focus eventually shifted to acknowledging his strengths rather than his weaknesses – the glass has become half full rather than half empty. However, he still sometimes experiences frustration caused by the practical challenges associated with the extent of his physical limitations.

He presents himself as a person who is determined to do what he has set his mind to. Ironically, the only reason why he was unable to commit suicide while severely depressed, was because he was incapable of executing a plan without assistance. And presently he is committed to promoting stem-cell treatment in SA, after he has experienced its personal benefit himself.

There were two stages of developing a close relationship with God. Immediately after the accident, he was 'anti-God' and 'anti-religious' and felt threatened by 'church' people. (One of the focus group members wondered whether the church elders evoked anxiety due to the participant's personal associations with their message and his experience of church.) But then he contracted pneumonia, and he had a near death experience which set him on a personal spiritual path. This moment reminds of the experience the apostle Paul had. Consequently, God is no longer 'external' to him now. Furthermore, having new experiences brings personal confirmation of the omnipresence of God. For example, through nature he realised God's presence is greater than his personal experience of Him. The whole is more than just the sum of its parts.

The interviewee holds an optimistic view of the future. His dreams are about helping others and ordinary things, such as having a partner. To have a girlfriend will be a specific answer to prayer.

Interviewee 4

Age	29 years
Gender	Male
Highest Educational Level	Post-Matric Diploma
Previous Employment	Company Internship
Type and Level of Disability	Quadriplegia (C4/5)
Age of Onset of Disability	17 years

He described himself as ‘totally disabled’. Since the onset of the disability, the participant was unable to find any employment. He has applied for numerous jobs without any success. This is a cause of a deep sense of frustration and anger within him. He declared that employers do not want to make special arrangements to accommodate people with specific constraining characteristics.

According to him, his early teen years were those of a normal youngster – he was law abiding, up to mischief as young boys typically engage in at times, and particularly active in sport. He mainly engaged in cricket, his main passion, and he excelled by having played at provincial school level. From a very tender age he dreamt of becoming a professional cricketer representing his country. This dream was shattered during a confirmation excursion of his church with a diving accident in a swimming pool. He was in Grade 10 at the time. He completed his school career at a high school for learners with learning disabilities.

He singled out the presence, love and enduring support of his family (especially his father, but also his siblings) that continue to give meaning to his radically different life since the traumatic experience. According to him, his father is the person who plays an irreplaceable role in his life. The fact that he was able to complete his school and academic career against significant odds, confirmed and proved to him that he can lead a normal life – contrary to the message of his doctors at the time of the accident that an academic career was an unrealistic expectation. ‘I am proud of what I have achieved, my degree. I will say I am a confident young man.’

He sometimes visits his family in his home town and does interact with his old friends during short visits. He also finds meaning in life and coping with daily challenges in his quest to make a real difference in the lives of people living with a disability. He wants to help improve their personal conditions and life prospects. He described himself as much less self-centred, and much more caring since the accident. His major challenge is boredom – he has a constant hunger and desire to use his academic skills if only some institution or company will employ him. He keeps contact with two of his lecturers and thus stays up to date with the latest developments in his field.

Dealing daily with the limitations and constraints brought about by his accident is 'very tough sometimes, especially when I am hungry I need someone to feed me. I like to go to the Waterfront and sit in my chair and gaze at the sea for hours. When I get hungry, I ask a stranger to feed me. They never refuse. I need a lot of patience and acceptance daily to cope'. He attributes his ability to cope with life's challenges to the hard material realities he was confronted with as a very young child. This gave him the emotional muscle to accept the diverse challenges he now faces daily. His early childhood years were hard and uncompromising; he was brought up by a single parent and with very limited resources. 'From a young age, life taught me to accept, accept what confronts you and move on.'

The most significant loss due to his disability is that of not being able to play cricket anymore, followed by an incessant lack of independence, a sustainable and decent income due to doors of job opportunities being closed in his face and an omnipresent thirst for a 'normal lifestyle'.

According to him, religion is very deeply embedded in his socialisation. He described himself presently as not being religious, but that he does pray to a higher force which he believes exists. He believes personal experiences does not happen randomly: 'Things come across one's life or other people's lives for a reason'. He declared, 'God looks after my life and is responsible for me having embraced a positive attitude. This gives me emotional strength to carry on and live a normal life'.

Field notes

He is the only interviewee who arrived on his own – in his wheelchair. He is a coloured person and has the highest academic qualification of the four respondents interviewed

thus far. During the interview he repeatedly referred to a general unwillingness and reluctance of employers to employ disabled candidates.

His father clearly is of paramount importance in his life.

Focus group

Despite a tertiary qualification, the participant still has not been able to secure himself a job at the age of 29 years. It is noted that this is his situation despite him as a coloured person belonging to the previously disadvantaged group.

After the accident when he was 17 years old, he was determined to finish school and proceeded to further his studies post-matric. His qualification has special meaning to him and his self-confidence is linked to it. His personal experience of discrimination in the work place brings about feelings of anger and frustration. If only he had the opportunity to feed his enquiring mind and apply his skills, he would no longer be bored.

He does not have a 'poor me' attitude. He asks others for help, but he also sees himself to be the helper of other persons with disabilities. Perhaps he is much more able to accept the help of others, because he also helps others. It can be described as an interdependency between him and others. He has accepted his disability.

Although he was confronted with economic hardships during childhood, he has enjoyed stable relationships with his family and friends all along. The support of his father especially since the accident, has greatest significance to him. Their love and support have made it possible to adapt to a radically different life. His greatest loss is that he had to give up on the dream to be a cricketer one day.

A 'normal lifestyle' is an important idea to the interviewee. With academic achievements he proved to himself that living a normal life is not an unrealistic expectation. And he also believes God provides him with the emotional strength to live a normal life. But this wish for normal life remains unfulfilled, because he is not employed and does not earn a decent salary.

From his point of view, the course of personal events is not coincidental. Very early in his life he already had experiences that prepared him for dealing with his disability later and he was able to 'bounce back' eventually. He believes God allowed this

accident to happen to him for a reason. Due to the accident and his disability, he changed from being self-centred to being caring of others.

Something shifted in terms of practicing 'religion' for him. As a child, he was socialised in the church – in fact, it was during a confirmation excursion that the life-changing accident happened. Currently he does not see himself as being 'religious'. He does pray to God and believes that God takes care of him though. His image of God is enabling: the credit for his positive attitude in life goes to God. However, one also gets a strong sense of a person whose internal locus of control is the driving force behind a choice to be happy.

Interviewee 5

Age	71 years
Gender	Female
Highest Education Level	Grade 10
Employment	None
Type of Disability	Hemiplegia
Age of Onset of Disability	Birth

The left side of the participant's body is affected due to a dislocated hip since birth. From the age of 19 she is a recipient of a monthly disability grant.

Her level of independency is good – she can feed and dress herself. However, balance is a challenge to her: She walks unassisted over short distances, but needs a walking aid for longer routes. She contracted breast cancer 20 years ago, and had to use a wheelchair post operation. She does her own shopping with the aid of an assistant / helper.

She was born and raised in the Cape Peninsula where she attended a main stream school and felt accepted by her peers. According to her, having a disability since birth makes it easier to accept and live one's entire life with it – this is her 'normal'. Her parental support was very good and consequently, the loss of her mother had the greatest impact on her.

She never worked and she pointed out that, when she was young, societal attitude towards people with disabilities was not as accommodating as presently. In the past there was not much understanding that resulted in little integration of people with disabilities in the community.

She described herself as not so clever, 'a bit slow'. Regarding self-image, she stated that it is 'not necessary to look in a mirror', but 'what I see, I accept'. She reflected that even at school she was okay with herself, she had good friends and support that protected her against abuse. She also feels safe while living in The House. She is mostly happy rather than moody. She is comfortable with the way she is being treated in society.

As far as friends are concerned, she declared that as a result of having been 'institutionalised', i.e. away from 'normal' society for 33 years, she lost her former friends. At present her friends are those living with her in the confines of The House, and they socialise during routine tea times. She did, however, point out that she does not depend on friends to keep going and to cope daily: 'I am strong in myself'. What gives her meaning in life is the fact that she is still alive – thus having lots to be grateful for.

From her point of view, her future prospects are probably filled with boredom and frustration, but she is anxious about the financial demands of caregiving at The House: 'Where will I go if I cannot afford it anymore?' She does not believe in dreams, because 'they never come true'.

She grew up as a staunch Anglican. She habitually reads her Bible every evening, but on the question whether she gets inspiration from this, she commented that the Bible is 'very complicated'. She is firm and solid in her belief that 'there is a God ... I just know that God is somewhere'. According to her, the physical world (mountains, ocean, etc.) is evidence that there has to be a creator, but natural forces could also have played a role.

Field notes

She described herself as having a minor intellectual disability. This clearly impacted on her ability to grasp certain questions during the interview and subsequently respond in a nuanced and comprehensive fashion.

Her greatest loss is not related to her disability, but to the loss of her mother. This probably should be seen within the context of her being born disabled – she thus never experienced a loss of mobility.

This participant's life does not include a strong religious dimension – her engagement in this appears to be more habitual than representing a meaningful source of fulfilment.

Focus group

The participant is 71 years of age, and her mobility is decreasing. But she is still functioning quite independently. From her experience, there is a positive shift in society with regard to accommodating persons with disabilities at present. When she was young, persons with disabilities were not integrated in the work place. She was never employed.

For this interviewee, disability is 'normal' – she does not know any life other than the one she leads, because she was born with a disability. Her disability has subsequently not brought about a time of adjustment during which she mourned losses and got used to another kind of life. For her, viewing one in a mirror is also associated with body image. It is interesting that her image in the mirror is not associated with self-acceptance. She is also comfortable with her slight cognitive impairment.

In the context of her being very mindful of the parental support she enjoyed, it is very understandable that she considers the loss of her mother as the greatest. She seems to have grown up in a shielded community – at the main stream school she attended, she was well accepted and her friends were protective of her.

There are advantages and disadvantages to 'institutionalisation'. Her need to feel safe and secure is very well met. However, she lost her former friends as a result of it, and life tends to be boring. On the other hand, the question whether she would continue to be able to afford the contentment and security associated with her stay, directs her anxiety not to the past, but to the future.

Life's meaning is linked to gratitude. She tends to be quite concrete: she neither has dreams nor an obvious relationship with God. She habitually reads the Bible, but she struggles a bit with its content. However, one focus group member mentioned, she cannot be too 'slow' if she viewed the geographical features of the physical world as a combination of the work of the Creator and natural forces?

Interviewee 6

Age	56 years
Gender	Male
Highest Educational Level	Grade 12
Previous Employment	South African Police Service (SAPS)
Type and Level of Disability	Quadriplegia (C 5/6)
Age of Onset of Disability	36 years

The interviewee was a police officer on duty during a robbery incident. He was shot in the face and a bullet lodged in his spine. During the period 1996-1998, his wife looked after him. Since 2013, when he contracted a serious infection, he became more dependent on carers. Presently he is marginally self-sufficient and can feed himself with one hand. For other functions he is dependent on carers.

Since the traumatic episode, his most challenging emotional obstacle was coming to terms with the total rejection he experienced from his wife. ('She wanted to kill me.') While his wife lacked empathy, she did not give him any emotional support. This rejection and subsequent loss have been ameliorated to some extent through the emotional well-being associated with his close contact and relationship with his daughter and grandchild.

He does not perceive his personality to have changed by being bound to a wheelchair. 'I do not think of [sitting in a wheelchair]. I am not to be pushed around (figuratively meant), I still have the same personality that I had as a policeman.' And when he needs help, he asks for it, although it remains difficult to have a disability.

Besides witnessing the happiness and well-being of his daughter and grandchild, he also derives meaning to carry on with his daily life through his strong religious roots that help him accept his disability and the reality with which he is confronted: 'What happened to me is not good, but God gives me the strength to cope with this – this is the only way to cope'. Although he struggled very much initially, he never asked God, 'why me?' He only asked God's help to deal with it.

In the period after the accident he received good support from friends and family. However, over time, they disappeared. When it dawned on him, 'I am alone in life now', it was very difficult for him to emotionally accept this sense of having turned invisible. He stated that his only real enduring friend (apart from his family members) is God: 'I talk to him when I close my door'.

He is categorical that his faith has been significantly fortified since the accident. He believes that God has the power to make him walk again one day. He believes God showed his omnipresent power by letting the accident happen and allowing him to survive; so He has the ability to also make him recover completely. However, sometimes his patience runs out, and he asks God when this is going to happen.

Field notes

This participant's mother tongue is Xhosa. He started to study law, but terminated his studies during the first year.

He clearly relies on God nearly exclusively to deal with emotional downs and has embraced God as the central figure and citadel of his strength to deal with the broken reality that people in his position face daily. This is evident in many of his responses he offered, questions relating to dealing with existential issues and those revolving around meaning and acceptance.

Focus group

Twenty years ago, this participant experienced two losses – first his physical ability and the personal independence related to it because of a shooting accident, and the loss of his marital relationship through his wife's emotional rejection subsequently. The latter loss was harder for him to process than the former.

Relationships are very important to him. The supportive relationship with his daughter and his grandchild respectively adds to his emotional well-being at present.

He has coping skills at his disposal. After the accident he is still a self-assertive person; he would still not allow anybody to 'push him around'. And he does not mind being dependent on others: He asks for assistance from others when he needs it. His religious upbringing helps him cope with his disability as well.

He has a favourable image of God and the personal relationship with God gives him inner strength. There is a difference between being rebellious and being honest about

experiencing life with a disability as a struggle. He is waiting for a miracle. While God 'willed' the accident and his survival, the interviewee believes He will also demonstrate his omnipresent power by letting him recover completely. But he admits, he is impatient that it has not happened yet.

A focus group member wondered whether the participant's culture plays a role here, or is his idea of expecting a miracle similar to those of other believers. Not everything a person has internalised is necessarily linked to personal experience. The narratives of others are also taken into one's knowledge base. On the other hand, although a miracle is not a certainty, miracles do happen.

Interviewee 7

Age	55 years
Gender	Male
Highest Educational Level	BA and Diploma
Previous Occupation	Actor
Type and Level of Disability	Quadriplegia (C4/5/6)
Age of Onset of Disability	26 years

Resulting from a car accident at high speed (200 km p/h), the participant's spine was broken. He was in a coma for three months and in rehabilitation for four months. He made enormous improvement. He has slight cognitive damage in the sense that he sometimes drifts from one topic to another during conversation.

Before the accident, he was an actor who composed musicals and performed in them, and he led an extremely active life (gym, sport etc.). His disability is of such a nature that he is largely dependent on carers, although he is able to turn himself from one side to the other in bed. He experiences major discomfort daily due to high levels of pain.

He conditioned and orientated himself to accept his limitations. He was in a relationship prior to the accident and even though his partner wanted to continue their

relationship, he decided it was best to end it due to the constraints his disability imposed on reality.

Accepting his post-accident physique has been a challenge. Initially, 'I did not like when I saw myself for the first time after the accident'. Currently he prides himself in his well-toned body and is meticulous in what he eats daily – he tries not to gain weight.

He does associate loss with his disability. The long time it takes to perform basic functions is torturous – 'Everything takes long ... my disability steals my time'. He stressed that it was a learning curve to get used to and not allow this to make him bitter. Sustained contact with significant and supportive friends and meaningful relationships are still ways of keeping himself positive. He harbours no grudge and animosity towards other people, but intensely dislikes inconsiderate individuals in society.

He spends time on the internet and DSTV daily. He has a fixed weekly date with his sister – he described their visit to a restaurant as 'a highlight of the week'. His support network is his church and his sister, as well as a pool of long-lasting close and great friends.

On the question, 'who gives meaning to your life', he replied with one word: 'Jesus'. He derives meaning from life and is able to carry on with living primarily through the strength he receives from God. He described himself as a born-again Christian that received anointment from God. God has always been a pillar of strength, 'a cornerstone in my life', also in his pre-accident life. His intimate relationship with God helped him to subdue his anger and it brought about a level of calmness in his life.

He definitely senses the presence of the Almighty: 'I feel a Spirit around me, a Presence, a Force and Omnipresent Power that had the capacity to create a world'.

As far as his future is concerned, he wants to write his life story and history.

Field notes

The 'drift' during conversation as a result of cognitive damage he mentioned, was not evident during the interview.

Focus group

This participant is 55 years of age, and comes across as a rational person with an internal locus of control and perhaps these characteristics have something to do with

his acceptance of his disability. The reported cognitive impairment does not seem to have had any effect on his participation in the interview. He is perceived as a determined person: he decided to end the relationship with his partner (due to the limitations his disability imposed on his functioning) and he also opted to work against anger and not become bitter. The process of acceptance took time and conscious effort.

Chronic pain is part of his daily life. But despite this, he participates in living. He gives the impression of a person whose social interactions are positive. Relationships are important; his support system consists of his sister and people at his church. A highlight of his week is when he and his sister visit a restaurant. And there is enjoyment in socialising with his group of friends.

Before the accident 29 years ago, he had a physically active lifestyle. It was difficult for him to look at himself in the mirror at the beginning. But not everything changed with the accident. He is still a disciplined person and he maintains a healthy body weight.

The personal meaning of time stands out. Following a motor vehicle accident at the speed of 200 km per hour, he is severely physically disabled. And presently, this disability acts as a time thief in his life – he gets tortured by the time even the simplest action takes to execute.

His faith was already established before the accident. He is a church-goer and he seems to associate with the charismatic style of worship. Church is a very important source of social support. His metaphors to describe God, not only relate to the traditional church architecture, but also to Biblical concepts: God is his 'pillar of strength'³³ and a "cornerstone in his life".³⁴ These sentiments confirm the personal meaning of Jesus in his life.

The interviewee is realistic in terms of future expectations. He would like to leave a personal legacy to the world by writing his autobiography. This is reminiscent of the Maslow hierarchy of need fulfilment.

³³e.g. Jr 1:18; Ps 75:3; Rv 3:12

³⁴e.g. Is 28:16; Eph 2:20-22; 1 Pt 2:4-8

Interviewee 8

Age	39 (almost 40) years
Gender	Female
Highest Educational Level	BA Hons
Occupation	Media programme manager
Type of disability	Paraplegia
Age of Onset of Disability	13 years

The interviewee's disability resulted from a spinal infection supposedly caused by lack of iron. She is mostly independent in terms of performing basic functions (clothing, preparing food etc.), due to her arms and hands not at all affected by the disability. She enjoys mobility by means of a specially adapted vehicle that gives her a large measure of independence and freedom that significantly adds to her quality of life. She has a strict exercise regime, and enjoys swimming and preparing food – she is aware of the importance of maintaining a manageable body weight. She experiences discomfort of pain daily, but she is acutely conscious of so many others who suffer more and face markedly more challenging obstacles than she does. For example, 'the single mother of three children in Khayelitsha who has to rise 4 o'clock in the morning' makes her grateful of what she has and what she is able to do.

She described the biggest challenge of her life's journey since the onset of her disability as being confronted with general society's sustained lack of understanding of the position and challenges faced by disabled people, and their absence of empathy. She mentioned numerous examples of the lack of accommodation she has had to deal with and still experiences daily; e.g. lack of ramps that allow access to restaurants, inaccessibility of bathrooms due to it being used as storerooms, or keys misplaced. She also mentioned the patronising attitude of some people towards her: Once she missed a show at an Arts Festival due to not being allowed to park her car. Taking air flights also presents a marked challenge. She related incidents of not being allowed to use her therapeutic cushion while seated in the aeroplane, or having had to crawl to the bathroom. Situations like these remind her of the reality that her disability remains an impediment to being accepted.

The most severe sense of loss is related to the inability to do what she wants to. Her disability has imposed marked limitations to the life she would have chosen for herself. For example, she misses dancing and participating in sport. However, ironically, being in a wheelchair has opened doors to various personal opportunities and perspectives on life that she would otherwise not have had.

Her primary source of inspiration and sense of meaning is associated with her work. She is aware of the positive impact she has on some of her audience and that she serves as an inspiration to them. However, she verbalised this awareness with hesitancy, because, due to her Calvinistic upbringing, she rather tends to be deprecating towards herself.

Despite her tendency to be self-critical, she views herself in a positive light.³⁵ She does not allow people with preconceived ideas about her or people with disabilities in general, to upset her or influence her self-image. Her experience is that people residing in Gauteng are generally more open-minded towards and accepting of being different.³⁶ She does not have a sense of personal psychological vulnerability. She describes herself as a fairly independent person and her close friends are her support system.

At her core lies her faith. God is present in her life.³⁷ She has an awareness of God who is a source of energy, and she is adamant that grasping at God's hand³⁸ helps her live her life. She does not allow herself to ask the question, 'why me?' She made mention of the role of evolution.

She has adopted a philosophical stance towards the future that a balance is required between having particular expectations, but not being too specific what should or could. Too much planning forfeits one's adaptability.

Focus group

At the age of 13 years, a spinal cord infection resulted in the interviewee becoming paraplegic. She completed her postgraduate studies and at 40 years of age, she is currently employed in her field of interest. Her job is a source of personal fulfilment.

³⁵'Ek hou van myself!'

³⁶'Hulle is meer oop vir iets anders.'

³⁷'God is teenwoordig in my lewe.'

³⁸'n gryp na 'n Hoër hand'

The participant's positive mind set is inspiring. On the one hand she does not deny the reality of living with a disability, and on the other, she embraces the 'good' that has come from it. She is well aware of the irony that various opportunities she has had are linked to her loss of freedom in terms of physical activities: her wheelchair is therefore both a symbol of loss and gain.

Her context is defined by a large measure of independency. She is able to care for herself. Driving her own adapted vehicle ensures her mobility and she holds a fulfilling job that inspires her. She is able to transcend her personal discomfort as a result of chronic pain and be altruistically aware of and compassionate about the suffering and circumstances of others, also those without physical disabilities. A group member wondered, is there a correlation between this interviewee's positive outlook and her practicing gratitude?

Matching her level of functionality, her frustrations lie with challenges in terms of accessibility of the able-bodied environment. She is strongly critical of society at large for its lack of understanding of and empathy with people with disabilities. The focus group members agree her anger is justified.

She does not introject³⁹ her disability in a self-destructive way, like perceiving it as a punishment from God. Although she is realistic about her practical challenges, she makes choices to ensure optimal quality of life. She is disciplined to stay fit and healthy by controlling her weight. She has chosen to not be negatively affected by some people's attitude of indifference.

She appears to be positively challenging her own self-criticism, the legacy of her Calvinistic upbringing, and this results in her healthy self-image. She is aware of the positive effect she has on her audience. She is also able to shift her attention from herself to others. The impression is that she has favourable social relationships in general.

She has a personal relationship with God. She is conscious of God as her spiritual core. God is a source of energy and her helper to have the life she leads. Her image of God is therefore enabling. It appears that her faith is more centrally sustaining than the friendships she has. Her metaphor to describe her relationship with God – grasping

³⁹ According to the Oxford dictionary, introjection means 'the unconscious adoption of the ideas or attitudes of others'.

the Higher Hand to manage life – evokes the chorus of the song written by Gene MacLellan:

Put your hand in the hand of the man
Who stilled the water
Put your hand in the hand of the man
Who calmed the sea
Take a look at yourself
And you can look at others differently
Put your hand in the hand of the man
From Galilee

The reference to evolution ties up with her open-mindedness. A lack of specific reference to the church in her life, coupled with indirectly holding religious dogma responsible for her negative, self-critical attitude, possibly reveals institutionalised religion still to be a factor in her life.

The participant believes her adaptability is ensured by striking a balance between goal directedness and flexibility.

Interviewee 9

Age	59 years
Gender	Male
Highest Educational Level	Post-Matric Diploma
Occupation	Retired SAPS ⁴⁰ officer
Type and Level of Disability	Paraplegia (T3/4)
Age of Onset of Disability	27 years

During 1987, the participant was in a coma for three weeks after a police vehicle accident during a non-crime incident. A protracted rehabilitation period as a result of a spinal cord injury followed, until he was able to resume life at home. When he left the safe and caring environment of the hospital after the rehabilitation period, he experienced insecurity and angst. Initially he did not grasp the impact of loss of

⁴⁰ South African Police Service

mobility, but the gradual realisation of it progressively filled him with anger. According to him, he still feels resentment currently in every instance he is confronted with an unfamiliar environment. His current level of functional independence is relatively good; he is able to eat and dress himself.

After the accident, he decided to return to the SAPS despite the option to be medically boarded. He made history as he was the first active member to be afforded the luxury of an adapted police vehicle upon his return to the service. He turned into a role model for police officers with disabilities during his time of service. He retired at a high rank, well-endowed and with a lift installed in a spacious home. His employment at the SAPS ensured him a solid pension and excellent medical cover for his entire life.

Post-trauma he has derived inspiration and a sense of meaning of life; first from a treasured, successful and meaningful career in the SAPS. He described his return to the service after his disabling injury the best decision ever in his life. Second, he married after the accident, and he and his wife have children. And, friends he made during his career still visit him regularly. The latter's sustained support is of particular importance to him.

He described the void created by retirement as an emotional experience more challenging than becoming disabled. One way of filling the void has been to develop an active involvement in organisations linked to the disabled community. His relationship with his wife is very important to him, particularly after retirement. He sometimes becomes anxious if his wife is absent for protracted periods (for example, when she goes shopping). He constantly wants to know of her whereabouts. (He would be worried that she might have had an accident.) This anxiety originates from a sense of feeling insecure and vulnerable.

The participant has no self-image issues and views himself exactly as other people do. Despite his disability, he proudly continued wearing his uniform, and he stressed that he was always impeccably dressed. He was and still is very aware of his appearance projecting a neat and well-groomed image of himself. His wife, children and long-lasting friendships constitute his primary support system – from his point of view, they are of paramount importance to his mental health and making sense of life.

He has no issue with the way others treat him as a person with a disability. According to him, while he was a police officer it was his duty to make other people feel at ease

in his presence. But he is still confronted with structural challenges, i.e., the height of tables in restaurants or the non-availability of bathrooms for the disabled.

He strictly keeps to a daily routine which he considers to be a driving force.⁴¹ He emphasised that without a schedule, daily life can get mixed up.⁴² He starts his day reading the Bible and praying with his wife.

Prior to his trauma he was mindful of the presence of a Creator and Higher Hand in his life. However, his spiritual consciousness was sharpened in the post-trauma phase. He and his wife are intimately involved in organised religion and he pointed out that their new church building is now much more accessible to him. He also stressed that the church, and thus by default God, whom he regards as a 'Being'⁴³, is not responsible for him becoming disabled, but facilitated some direction that developed greater focus on life, and with age his religious participation increased.⁴⁴

Although he lives from day to day, he has specific future plans. For example, he would like to take his wife on a road trip to Namibia in his personally adapted vehicle / mobile home.

Field notes

His wife was present during the entire interview.

Focus group

At 59 years of age, this interviewee is retired. His financial circumstances allowed him to make changes for the convenience of every day functioning after an accident at the age of 27 years: a lift in a luxurious home, medical cover, and an adapted mobile home vehicle. This probably links with his high level of functional independence. A relatively favourable situation was furthermore brought about by continued employment in a personally highly meaningful career, professional respect received, financial security, and the support of a dedicated wife.

⁴¹'dryfkrag'

⁴²'anders kan my dag opgeneuk raak'

⁴³'Wese'

⁴⁴'Die Here het 'n hand in my lewe gehad ... nou is ek meer gefokus ... met ouderdom kom daar 'n meer intense godsdienstige meelewing.'

He is very much aware of the accommodations the SAPS made for him to be able to continue working post-accident. However, at present, insufficient structural accommodations do sometimes hinder his daily living after retirement.

It is important to him to set a good example for others. It is noted that he was able to transcend the personal impact of the disability when he returned to work after the accident, and to focus on what was expected of him as a police officer – to make others feel comfortable in his presence with a view to being of service to them. Retirement subsequently caused more of an adjustment than his disability status initially did. Consequently he became involved with organisations linked to the disabled community to fill the void of retirement.

Bodiliness is an important aspect: He gives a lot of attention to his physical appearance. The discipline and routine demanded by his profession quite likely tie in with the strict religious schedule he maintains, and possibly with his belief in a creator God, and his hands-on involvement in organised religion, perhaps also having been actively involved in the construction of a new church building.

According to Freud (Engler 1979:54), the meaning of life is to work and to love. This participant speaks proudly of his job and his wife, his friends and family. His sense of meaning comes from work (even after retirement, a lot of his value seems to stem from his identity as a policeman) and love (his wife, children and long-lasting friendships). However, personal meaning and social support do not seem to be sufficient to let anxiety dissipate.

Anger is one of the phases of loss. His initial anger was linked to the loss of mobility. Two aspects of emotional functioning that are apparent currently, are anxiety and sporadic resentment. He is retired now, and dependent on his wife. He associates a feeling of anxiety with her absence. He resents unfamiliarity. It is possible that the presence of his wife makes coping with strange situations easier.

It seems the trauma deepened his sense of spirituality.⁴⁵ Ageing also seems to be an important factor. He has an awareness of God's role in his life and is not blaming God for his injury.

⁴⁵

For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver (Ps 66:10 NIV).

This participant is actively involved in religious activities. He and his wife follow a daily morning devotion routine of reading the Bible and praying together. Their new church building is more easily accessible with a view to him attending services. One group member wondered whether he played a part in the design of the new church building, to improve accessibility for persons with disabilities. Another group member wondered if his wife's connection to church played a role in his involvement there.

His dreams for the future appear to be realistic, he would like them (him and his wife) to travel.

Interviewee 10

Age	50 years
Gender	Male
Highest Educational Level	Grade 10 (at age of 19 years)
Type of Disability	Amputation
Age of Onset of Disability	14 years

The participant contracted a virus that eventually led to the amputation of his right leg from below the knee. He had several unsuccessful operations. In the first six months his mother assisted him. During the post operation rehabilitation phase, he used crutches and then prosthesis was fitted. Although he was accepted to join the army, he was declared medically unfit after six weeks. He then worked in a butchery for three years and did an apprenticeship as a block man. He relocated from his family in the Eastern Cape to stay with friends in the Western Cape. He did wood work for his keep. He met his wife and after a marriage of seven years, during which they had one child, his wife fell ill and passed away. He developed another infection and a year after her death, the upper part of his right leg was amputated. He described this as the darkest phase of his life resulting in him unsuccessfully trying to end his life twice, first by rolling

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed (1 Pet 1:7-8 NIV).

his wheelchair into a swimming pool, and then later ingesting toxic household products and tablets.

Then he left his mother-in-law's home and moved onto the streets for a short period of time. He secured accommodation with a financially struggling family, and he still stays with them. He has developed a special friendship with the oldest daughter of the family – she is half his age.

He described his current level of independence as high; he has a fully functional upper body and he is able to feed, bath and dress himself. He earns his keep by begging at a road intersection of a busy road, usually between 09:00 and 19:00 daily. His income is relatively substantial. (It varies between R120 – R350 per day although he can earn up to R600 per day.) This enables him to contribute to household expenses. He does not receive a disability grant due to the fact that his disability is classified as 'partial'.

Occasional joys are related to his son (who has a mental disability), the family he resides with and religious experiences. He does not see himself as 'happy' though. Although he is no longer suicidal, he is still not in a good head space. A married couple helped him to come to acceptance of his fate and also introduced him to their church. This helped him to gain a sense of pride in his own abilities, i.e., 'I do not like people pushing me. I manage; I can get on the pavement from the road'. He finds meaning in helping an impoverished household to cope through his contributions. He has no other friends, besides his son, his girlfriend and her son with whom he developed a close and caring relationship.

He expressed mixed feelings regarding others' reactions towards him. Some people are accepting, and others can be very rude and insulting while he begs. 'There is one Afrikaans white guy in a big 4x4 who is very rude; he often shouts, "you white trash!"⁴⁶ This is hurtful and embarrassing and he consequently feels depressed and helpless: 'People think we are all the same, we take the money and get drunk ... I don't drink any alcohol'. According to him, he copes by trying hard to forget who he is.

He feels very frustrated that he is unable to secure himself employment: He has approached a number of businesses for a job, and he gets the same answer every time – they will contact him, but they never do. He has therefore given up on this dream. He would like to build his 'own' accommodation on the family's plot, because

⁴⁶'jou wit gemors!'

this will establish some security for him, and this prospect makes him optimistic and excited about the future. On the other hand, thoughts about the cost of a Wendy house and the realities of the job market dampen his outlook on the future.

He does not presently attend church. However, he is strongly aware of God's presence, protection and blessing daily – he expressed a clear and strong sense of vulnerability while moving in and through the traffic in his wheelchair, but 'God protects me daily at the robots'. He described God as a caring energy / person.

Field notes

This interviewee sits in a wheelchair at robots and asks for money from passing traffic.

He repeatedly mentioned how socially marginalised he feels.

A strong sense of disillusionment is evident.

I asked him to send me his contact details; I want to see if WCAPD can facilitate access to a grant.

Focus group

The participant is 50 years old and makes a living by begging at the robots of a busy street junction. He has given up looking for a job. He uses this income to contribute to the household of the financially destitute family with whom he stays. He has experienced complex trauma: illness at 14 years of age resulted in an initial amputation; he later lost his wife and then a second amputation followed.

The suffering due to the loss of his wife and the second amputation brought about the 'darkest phase of his life', and resulted in two suicide attempts. But presently he has a reason to stay alive, although he does not consider himself to be 'happy'. His respective relationships with his son, his partner and her son are very meaningful to him. He furthermore demonstrates his 'worth' as individual by contributing to the household expenses of his partner and her family who took him in.

While he has come to accept his 'lot' as a person with a disability, not everybody is accepting of him, in fact one specific individual has rejected him outright. He has a limited support network and feels socially marginalised. He has also felt hurt, embarrassed, depressed, helpless, insecure and disillusioned in the past.

His level of independence is high. It is interesting that he does not consider himself to be employed – specifically self-employed – by being a beggar. This is in spite of his pride in his physical ability to function self-sufficiently on the streets, and his consciousness of the fact that he is not spending money on liquor, but contributing to the livelihood of an impoverished household. From his point of view, beggars are stereotyped as drunkards. He specifically experiences abusive insults hurled at him when he begs. Then he tries ‘to forget who he is’. Is his deliberate self-obliteration a mechanism for self-protection? A group member considered the idea that persons with disabilities are more prone to stereotyping.

Church seems to have played a role at some stage in his life. The participant’s increased self-acceptance seems to have coincided with his introduction to church by a married couple. His faith operates independent of church attendance currently. God is seen as ‘caring’. Whereas he is physically extremely vulnerable in his wheelchair in traffic, he is strongly aware of God’s presence, protection and blessing daily.

‘Owning’ his accommodation in future will foster a feeling of security. But the excitement that accompanies such a prospect is dampened by the concern that he would not be able to afford it.

Interviewee 11

Age	64 years
Gender	Male
Highest Educational Level	Grade 7
Previous Occupation	Bricklayer
Type of Disability	Amputation
Age of Onset of Disability	55 years

The interviewee was born in the Northern Cape and relocated to the Western Cape in 1970. Due to blocked arteries left unattended, an amputation followed in 2009. His one leg is still functional, although he has increasing lack of movement, due to the

blockage problem. There is a possibility that he will lose some of his toes, and an operation is due soon.

He has never married. He stays alone in a tin shack,⁴⁷ but he will be moving into a new 'RDP'⁴⁸ house shortly. He receives a disability grant and claims to be totally independent.⁴⁹ A young girl whom he knows very well, helps him, e.g. by cleaning his house and pushing his wheelchair. Two caring ladies also play an important practical role in his life.

He loved his job as a bricklayer, and since the amputation this is his greatest loss: He earned a decent income and had a good life by doing something he really loved. His failing physical health is the overpowering challenge that has consumed his life and sense of well-being since 1994. He has come to terms with his disability.⁵⁰ It did not make him bitter or angry. According to him, he has turned into a better person since becoming disabled. And he has learnt to live according to his means.

He was categorical that his religion, i.e. reading the Bible, makes him positive, but he does not attend church.⁵¹ This, and the role that the two ladies play in his daily life are pivotal in terms of his well-being. He described himself as a very positive person. He claims to be more positive than many of his friends.⁵² When his friends and two sisters visit or phone him, he takes it as a sign of their continued interest in him as an individual and his well-being.

When he is at home, he listens to the radio and he also enjoys reading. He has an extensive friendship circle that includes both abled and disabled people – he described himself as extremely social and friends thus play an important role in his life.⁵³ Others make him very happy, because they show great affection for him. This he attributes to his positive disposition which attracts people to him.

⁴⁷'hok'

⁴⁸ the former 'Reconstruction and Development Programme' state housing project

⁴⁹'Ek het geleer om na myself te kyk, ek moes. Ek kook, was myself, trek myself aan...die jong meisie maak my huis skoon, sy het voor my grootgeword.'

⁵⁰'Ek is rustig daaroor.'

⁵¹'Ek het drie Bybels en lees baie gereeld – ek gaan nooit kerk toe nie.'

⁵²'Mense kan nie glo hoe positief ek is nie.'

⁵³'Ek beweeg baie buite op en af in die straat en gesels met almal; as ek hulp soek, is my vriende daar vir my.'

According to him, there is only one thing that gives meaning to his life – his God. God helps him to love and to live.⁵⁴ He believes it is the Almighty that helps to alleviate his daily discomfort and pain after he prayed to him.

His image of God is a human-like figure that never stops giving him power and energy to deal with his challenges.⁵⁵ Since becoming disabled, his faith has strengthened and it helped him deal with the operations he had to have. He is optimistic about the future.⁵⁶ Although his only dream is to come closer to God and serve him better in future, he would really like to get an electric wheelchair.

Field notes

I found this coloured man rolling his chair while I returned home after a female potential participant reneged after confirming her appointment. The interviewee struggled to grasp the more abstract questions and philosophical aspects of the interview.

He claims to be totally independent, but when I met him he was pushed by a young girl – he pays her to do this.

He clearly is highly involved in his religious experience and this is a crucial crutch in his often solitude; also, the two ladies play a critical role in both his physical and emotional well-being – he is an impressive individual.

In the time since the interview, he has received an electric wheelchair. My colleague and I initiated a fund raising attempt, and with the donations bought the wheelchair with a view to actualise a dream of his.

Focus group

A group member remarked, 'It is actually very difficult to understand the optimism of this interviewee, because his circumstances are actually supposed to have the opposite effect'.

The participant loved his job as a bricklayer. Nine years after an amputation at the age of 55 years, the cost of the fulfilment of this job is still his greatest loss. But there is meaning to his disability: It changed him into a better person. He is therefore neither angry nor bitter about this. It is actually the opposite; he believes he has become a

⁵⁴ 'My God leer my elke dag om lief te hê en te leef.'

⁵⁵ 'God stel my nooit teleur nie.'

⁵⁶ 'Ek is nog nie moeg van die lewe nie; ek wil nog nader aan God kom.'

better and more responsible person as a result of his disability. Failing health does remain an overpowering challenge, even after he accepted his disability. He stays alone in a shack and experiences daily discomfort and pain due to his health condition. He prides himself in his capacity to be positive though.

His healthy self-image is not based on his bodiliness, but on his extroverted and spontaneous personality. He is energised by people and this is the force that pulls people towards him. His social support system consists of the two ladies, the cleaning girl and his friends, and the radio. Although he later said only God gives meaning, the empathic interest of both abled and disabled friends, also seems to have significance in his daily living.

He regards himself to be 'totally independent', although he receives a disability grant, needs to be pushed around in his wheelchair (before having an electric one), has the help of a cleaning girl and the unstinting support of two ladies. Having accepted his disability, he does not have any problem to make use of the assistance of others when he needs it. Another group member wondered, is his definition of independence different to that of able-bodied people? Therefore, 'When there has been a loss of functionality, and you have learnt to adjust to your 'new' abilities, do you get a 'new' idea of what it means to be independent?'

His faith is not linked to a church, but to a concrete representation of God as a human-like figure. God becomes internalised through actively reading the Bible and praying. He makes a direct link between these 'religious' activities and his positive attitude towards life. He feels a strengthening of his beliefs. He calls upon God to alleviate pain and to help him deal with challenges. God has never failed him; he has an unflinching belief that God is helping him. He is optimistic and hopeful about the future, for circumstances to improve. And he wants to serve God.

Interviewee 12

Age	47 years
Gender	Male
Highest Educational Level	Grade 8
Previous Occupation	Assistant baker

Type of Disability	Paraplegia (C5/C6)
Age of Onset of Disability	Approximately 21 years

The interviewee was born and bred in a coastal town in the Western Cape. After completing Grade 8, he was forced to leave school due to economic pressures, as well as negative peer group pressure. He had a stormy youth, belonged to gangs, used drugs, but rehabilitated himself eventually. He found gainful employment as an assistant baker after drifting for approximately five years. Since then he is staying with his family. While earning, he cared for his mother, a passion that he still has, but which frustrates him now, because of his lack of income potential.

He had a diving accident. He lay comatose in hospital for approximately one week; thereafter a rehabilitation period of about seven months followed that included intensive Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy. His injury improved from C5 to C6 due to the success of the therapies. As far as independence is concerned, he can feed, shave, and dress his upper body himself.

His life changed in two ways after the accident. First, living means dealing with physical vulnerability and increasing fragility due to disability, and second, his religious awareness and involvement are much more intense.

He described the first six years post-accident as very difficult. Emotionally he could not accept what happened to him and virtually never left home. He was embarrassed by the physical transformation that had taken place and he was ashamed: He avoided contact with friends and strangers at all cost. He described his biggest losses to be his good health previously and his mobility. However, he slowly gained confidence to the extent that he started swimming competitively and participated in quad rugby.

He met his wife during this time, and he wore a black suit and sat at the pulpit in his wheelchair when they got married. Being accepted by an abled woman did wonders for his self-esteem. However, the 'old person' took hold of him again. Since then he has turned lazy, unmotivated and has put on weight again. He is not happy with his body image at present. He feels guilty about being overweight – it sometimes makes it difficult for his wife to assist him. Her struggle to help him is a concern to him.

He attributes his new beginning, apart from his wife, to the personal awareness of God's presence in his life.⁵⁷ Before the accident, his religious life was 'lukewarm'.⁵⁸ But now he is a strong believer in God and religion plays a central role in structuring his daily existence, for example, he attends Bible study meetings.

He does not have a problem to interact with others. He described himself as a friendly and warm person with the ability to communicate easily with others, also abled people. This is because he has the ability to put others at ease with his condition – people tend to find his company enjoyable. His disability has taught him to not be too sensitive, and he now tries to forget his problems and stay positive.

He sees his role to be of help to others; in his community poverty is rife, and he supports those who feel 'down'. His contact with extended family is virtually non-existent and according to him, they have no concern for him. But he does not care, because he is able 'to stand on his own two feet'.⁵⁹ His few close friends are all wheelchair-bound.

The participant is thankful for being alive after the accident, and he is presently content despite his disability.⁶⁰ According to him, it is with God's help that he is able to cope with daily living; it is his faith that makes him carry on.⁶¹ Furthermore, God also helps him to keep calm and sane every day. And the Lord helps him with any challenge.⁶² For example, he was seriously ill (with TB and bronchitis) a couple of years ago, and when the medicine did not work, he thought he was going to die. Then he had a vision of a circle of bright light transcending on him, and he was subsequently healed.⁶³ This experience cemented his relationship with God even more. After what God has done for him, he is even more motivated to be alive and to serve the Lord.⁶⁴ He does not attend church.

He feels positive about the future and has a purpose to live: He sees his destiny as helping and encouraging others with disabilities.⁶⁵ He dreams of starting a small

⁵⁷'toe het die Here in my lewe gekom'

⁵⁸ 'louwarm'

⁵⁹ 'Hulle worry nie oor my nie, waarom moet ek oor hulle *worry* ... ek staan maar op my eie bene!'

⁶⁰ 'Ek is dankbaar dat ek nog elke dag kan asemhaal en elke dag kan lewe is vir my genoeg.'

⁶¹ 'Die Here help my om die lewe te hanteer. Ek weet nie waar ek sal wees as dit nie vir my geloof was nie.'

⁶² 'As daar probleem in my pad kom, gee ek dit vir Hom, hy help my altyd.'

⁶³ 'Daar was helder sirkel met skerp lig wat op my neergedaal het, daarna was my siekte oor.'

⁶⁴ 'Ek wil net aangaan met my lewe en die Here dien, ek weet wat die Here vir my gedoen het.'

⁶⁵ 'Ek het 'n *destiny* meneer, ek het nog 'n rol te speel om die *disabled* te help en hulle te *encourage*.'

business with a view to be independent of others, and he would also like to make extensions to his house.

Field notes

He did not want to say much about his relationship with his wife.

He is clearly deeply religious, and God and faith play the most important role in his life. He is a soft spoken man that oozes empathy for fellow humans – this includes his wife, but especially his disabled support group.

It seems he has a strong emotional core that enables him to detach himself from his own torturous material and physical reality, and enables him to deeply care about others in precarious positions.

Focus group

For approximately 25 years, this participant has been living a personally meaningful life despite paraplegia. Before a diving accident, he had rehabilitated himself from drugs, was employed as assistant baker and able to provide for his mother.

Bodiliness surfaced quite often during this conversation. Participation in sport had a positive effect post-accident on his body image during the phase that the interviewee was still coming to terms with the effect of the disability. At first he was so ashamed of his physique, that he isolated himself socially. Then he married an able-bodied woman. As his self-acceptance increased, so did his positive perception of himself. However, in the meantime he has gained weight, and his present discomfort with his body is about the difficulty this creates for his wife assisting him. He feels guilty for his body weight causing her to struggle when she helps him.

It is hurtful that his family lost interest in him. It seems that the way he deals with this hurt is to rationalise that he does not need them anyway, because he can take care of himself. But he also deals with the reality that he is unable to earn an income to provide for his mother and other people.

It seems his experienced physical vulnerability and cumulative fragility are balanced out by growing religious awareness and involvement. A spiritual transformation – described according to the sentiments of Rv 3:15-16, i.e. becoming totally committed – followed the accident. This includes an experience of miraculous healing. However,

organised religion in the sense of attending church has remained unimportant. That being said, he does find Bible study a fulfilling activity.

Post-trauma God plays a central role in his life and in his ability to cope and meet daily challenges. He also attributes his healing to God. He experienced a miracle when he recovered from a very serious illness after he had a vision that appears to be the ultimate confirmation of God's sustaining role in his life. His thankfulness reminds of Ps 30:2-4.⁶⁶

He cannot conceive the possibility of handling his life without faith in God. A group member wondered whether the interviewee makes a distinction between 'his' (personal) faith and 'Christian' faith in general. He is very sure that God's answers to his prayers are unfailing.

He is a caring person. This interviewee, who is socially much at ease, transcends his own situation by his perceived role as that of helping others. He has a clear purpose in his life and hope for the future. The interviewee believes his purpose is to give support in his community and encourage persons with disabilities in particular.

A group member remarked, 'He has shown incredible strength in his lifetime in overcoming difficult childhood circumstances, addiction and coming to terms with his disability'.

Interviewee 13

Age	23 years
Gender	Female
Highest Educational Level	Grade 12
Type and Level of Disability	Paraplegia (C5)
Age of Onset of Disability	Birth

⁶⁶

O Lord my God, I called to you for help and you healed me. O Lord, you brought me up from the grave; you spared me from going down in the pit. Sing to the Lord, you saints of his; praise his holy name (Ps 30:2-4 NIV).

The interviewee was born disabled, and her mother has refused to communicate with her about this subject all along. The participant subsequently does not know the reason for her condition, although she has a need to. She does not live with her mother presently; she stays with her aunt and her nephew who is 17 years old and still at school. She is completely independent and cares for herself. She makes a material contribution to household expenses, because she is a recipient of a disability grant. But it is a major battle to have access to enough food. She feels desperate for a job to earn her own money, but according to her, people do not employ her, because she is not registered with SARS.⁶⁷

She said, she is 'all right' with herself, because this is what she has known all her life. On the other hand, she has a deep desire to be able to be 'normal', to get up from her broken wheelchair and find a job. Her life is one big struggle for her, and she feels depressed because she is stuck.⁶⁸ She perceives her losses to be the inability to walk and a lack of independence. She dreams of owning her own house, securing a job and to be in control of her life one day.⁶⁹

Apart from her nephew and her religious community, she has nobody. Her relationship with her mother is nearly non-existent and her relationship with her aunt is sometimes tense and fractious. She intensely dislikes socialising with others,⁷⁰ although she does look forward to spending time with a few friends or family at times. According to her, her nephew gives meaning to her life: When lying in bed depressed, he sometimes forces her to get up, motivates her to get out and mix with people, or the two of them go shopping.

She attends church and prays. Serving the Lord and talking with him make her life meaningful; she has nothing else to do.⁷¹ She has an intense experience of the presence of the Almighty God when she prays, but she does not understand why He is not answering her plea to be able to walk.⁷²

⁶⁷ South African Revenue Service

⁶⁸ 'Ek is nou moeg gesukkel ... ek is *depressed* en voel ek gaan nie verkom nie.'

⁶⁹ 'Ek wil my eie lewe beheer, dis al meneer.'

⁷⁰ 'Ek stres as ek tussen ander mense is.'

⁷¹ 'Om die Here te dien en met hom te praat, gee my lewe betekenis ... Ek gaan elke dag kerk toe ... dis al uitweg vir my, ek het niks anders te doen nie.'

⁷² 'Ja, ek bid en praat voortdurend met die Here, ek vra hom elke dag om my te laat loop ... ek weet nie hoekom Hy dit nie doen nie.'

Field notes

The appearance of the interviewee was one of neglect; her tracksuit pants were dirty and torn, her shoulders slumped forward and her eyes were sad with a vacant expression. She portrayed overall emotional fatigue. A fatalistic, withdrawn, asocial and depressed disposition was very evident while interacting with her.

This participant is undoubtedly deeply depressed. She is soft spoken and did not interact easily – she gave short answers with her eyes cast down. At the end of the interview I gave her R100.00 and bought her food. She burst out crying when I handed her the money. This was the most demanding of all interviews conducted.

Although she is clearly intellectually able, her inability to lead an independent life, that includes financial security and privacy, deeply frustrates her. The lack of familial support, interest or love makes her vulnerable and lonely. She mentioned that towards the end of the month it is normal to go hungry. The fact that her only sustained support network is a 17-year-old learner is a stark contextualisation of her precarious situation.

Focus group

This 23-year-old participant is paralysed since birth. Although she described herself as completely independent, her life conditions are extremely challenging. Her disability grant is not nearly sufficient to make ends meet. By the end of the month she goes hungry, she does not have decent clothes to wear and her wheelchair is broken. Of all the interviewees this young woman seems to be the most deprived of human sustenance.

Finding employment has been a real challenge to her. The lack thereof has severe implications in terms of her financial security, lifestyle and mood. It also has repercussions in terms of independence and mobility. She has a broken wheelchair and cannot afford aids that could improve her mobility and level of independence. Although she regards herself as totally independent, because she is able to care for herself, the experience of not being in control of her life is associated with a loss of independence.

Having been born disabled, does not make self-acceptance any easier for the interviewee. Although she verbalised that she is 'all right' with herself, she feels depressed. She has very little social support. She feels rejected by her mother, and

the love and concern of her adolescent nephew prevents her from becoming completely emotionally isolated.

Organised religion – attending church – and prayer play a crucial role in her life. But these activities are her only resort. She appears to be resigned as if there is nothing else for her left. The idea that one can be lonely while you are not alone, comes to mind. A group member contemplated, what happens at church, have congregants not reached out to her and made God's love visible in some or other way?

The theme of the unanswered why question has emerged. The interviewee still does not know why she is disabled, because her mother refused to share information with her about this topic. She also does not understand why the Lord does not answer her prayer to be able to walk.

She is desperate for a miracle to happen, reminiscent of when the Lord said to the paralysed man, 'Get up, take your mat and go home'.⁷³ She wants to be 'normal': she wants to get up and walk. The impression is that she resents God that this has not happened yet. There seems to be an inner conflict associated with her relationship to God. On the one hand, she intensely experiences His presence, but on the other, she does not understand why He does not respond to her intense yearning to be healed and to walk.

6.3 General and unique themes

6.3.1 Onset of disability

Two participants (interviewees 5 and 13) are physically disabled since birth. The other eleven participants' respective disabilities resulted from some kind of traumatic incident. Neurophysiological injuries (interviewees 1, 3, 4, 7, 9 and 12) and/or the loss of limbs (interviewee 2) resulted from some accident, or the call of duty as a police officer (interviewee 6). Otherwise the disability is associated with some debilitating illness and/or its treatment (interviewees 8, 10 and 11).

In their study at Groote Schuur Hospital, Sothmann, Stander, Kruger and Dunn (2015:836) found that the frequency of spinal cord injuries is significantly higher among males, and in the age category 21 to 30 years. Of interest is this finding's consistency

⁷³ Mt 9:6 NIV

with the interviewees demographic data – the onset of the spinal cord injury of six male participants resulting from an accident, is in the age range of 17 to 27 years. Three participants (interviewees 1, 7 and 9) were involved in a motor vehicle accident, and three participants' (interviewees 3, 4 and 12) injury was caused by a diving accident.

6.3.2 Life 'before' and 'after'

The interviewees whose disability is associated with a traumatic event have a life 'before' the defining moment or period, and a life 'thereafter'. A period of adjustment to a changed identity and life circumstances followed the traumatic incident. Accepting the reality of personal trauma is necessary to adapt to a changed life and acceptance is considered to be an element of religious coping (Pargament in Şimşir et al. 2017:98). Most of the participants have come to some form of resolution in terms of the life that presently belongs to the past.

6.3.3 Bodiliness

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body (2 Cor 4:7-10 NIV).

Various participants gave expression to the challenge of growing used to essentially altered embodiment. It takes substantial time to adapt to a new bodily self (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004:8), and feelings experienced during this period vary from anger and frustration (interviewees 1, 3 and 7), turbulence (interviewees 2 and 3), rejection of the self (interviewee 3), depression (interviewees 3 and 10), mourning of losses (interviewees 1, 3, 4, 7, 8 and 11), negativity (interviewee 7), insecurity and anxiety (interviewee 9), to shame (interviewee 12). For some interviewees the impact of the disability on their physique was too much to bear initially, resulting in them temporarily dissociating from their bodily self by means of actions (intending) to deny or escape physical reality (interviewees 1, 3 and 10). This initially resulted in the unsuccessful suicide attempts of interviewee 3 and interviewee 10. Not everyone has made peace with a radical bodily transformation as of yet (interviewee 1).

This reminds of the stages of experience by many people with disabilities, as tabled by Kretzschmar (2018:28).

Table 6.1 Emotional stages of disability

Source: Kretzschmar 2018:28

STAGE	EXPERIENCE
Denial	A person who his paralysed may say: "There is nothing wrong with me, I will walk again". This type of denial can lead to other problems which the person may not understand, e.g. becoming very anxious and feeling very vulnerable.
Anger	Being angry with God or with other people.
Bargaining with God	Some people try to bargain with God, promising they will do things for God if God heals them. For example, "If you heal me, I will become a pastor".
Depression	Becoming very sad, because there seems to be no hope that anything will change.
Acceptance	"I will make the best I can of my life".

While playing rugby or doing lifesaving (interviewee 1), playing cricket (interviewee 4), working-out at the gym (interviewee 7) or dancing (interviewee 8) is no longer possible post-trauma, swimming (interviewees 8 and 12) and quad rugby (interviewee 12) are the sports that are enjoyed by some participants presently.

Action coping strategies allow an individual to address the impact of a personal challenge, and thereby reclaim control and preserve a sense of identity (Faull & Hills 2006:731). Three participants referred to the importance of maintaining a healthy body weight with a view to optimal functionality (interviewees 7, 8 and 12). Interviewee 12 indicated that he feels guilty for having become overweight – this poses a challenge to his wife in assisting him.

Some persons are reminded of their disability by the experience of chronic pain, despite them having come to terms with their altered embodiment (interviewees 7, 8 and 11). And the physical limitations associated with disability continue to impose some impediment to functional living (interviewees 2, 3, 4 and 6).

And interviewee 13 – whose alternative bodiliness forms part of her life since birth – is unaccepting of her inability to use her legs.

6.3.4 Invisibilisation

The theme of invisibilisation of or ‘failure to see’ persons with disabilities (Lowe 2012:188) was revealed in four conversations. Interviewee 3 remarked that he ignored people in wheelchairs, before he himself needed one to move around. Interviewee 1 objects to persons with disabilities being ignored during conversation. Interviewee 4 had the experience of his doctors treating him as a ‘diagnosis’. However, he actually now prides himself; by having exceeded all their expectations, he proved them wrong. When interviewee 6 realised ‘I am alone in life now’ after significant people in his life disappeared from the scene, he had the experience of having become invisible to others, but not to God.

6.3.5 Notion of ‘normal’ or normality

The onset of disability of both interviewee 5 and interviewee 13 was at birth. At the age of 71 years, interviewee 5 has known nothing else than her current embodied self and this body is her ‘normal’. However, from her point of view, she does not form part of ‘normal’ society, due to having been institutionalised for 33 years. At the age of 23 years, interviewee 13 yearns to be ‘normal’, i.e., to be able to walk and to hold a job.

Interviewee 1 considers his dreams for the future to be ‘normal’: He would like to meet a partner, have children, work professionally and have financial independence. Interviewee 4 makes a distinction between a ‘normal lifestyle’ and a ‘normal life’. While he mourns the loss of a lifestyle characterised by playing sport, independence and the capacity to earn an income, he believes it is through God that he has developed a positive attitude to accept his life as ‘normal’. For this participant, there is a strong association between ‘normality’ and the achievement of studies completed, despite the barriers encountered due to his disability.

Lowe (2012:189) refers to sin-disability and the normality cult as two ‘sinful’ social discourses. Although no participant made a link between his or her disability and sin (sin-disability discourse) (for example as in the McColl et al. (2000:821) study), the theme of normality emerged from the four reported conversations above. In essence, normalcy discourses work in favour of those who are deemed ‘normal’ in society and

exclude the ‘non-“normal”’ (Lowe 2012:189). Susannah Rodgers, paralympian and ambassador of numerous charities and companies writes:

I appreciate that disability as an identity is tricky, but it is simply language and words. Who is to say that normal is normal? Or that able is able? What I mean to emphasise is that we are all individuals, we are all wonderfully unique and we all have a contribution to make. We will all experience differing levels of ability throughout our lives and none of us will ever be perfect. Even if we were, would that create an ideal world? (Rodgers 2019).

Social discrimination demonstrates the unjust effect of the normalcy cult on persons with disabilities and the emergence of this theme during the explicitation is the result.

6.3.6 Discrimination

On occasion persons with disabilities are treated condescendingly, be it obvious or subtle. From the point of view of interviewee 1, they are sometimes ignored in conversation when speakers rather address persons without disabilities in the company. Interviewee 10 experiences outright rejection from one particular individual while he begs. He believes that he is judged on the basis of stereotyping, i.e, it is assumed that he buys liquor with the money. (The irony is that he actually is a teetotaler).

More than one participant mentioned societal discrimination (McColl et al. 2000:820). Employers are generally unwilling to accommodate persons with disabilities within the work setting (interviewee 4). Persons with disabilities are met with a lack of understanding and empathy when it comes to practical accommodation concerning accessibility (interviewee 8), particularly regarding ramps, toilet facilities, parking and utilising aids to alleviate disability-related discomfort. Ergonomic modifications will make working conditions more convenient for persons with disabilities (interviewee 9). However, the oldest participant (interviewee 5) is of the opinion that times have changed – when she was young, society was much less inclined to accommodate persons with disabilities than it is currently.

Thompson (2005:247) writes people with disabilities everywhere routinely experience discrimination. It is exhaustive – there is a constant need to be alert, self-protective, and ready to do battle against officialdom, metaphor and derogatory language which could diminish ‘one’s sense of personhood’.

6.3.7 Dependency / independency / interdependency

The significance of this theme that was revealed through the explicitation is captured by theologian Mary Elise Lowe (2012:190):

Another harmful discourse for many individuals with disabilities is the discourse of independence, which rewards the independent and punishes the dependent. Independent persons are expected to live alone or be married, have a full-time job, manage their own transportation, maintain a home or apartment, have a bank account and a credit card, and be able to go to a store, purchase an item, and get it home independently. Notice how many beliefs and economic, medical, religious, and legal assumptions are involved in this independence discourse. For many persons with disabilities, several of these activities are physically impossible, intellectually overwhelming, or economically implausible. The consequence of this discourse is that some individuals are treated like children and are not given the respect and self-worth that they deserve. Surely this is a discourse that denies persons their God-given dignity.

In general, there seems to be a subtle tension between functional dependency and psychological independency for participants. Interviewee 1 regained a measure of independence post-accident by leaving home and settling in a residence for persons with disabilities, and he still wishes to be financially independent. While the financial independence of interviewee 2 was secured by compensation and insurance post-accident, he was completely dependent on his support system initially before he was able to go and work. As is the case with some of the other participants (interviewees 8 and 9), an adapted vehicle provides freedom of movement to him also, and subsequently a sense of greater self-sufficiency. Mobility and independency seem to be correlated.

Interviewee 10 demonstrates an internal locus of control: His disability keeps him out of the job market, but he is able to earn a living by begging at a busy intersection, and therefore maintains a measure of financial independence. Alternatively, interviewee 13 remarked that she really wished for the opportunity to take control of her own life, and not need to rely on others for everything.

Three participants referred to communicating with others about their physical needs. Interviewee 4 enjoys sitting in his wheelchair gazing at the sea. Because he cannot feed himself, he will request strangers to assist him, and nobody has ever refused.

Interviewee 6 also asks for help when he needs it. According to interviewee 12, persons with disabilities should not be too sensitive. This raises the idea of interdependency. In this regard, the daily functioning of interviewee 11 is noted. He regards himself to be 'totally independent' while living on his own, dependent on a disability grant, without an electric wheelchair and requiring practical assistance from at least three women when he deems it necessary.

The concept of 'dependant-independence' (Swinton et al. 2011:13) relates to the theme of trust that emerged from the McColl et al. (2000:820-821) study on spiritual changes after trauma:

The essential character of some relationships with others had changed, because they now necessarily included an element of "doing for." Participants reflected on the difficulty of this transition and its effects on one's identity and self-image. Several new ideas were incorporated into the image of the self to allow others to provide help. Several persons reflected on the preinjury self, and referred to having to give up the idea of being independent. In one case this was successfully replaced with a recognition that others like to help: "A guy told me while I was in the hospital that people like helping other people. I had never really thought about it at the time, but being in the community, now I let people have the opportunity to help me. If it were me and the situation were reversed, I'd want to help".

6.3.8 Family and friends

The significance of attachment relationships for persons with disabilities transpired, as well as the importance of friendships, although often limited in number (McColl et al. 2000:820). A positive correlation between social support and post-traumatic growth exists (Şimşir et al. 2017:99; cf. World Council of Churches 2016:13).

Six participants particularly mentioned their parents. The unconditional love and support of a mother (interviewee 1) or a father (interviewee 4) are acknowledged. One participant (interviewee 12) is frustrated by the idea that he is no longer in a position to provide for his mother. Of the two participants (interviewees 2 and 5) who had lost their mothers, one (interviewee 5) considers this loss to be greater than the loss of her functional independence. Alternatively, another participant (interviewee 13) spoke of her mother's rejection. The positive support of family is acknowledged (interviewees 3 and 4) and two participants (interviewees 7 and 11) mentioned that they maintain regular contact with their siblings. Two participants (interviewees 12 and 13) live quite

isolated from their families of origin. The only emotionally significant relationship interviewee 13 has, seems to be the one with her adolescent nephew. However, for interviewee 10 the idea of 'family' is not linked to blood ties, but to people that give meaning to one's life through their acceptance.

Four participants mentioned their wives. The passing of the wife of interviewee 10 was a major blow to him. Their dependency on their wives is recognised by two participants (interviewees 9 and 12). In fact, interviewee 9 appears to have developed a form of 'separation anxiety' as a result. Interviewee 6 was blatantly rejected by his wife at the time he became disabled and actually needed her support. His daughter and grandchild are positive resources in terms of his emotional well-being though.

To feel part of a social group is important. Friends can play a pivotal role in the process of self-acceptance (interviewee 1). Two participants (interviewees 1 and 6) had the experience of friends gradually leaving them post-accident, while the support of friends of another (interviewee 7) continued (McColl et al. 2000:820). An effort to regularly socialise with others is made (interviewees 2 and 11). Two participants (interviewees 5 and 12) mentioned that their friends are also persons with disabilities. A participant (interviewee 5) has the convenience of routine opportunities for socialisation at the residence.

6.3.9 Self-image

Four participants specifically mentioned taking pride in themselves. Interviewee 4 completed his studies against all odds. Interviewee 7 maintains a well-toned body by means of disciplined eating habits. Interviewee 9 was the first active SAPS member with a disability who had an adapted police vehicle to his disposal. Although interviewee 10 feels proud of his ability to manage moving around on his own, he does not view himself to be a 'happy' person, and he feels socially marginalised.

The positive self-image of three participants (interviewees 2, 11 and 12) is linked to their general popularity: due to respective personal characteristics, they are liked by everybody, whether abled or disabled. Interviewee 3 regained an optimistic frame of mind when he realised that he was still a likeable person – also to women. Interviewee 12 also mentioned the positive effect it had on his self-esteem to marry an able-bodied woman. Interviewee 8 guards against the effect of people's preconceived ideas about her or persons with disabilities in general, to maintain a positive view of herself.

According to interviewee 6, the traumatic injury that caused him to be bound to a wheelchair did not have an effect on his personality, because he is still as self-assertive as before.

6.3.10 Maslow's (new) hierarchy of needs

Abraham Maslow's theory on the hierarchy of human motivation (1943), as well as his addition of the top apex of self-transcendence before his death in 1970, compliments some of the conversational themes.



Diagram 6.2 Hierarchy of human needs according to Abraham Maslow

Source: medium.com/coachilla-hq

One can be healthy despite one's disability, if health is seen as 'a state of overall wellness in which the individual perceives their self as whole and functional, regardless of the level of physical, social or mental functionality observable' (Faull & Hills 2006:729).

- However, if interviewee 13 is not making ends meet in terms of physiological needs, it appears to be a question of survival and nothing more.

- The need to feel safe can also be a primary focus. Interviewee 5 opined that as an elderly person she is shielded from abuse in the residence she lives in, but what if she is no longer able to afford her stay? Interviewee 10 is also concerned about his financial security.
- Different participants (interviewees 2, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12) referred to the significance of a vocation concerning personal worthiness and dignity, meaningfulness and self-actualisation. Some of the participants (interviewees 2 and 4) indicated that they are no longer employed and also unable to find employment matching their training, specific skill and/or particular interests.
- And last, there were participants (interviewees 3 and 4) who expressed the motivation to help or care for others. For example, it is a personal quest for interviewee 3 to promote the use of stem-cell treatment in South Africa. This brings to mind 2 Cor 1:3-5 NIV:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

6.3.11 ‘Why me?’

Three participants mentioned the ‘why me?’ question, i.e., why a traumatic life event happened to him or her specifically, rendering him or her with a disability and not someone else (Şimşir et al. 2017:98; cf. World Council of Churches 2016:13). Two major life events had a significant impact on interviewee 2, i.e., the abandonment by his mother and later, the amputation of his legs. According to him, he has chosen to take a positive and accepting philosophical stance towards his life, and therefore when this question presents itself, he tries to rather ask, ‘why *not* me?’ Interviewee 6 has not felt the need to ask God, ‘why me?’ amidst the struggle to cope. His only question to God is a plea for helping him deal with his disability. Interviewee 8 has made a conscious decision not to ask herself the ‘why me?’ question. Other participants (interviewees 1, 3, 7, 11 and 12) referred as well to mindfully choosing a positive attitude or the benefit of optimism towards their circumstances. And in three conversations the virtue of gratitude was revealed (see McColl et al. 2000:820). This varies from gratitude for being alive (interviewees 5 and 12), the realisation of personal

ability despite disability (interviewee 8) to gratitude for motherly love and support (interviewee 1).

The question of interviewee 13 pertains to why God does not answer her daily prayer for healing and allow her to get out of her wheelchair and walk.

6.3.12 Resilience

Resilience is usually associated with psychological health in adulthood despite the experience of major life challenges during the formative years: 'an ability to go on with life after hardship and adversity' (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004:4). Some individuals are of the opinion that adverse experiences in their life before the accident 'prepared' them to live a life with a disability, by having 'toughened them up'. Interviewee 2 grew up in an orphanage before he joined the army. In the words of interviewee 4, 'From a young age life taught me to accept, accept what confronts you and move on'.

6.3.13 The paradox

Participants do not perceive God as the agency for injury or disability. In fact, God used something 'bad' in their lives for the greater good.⁷⁴ Most interviewees believe their faith was strengthened by often extreme misfortune. For interviewee 3 a vision he had during a near death experience whilst ill, served as a conversion episode: his relationship to God was no longer 'external', but has become internalised and infused with meaning and inspiration. Interviewee 4 is convinced that he became disabled for a reason (McColl et al. 2000:821), and interviewee 9 implied that God 'allowed' his disability for what it brought about in his life: spiritual growth.

According to Wright (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004:5), the positive meaning attributed to having a disability does not relate to the disability itself, but to the appreciation of 'a dauntless human spirit' in the face of it. Life with a disability is therefore paradoxical: 'out of loss there is gain' (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004:6).⁷⁵ One has to deal with various unfavourable consequences linked to the disability, but alternatively, in doing so it is life-changing in a positive way.⁷⁶ Interviewee 4 remarked that he is less self-centred

⁷⁴ Gn 50:2, Jn 9:3

⁷⁵ Ps 63:1, 3-4; 2 Cor 6:9-10

⁷⁶

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Mt 11:28-30 NIV).

and more caring of others since his accident. Interviewee 11 has learnt to live according to his means.

Physical vulnerability actually brought about a stronger awareness of God's role in the person's life. For example, interviewee 2 is very much aware of the gifts he is bestowed by a Higher Hand, and the Lord's comforting presence.

Two verses from the Bible reflect this paradox:

But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, I am strong (2 Cor 12:9-10 NIV).

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (Ja 1:2-4 NIV).

According to Faull and Hills (2006:731), the core self of a person with a disability has been altered in the wake of significant trauma, and former levels of functioning are no longer possible. With a view to optimal well-being, Transformation coping strategies are required. These strategies are related to the spiritual self. 'Posttraumatic growth occurs concomitantly with the attempts to adapt to highly negative sets of circumstances that can engender high levels of psychological distress' (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004:2). It is not a question of returning to 'baseline' post-trauma; it is viewed as the struggle to deal with trauma that is accompanied by 'an experience of improvement that for some persons is deeply profound' (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004:4). And this process does not necessarily dispel psychological distress (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004:10). The five broad domains that are related to post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004:6) emerged from the explication:

- a significant change in perspective towards life (interviewees 2, 3 and 12);
- increased meaningfulness of interpersonal relationships and empathy (interviewees 2, 4, 8, 9 and 12);
- a sense of some personal strength (interviewees 2, 4, 8, 9, 11 and 12);
- a recognition or realisation of new possibilities (interviewees 2, 3 and 12); and

- spiritual and existential development (interviewees 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11 and 12).

6.3.14 Christian faith

'[T]he religious coping style increases disabled individuals' ability to adapt. The way they use religious coping depends on how religion is placed in their life' (Hatun et al. in Şimşir et al. 2017:97). The participants' perception of God forms a continuum in terms of personal involvement:

Creator of the world → Omnipresence → Power / Energy → Being → Almighty → Pillar of strength / Cornerstone → Higher Hand → Caring → Friend → Intimacy

Three participants (interviewees 5, 7 and 9) spoke about God as Creator⁷⁷ (McColl et al. 2000:821). Four participants (interviewees 3, 4, 6 and 7) referred to the omnipresence of God.⁷⁸ God is a personal source of power (interviewees 7 and 11) and energy (interviewees 2, 8 and 10). Interviewee 9 perceives God as a Being and He is a human-like figure for interviewee 11. The Almighty God turns cold into warmth, darkness into light and negative into positive (interviewee 2). God is a Higher Hand (interviewees 2, 3 and 9), a Pillar of strength (interviewees 4 and 7) and Cornerstone (interviewee 7). God is caring and protective; He is a Provider (interviewees 2 and 10) or a Helper (interviewee 12). He is a Friend (interviewee 6). His love is unconditional (interviewee 1) and a relationship with Him is intimate (interviewee 7).

Only interviewee 7 referred to the Son of God ('Jesus') and the Holy Spirit ('Spirit'). While he described himself as a 'born-again Christian' and therefore implied an actual conversion experience, interviewee 12 also described a metamorphosis following the acceptance of the Lord in his life. A deepening of faith is associated with the experience of trauma (Şimşir et al. 2017:99). Every participant (except interviewee 5) directly or indirectly indicated some personal relationship with God. Interviewee 7 and interviewee 11 talked about God that gives meaning to their lives. Interviewee 8 used a metaphor of the human hand grasping at the Higher Hand illustrating God's presence in her life. God is recognised in nature by interviewee's 3 and 5; while interviewee 4 likes to gaze at the sea.⁷⁹ God's presence in nature and the cosmos is recognised as elements of spirituality (paras 2.2.4 and 4.2).

⁷⁷ Ps 8:3

⁷⁸ Mt 28:20, Ps 139:7-21

⁷⁹ Ps 19:2-5

6.3.15 Religious activities

While three participants (interviewees 7, 9 and 13) mentioned involvement in church, most participants do not attend church. Four participants (interviewees 1, 4, 5 and 8) specifically mentioned that they were raised within the formal tradition of church as an institution. Interviewee 1 has been left with a negative view of organised religion, and interviewee 3 mentioned a dislike for church officials. While God plays a positive role in the lives of all the interviewees (para. 6.3.14), this cannot be said of the church: the majority are either churchless or indifferent to the church. The relevancy and the focus of the church is at stake, it emphasises the reality of post-modernism and an era of post-Christendom (para. 8.1).

Interviewee 5 seems to read her Bible as a matter of habit, and when interviewee 11 is reading his Bible, he is filled with positivity. Interviewee 1 finds inspiration by viewing religious sermons on YouTube and for interviewee 12 attending Bible study meetings has priority. By means of prayer,⁸⁰ some participants seek God's calm and peace (interviewee 1), wisdom to deal with challenges (interviewee 1) and alleviation from physical discomfort and pain (interviewee 11). For interviewee 1 prayer helps him to live a life of acceptance, and for interviewee 13 prayer gives meaning to her life. According to literature (Şimşir et al. 2017:91), prayer is a post-trauma coping mechanism that promotes physical and mental health.

6.3.16 Metaphysical experiences

Two individuals gave testimony to a decisive moment in their lives that reinforced their personal relationship with God. Interviewee 3 had a near death experience resulting in a vision that not only convinced him of the presence of a Higher Hand, but also directed him on his current spiritual journey. Interviewee 12 was healed miraculously when terminally ill a few years ago. He recovered after he had a vision, and this experience further 'cemented' his existing relationship with God.

Henri Nouwen had a near death experience after an accident. He (Nouwen 1990:15) felt it necessary to share his experience:

I have written it because I had no choice. My accident brought me into the portal of death and led me to a new experience of God. Not writing about it would have

⁸⁰ Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality (Rm 12:12-13 NIV).

been unfaithful to my vocation to proclaim the presence of God at all times and in all places. Books and articles have been important in my search for God, but it has been the interruptions to my everyday life that have most revealed to me the divine mystery of which I am part.

6.3.17 Awaiting a miracle

Two participants are waiting for a miracle to happen. Interviewee 6 is expectant and by admission impatient at times, about the prospect to be healed. Interviewee 13 is desperate and despondent, because the Lord has not set her free from her wheelchair yet.

Nick Vujicic (n.d.), the motivational speaker who was born without limbs, has the philosophy that if one does not get the miracle one prays to God for, one is meant to be a miracle to somebody else.

6.3.18 The future

The oldest participant (interviewee 5) is the only one whose outlook is obviously unfavourable. She associates the future with boredom, frustration and uncertainty concerning safety and security. For most of the other participants, the future holds some opportunity for personal achievement and/or self-fulfilment. Interviewee 1 and interviewee 13 strive for greater independence, while improvement of finances also have importance (interviewees 1 and 12). For interviewee 3 it would be a 'Godsend' to have a girlfriend one day. For interviewee 2 and interviewee 9 the future holds the promise of excitement through travelling. Interviewee 8 would like to further develop the personal skills of balance and flexibility in her life. Interviewee 7 would like to leave a personal legacy by writing his own story.

Three participants are motivated to help others: Interviewee 3 by advancing stem-cell treatment, interviewee 9 by his involvement in organisations linked to the disabled community, and interviewee 12 by his involvement in community work among the poor. Two participants (interviewees 11 and 12) particularly mentioned their motivation to be a servant of God. Despite their disabilities, these participants are very much aware of the gifts they have to offer to others.⁸¹

⁸¹

I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Phlp 4:12-13 NIV).

[W]e also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering also produces perseverance, perseverance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us (Rm 5:3-5 NIV).

6.4 Composite summary

'[A]ll human experiences are both rich and complex' (Holroyd 2007:2). Each participant's life-world was revealed to be uniquely distinctive in terms of developmental circumstances, personality, personal experiences, financial capacity, etc. Every interview bears testimony to a personal journey and exceptional history. However, the participants also share commonalities: they all have a disability, and many are quadriplegic. Eight interviewees live in the same residential facility.

Most participants spoke about the challenge of growing used to an altered embodiment after trauma. In fact, for two conversants it was initially too much to bear; and resulted in unsuccessful suicide attempts. One person has not yet made peace with his disability, and another expressed frustration about not being healed yet.

The stereotypical views of society determine the group's conceptualisation of normalcy. This leads to different forms (and levels) of discrimination and injustice against persons of disabilities. The study particularly confirmed the attitude of resistance experienced by persons with disabilities to be accepted and reasonably accommodated in the work place. The essence of their experience is encapsulated by the following judgement:

Exclusion from the mainstream of society results from the construction of a society based solely on "mainstream" attributes to which disabled persons will never be able to gain access. Whether it is the impossibility of success at a written test for a blind person, or the need for ramp access to a library, the discrimination does not lie in the attribution of untrue characteristics to the disabled individual. The blind person cannot see and the person in a wheelchair needs a ramp. Rather, it is the failure to make reasonable accommodation, to fine-tune society so that its structures and assumptions do not result in the relegation and banishment of disabled persons from participation, which results in discrimination against them (Eaton v Brant County Board of Education).

The issue of financial security was raised; and the lack of employment especially is a reason for concern among various participants. Frustration as a result of not finding employment matching qualifications was expressed. Employment promotes personal security, and developing a career identity has a favourable effect in terms of self-image and self-worth. Those few interviewees who either have a professional career or have the luxury of financial provision enjoy the benefit of greater freedom, and efficient mobility.

The support, care and/or love that most participants receive from family members and/or a circle of friends are cherished by them. The concept of friendship gets deeper meaning with Swinton's (2011:304) comment: 'Friendship as a divinely inspired relationship is a mode of knowing God.' Most relationships give meaning and purpose to their lives, although the intensity of relationships varies. The participants are not only dependent on others, they also have personal gifts and talents to share. Knowledge and skills are employed in different ways, from informal meaningful friendships to servitude in terms of more formal support of persons in need. This theme of interdependency that emerged is particularly significant. We are all dependent beings. Each one of us is in some way dependent on someone else. Moltmann (1998:110) radically states, '[t]here is no differentiation between the healthy and those with disabilities. For every human life has its limitations, vulnerabilities, and weaknesses. We are born needy, and we die helpless'. We are all vulnerable beings; one day we may be fit and healthy, only to be admitted into intensive care the next, whether due to natural or unnatural causes. We need one other as we share human vulnerability with one another. Persons with disabilities help us to face our own vulnerabilities and to embrace our interdependence (cf. Reynolds 2013:23).

The participants have 'positive' images of God. Most metaphors are general, traditional and/or vague; it varies from a more transcendent God, to that of an immanent belief in God. One interviewee views God in a specific and intimate way as 'real Friend' (para. 2.6). An impersonal image of God allows for greater autonomy of a believer (Van der Ven 1993:200). However in a post-modern era, autonomy is no longer necessarily regarded as a positive attribute. Christians are supposed to realise that they are dependent beings (para. 7.5.5). An apathetic image of God, a God who remains untouched to suffering, tends to maintain the *status quo* in society, according to Moltmann (Van der Ven 1993:173, 200). Some empowering characteristics of God

were revealed. No participant reflected on a suffering God, or a God that has special concern for the poor and the destitute. The embodiment (incarnation) of God in Christ was not mentioned, however one participant made mention of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Nobody blames God for her or his disability. In fact, most participants indicated that their faith was reinforced by their adversity. Şimşir et al. (2017:99) found that strength of faith can vary after a traumatic experience, some persons lose faith, and others' faith in God deepens.

Nevertheless, most participants are either churchless or indifferent to the church. The church has no functional impact. Most probably as persons with disabilities they (and their unique needs) are not accommodated by the church, and consequently their lives are left untouched by organised religion. It follows that, although spirituality is not dependent on religious institutions, the church forfeits its mission and purpose, if not identity, when it does not serve as a spiritual resource for the marginalised. The church needs to take the incarnation of Jesus serious.

Many churches refer to a moment when they realised the “de-churched” and “un-churched” members will probably not come back to them in spite of all the appeals to them. So the only answer left is that we go to them – like Jesus did with us (Burger 2017:255).

The story of one interviewee who finds herself in dire straits is particularly challenging. She goes to church, but it seems nobody at church is supporting her. This is a reminder of thousands of persons who are regarded as ‘nobodies’, helplessly living without hope in the margins of South African society. The high unemployment rate and a disturbingly large income gap between rich and poor are real.

The interviews focussed on the spiritual journeys of the participants, on themselves, their self-image, on their significant others, the experience of their lifeworlds and God, their practice of faith, and its meaning. The experience of meaningful relationships personifies participants' spirituality. Their altered embodiment makes an embodied spirituality contextually relevant.

6.5 Conclusion

Movement 1 and 2 serve as a theoretical background to the inspiration, development and implementation of the qualitative research in movement 3. The current movement

is reinforced by the following chapter. The focus will not only be on the disability discourse, e.g. theologies or spiritualities of disability, but also on the views on spirituality of selected theologians with disabilities and those with close relationships with persons of disability. The overall theme of the chapter reminds everybody of their imperfection.

CHAPTER 7 THE EMBODIMENT OF IMPERFECTION

7.1 Bridging the gap

In chapter 6 we listened to the narratives of thirteen individuals with disabilities and identified several themes on disability and spirituality by means of explicitation. In chapter 7 the discourse on disability and spirituality is continued.

As seen in chapter 3, the fundamental character of the Christian faith lies in the embodiment of God; it is 'the religion of the body'. In chapter 4 we have recognised that 'Christian faith confesses a biological spirituality' (Hull 2003:23). There is no uncertainty that the body is essential in Christianity (Creamer 2009:36). Contemplating on the writings of Bonhoeffer, Vosloo (2006b:25) contends, 'the body has a higher dignity in Christian teaching. The human being remains a bodily being'. The narrative of the human Jesus of Nazareth makes an embodied-spirituality a viable reality since holistically the spiritual quality of the human body is confirmed by the incarnation (Ware 1997:92), his suffering and crucifixion. This keeps the discourse of body or embodiment theologies creatively alive. Body theologians oppose the thinking of Greek dualism, the heresies of Doceticism and Gnosticism as well as church tradition 'that bodies are bad, that the corrupted, material body gets in the way of spiritual health and relationship with God' (Gross 2010:55; cf. Timmerman 2005:153; see Berry 1982:953).

Embodiment theologies require our bodies to be taken seriously in doing theology (Creamer 2009:57). Nancy Mairs (1989:271), a well-known author who has multiple sclerosis, reminds us:

I am somebody. A body. A difficult body to be sure, almost too weak now to stand, increasingly deformed, wracked still by gut spasm and headaches and menstrual miseries. But some *body*. Mine. Me. In establishing myself as writer, however modest my success, I have ceased to be *nobody*. I have written my way into embodied self, and here I am at home.

In similar vein, Eckhardt Tolle (2005:96) advises: 'Do not fight against the body, for in doing so you are fighting against your own body. You are your body' (cf. McColman 1997:10-11). Bonhoeffer (Vosloo 2006b:25) affirms the unity of bodiliness and humanity.

We read, reflect and practice theology with our bodies. At the moment, I am busy typing theological thoughts with a tremor in my hands and with chronic pain in my back. In a certain sense all theologies are embodied, because everyone involved with theology has a body (Creamer 2009:57; cf. Dunnill 2002:110). By doing body theology one is actually in a binary manner involved with one's own body and those of others. But, for centuries most theologians gave no thought about doing theology with their 'embodied selves'. To be more specific, male theologians have focused mainly on spirit and mind, and not on the 'inferior' material body when theologising. Due to the feminist and gay/lesbian liberation movements, the experience of the body entered theology (Nelson 1992:42; see Anderson 2003:34). The same can be said about the influence of the disability rights movement on theology.

A body theology begins with the existential physicality of flesh and blood, according to James Nelson, who basically developed body theology (cf. Blair 2003:73; Creamer 2009:56). However, Donald Berry (1982:953-954) also uses the term 'body theology' when referring to a theology of the finite. 'Body theologians' give the body a subjective position in theology (Gross 2010:55). Nelson (1992:41) reflects on the Jewish and Christian theologies that employ religion as the point of reference to contemplate on the experience of the body. Nelson (1992:42-43) contends:

Body theology begins with the concrete. It does not begin with certain doctrinal formulations, nor with certain portions of a creed, nor with a "problem" in the tradition (through all of these sources may well contribute insight later). Rather, body theology starts with the fleshly experience of life -- with our hungers and our passions, our bodily aliveness and deadness, with the smell of coffee, with the homeless and hungry we see on our streets, with the warm touch of a friend, with bodies violated and torn apart in war, with the scent of a honeysuckle or the soft sting of autumn air on the cheek, with bodies tortured and raped, with the bodyself making love with the beloved and lovemaking with the earth. The task of body theology is critical reflection on our bodily experience as a fundamental realm of the experience of God.

Nelson (Blair 2003:73) emphasises a 'phenomenological reflection on our bodily experience as crucial to informing our understanding of God'. In *The Theology of Touch* (1996), Vivien Naylor contends, '[t]o discover who I am and who God is, is part of the same process, and who I am, is bound up with my body'. Furthermore, Sölle and Cloyes (1984:29) note:

My body tells me that I am in pain, hungry, have sexual needs. It is through my body that I know it is not so very good here on earth. The wrong way to relieve this tension is to deny and to suppress the body and its needs in favour of affirming an idealistic spirituality cleansed of all bodily desires. An idealistic spirituality is the enemy of a creational spirituality. It is based on the dualism of self and body, body-spirit dichotomy that we inherited from Greek philosophy.

'My body is my embodied spiritual self!' (Van Niekerk 2012:373). It follows that a body theology has to incorporate a 'theology of pain and suffering, a recognition that time and the healing powers of nature are not always efficacious; indeed, that in the final analysis, they are never more than temporarily successful', according to Berry (1982:955). However, one should avoid being masochistic, as well as the idea that 'sacred sorrow' (Berry 1982:955) is fundamental to faith when practising body theology.

In comparison to a more Theocentric anthropological approach by Nelson towards a body theology (see above), Mary Timothy Prokes utilises a biblically-based, Christocentric approach when discussing the significance of spiritual-embodiment (Blair 2003:73). According to Prokes (1996:25),

Christian faith is embodied faith, deriving from the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, and the Revelation that he lived out bodily, but principally through his passion, death, and resurrection. Christian theology (*fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding) can be authentic only when it, too, is firmly rooted within the mystery of embodiment. Genuine faith understanding presumes a sound, ever-deepening anthropology: the significance of embodiment is crucial to all theological inquiry.

The themes 'incarnation' and '*imago Dei*' in body theology have considerable implications for the theological views of disabilities, according to Blair (2003:73; cf. Deland 1999:48-49). Body theology represents the Eastern interpretation of humanity's natural kindness and dignity preserved since the fall, compared with the Western emphasis on the sinful nature of human kind that is connected with the fall (Blair 2003:74; cf. McGrath 1994:22). According to the understanding of Augustine (Blair 2003:74), all disabilities have a direct or indirect link to sin, because of the fall. This doctrine is detrimental to people with disabilities (Lowe 2012:185; cf. Eiesland 1994:75, 101; Yong 2011:23; Creamer 2012:342). Alternatively, the doctrine of creation with *imago Dei* more likely supports human dignity, even if the original image

has flaws (Blair 2003:74). However, Reynolds (2008a:177) cautions against defacing the image of God, with reference to disability. Rather than taking a perspective of misrepresentation, he opts for a flexible interpretation of the *imago Dei*: 'created for contributing to the world, open toward the call to love others'. This view suggests three dimensions, *inter alia* 'creativity with others, relation to others, and availability for others' (Reynolds 2008a:177). Each person contributes to the cohesion of humanity with his or her limitations as well as gifts.

As *imago Dei*, human beings mirror God not only in flesh and blood, but equally in communion with and in relation to other persons – to be truly and totally human, they imitate God (cf. Van Huyssteen 2006:320; Reynolds 2008a:178). They discover that the essence of human identity lies in reciprocal relationships: personal strength does not determine belonging (Vanier 1998:41), but the vulnerability visible in giving to and receiving from others (Reynolds 2013:21). Moltmann (1998:121) states, a

person with disabilities gives others the precious insight into the woundedness and weakness of human life. But a person with disabilities also gives insight into the humanity of his own world. Through persons with disabilities, other people can come to know the real, suffering, living God, who also loves them infinitely.

Furthermore, it can be said that there is a necessary and important role for people with disabilities among the faithful. They are the human embodiment of God revealed and as such point towards what are as yet undiscovered by the 'able-bodied' (Anderson 2003:51).

7.2 Theology, spirituality and disability

The connection between people with disabilities and a body theology, as seen in the previous paragraph, gives rise to particular theologies of disability. A body theology with *inter alia* the themes of *imago Dei*, incarnation, vulnerability and liberation supports the development of a viable Christian theology of disability. A leader in this field is Nancy Eiesland who challenged 'established theology' and 'traditional ecclesiology' with her seminal work, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (1994).

Before Eiesland's work, disability was addressed in terms of pastoral care and adaptation of religious education and devotions (Creamer 2012:342). A practical

theology aligned with disability subsequently developed. For example, Harold Wilke was born without an arm and became a pastor and advocate for disability rights. In 1980, Wilke published *Creating the Caring Congregation* in which the 'special needs of people with disabilities' are considered and an awareness created of the barriers that hinder persons with disabilities' access to Christian congregations (Blair 2003:76). After Eiesland, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (2007) by Amos Yong followed, as well as *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and hospitality* (2008a) by Thomas Reynolds, and Deborah Creamer's work *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (2009). These disability theologians' contributions have enriched theology and disability discourse (cf. Reinders 2013:31), in the light of their first hand experience of disability, either in relation to themselves, or their families. For example, Eiesland has a degenerative bone disease; Yong has a brother with Down syndrome; Reynold's son was first diagnosed with Tourette's and later with Asperger syndrome. In 2004 Mary Fast (2011:416) submitted a thesis in Masters of Theology, *A Liberation Theology of Disability*; her son was diagnosed at the age of two years with a significant developmental delay. With an educational background respectively in disability studies in the humanities and theology, the married couple, Maria Truchan-Tataryn and Myrosław Tataryn, wrote *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology for Embracing Difference* (2013). Their third daughter has a diagnosis of Rett Syndrome (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:21). Jürgen Moltmann's (2009a) concern with and interest in the theological disability discourse is related to the death of his brother who was severely disabled as a result of the euthanasia program in Nazi-Germany.

This raises the question whether non-disabled persons are qualified to write about disability (cf. Yong 2011:10; see Hauerwas 2005:13). Creamer (2009:5, 8-9) refers to the epistemological advantage of being disabled (therefore an 'insider') in studies of disability, but also takes a respectful position regarding the knowledge of 'outsiders'. 'Disability identity, as both a label and a form of self-understanding, depends a great deal on the interpretations of others' (Creamer 2009:5). A similar debate is applicable to 'feminist theology', 'theology of the poor', *et cetera*. Yong (2011:10) states that he cannot represent persons with disabilities by means of his book, but having been touched by his brother's condition, he was inspired to re-think his conventional theological thinking on disability.

Fortunately in the twenty first century, studies on the experience of persons with disabilities have received more theological and spiritual reflection among scholars and ecumenical and missional movements. The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization held in Cape Town in 2010 challenged the ‘global Church to bear witness to Jesus Christ and all his teaching – in every nation, in every sphere of society, and in the realm of ideas’ (Kim & Anderson 2011:421). As a result of the congress, “the Cape Town Commitment” was formulated which *inter alia* proclaims *Christ’s peace for people with disabilities*:

Serving people with disabilities does not stop with medical care or social provision; it involves fighting alongside them, those who care for them and their families, for inclusion and equality, both in society and in the Church. God calls us to mutual friendship, respect, love, and justice (Kim & Anderson 2011:450).

In *Mission from the margins: Toward a just world* (2012), the theological reflection and statement of Just and Inclusive Communities (networks and initiatives associated with the World Council of Churches), four groups of people are identified who are continuously marginalised. One of the groups is ‘People living with disabilities who struggle for a life with dignity and participation’ (World Council of Churches 2012:153; cf. Keum 2018:12). (See chapter 8.)

Contrary to Christian tradition that is aligned with the marginalised, churches still tend to segregate when it comes to people with disabilities, and subsequently disregard their rights to be valued and respected as worthy human beings (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:15). According to the findings of the *2010 Harris Interactive Survey of Americans with Disabilities* (UCC Disabilities Ministries 2016), thirty-five percent of persons with disabilities are more likely not to attend worship services, due to attitudinal barriers that make them feel less welcome. ‘[O]ther people’s stares are often more painful than inaccessible stairs’ (World Council of Churches 2016:6): it does happen that persons with disabilities are met with prejudice and have to deal with a ‘we – they’ mentality in the church community. The alternative discourse of the integrity of every human life, irrespective of its bodily form or function, as well as the interdependency of these beings, will be promoted only when present societal norms and values are challenged (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:15).

What is needed is not only *orthodoxy* or a relevant theology but *orthopraxy*, applied ethics and '*orthokardia* – "rightheartedness"', a term used by Kourie (2006:35), referring to people with disabilities (see Koopman 2013:35).

Disability theology, like most other theologies, is context related. Different approaches to disability theology exist, given the variation of thoughts on disability and theological modes of disability (Creamer 2012:339). However, there are general aspects shared by most disability theologies, e.g., an awareness of embodiment as a theological basis; a conviction that nothing is essentially wrong with a person experiencing disability; a dedication to righteousness towards people with disabilities; and a basic belief that theology and disability share important perspectives (Creamer 2012:339). Disability theologians acknowledge that persons with disabilities are either a 'minority voice' or entirely silenced in the Christian practical-theological debate. Therefore, it is their business to listen actively to persons with disabilities, reflect on their experiences and to transform and construct an all-inclusive practice-orientated theology that serves people with disabilities (Swinton 2011:274-275).

The disability theologians are ecumenically well represented, e.g. Jean Vanier and Jennie Weiss Block from the Roman Catholic tradition; Gillibrand, an Anglican; Stewart Govig, a Lutheran; Hans Reinders and Brett Webb-Mitchell, Reformed; and Amos Yong, a Pentecostal. Nancy Eiesland and John Swinton are Liberationists; Deborah Creamer, Nancy Eiesland and Doreen Freeman are Feminists; and David Pailin is a process theologian (Swinton 2011:275). They also represent different theological disciplines, e.g. biblical studies, systematic theology, Christian ethics, church history and practical theology. Some theologians are not formally trained in theology, but are sociologists, psychologists, educationalists, and parents (Swinton 2011:275).

Swinton (2011:274) provides a general definition of disability theology as:

the attempt by disabled and non-disabled Christians to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ, God, and humanity against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experiences of people with disabilities. It has come to refer to a variety of perspectives and methods designed to give voice to the rich and diverse theological meanings of the human experience of disability.

7.3 Dis/abled language

It is essential to the theologies of disability that the word “disability” is defined (Creamer 2012:339). ‘Language can be a way to exclude people, hurt people, and oppress people’ (Kabue 2013:2). The majority of African languages utilise expressions that refer to animals or things when referring to people with disabilities, mirroring the possibility that they are lesser people (Kabue 2013:2). But to define ‘disability’ is a complex, ambiguous, diversified, individualised and multi-faceted activity. ‘[D]isability takes many forms and affects human lives in a wide variety of ways’ (Creamer 2009:15; cf. Webb-Mitchell 1994:30; McNair & Sanchez 2008:38; see Yong 2011:9; Creamer 2012:339; Reynolds 2013:25). Factors such as race, class, age and gender cause different experiences of disability (Creamer 2009:15). Furthermore, disability may not be noticeable at first glance (Creamer 2009:13). And persons who are disabled as well as marginalised, are doubly or even triply oppressed (Creamer 2009:15-16).

A distinction is made between ‘impairment’, ‘disability’ and ‘handicap’. ‘Impairment’ generally refers to an ‘abnormality or loss of physiological form or function’. “Disability” describes the consequences of the impairment, which may be an ability to perform some task or activity’ (Creamer 2009:14). Finally, ‘handicap’ refers to the ‘disadvantage that results from an impairment or disability’. Yong (2011:9) opts for ‘disability’ as a generic term, inclusive of the wide spectrum of disabilities. Most persons with disabilities accept the phrase ‘persons with disabilities’ to describe themselves (Eiesland 1994:27).

Generally, disability is viewed as a problem or deficit in the individual, and in need of a cure. The medical model applied to disability (Creswell 2013:24; World Health Organization 2001:20; World Health Organization and World Bank (2011) in Statistics South Africa 2014:13; cf. Creamer 2012:340) ‘understands bodies to be like machines that work to greater and lesser extent, and where disability is identified as a defect in the body’ (Creamer 2012:340). The medical model examines a person’s body according to its function and performance (Anderson 2003:40). The main aim of the model is diagnosing a defect and fixing it by means of treatment (Reynolds 2008a:25; cf. Kabue 2013:3; see Keum 2018:13). This often results in an asymmetrical relation between patient and healer. The patient is objectified by the healer’s diagnosis, and is dependent on the healer’s knowledge and expertise to be cured. The emphasis of the

medical model is an attempt to correct the deficit in the individual. This can lead to an endless process for the person with the disability at the hands of professionals; by increasingly becoming an object of medical interventions, leading increasingly to loss of integrity and sense of self. If healing is to be primarily about restoring wholeness, rather than to fix an individual, what is required are spiritual practices that foster connection and encourage and offer reconciliation (Thompson 2005:246).

Treatment of the 'problem' is occasionally also seen as a valuable source of income for the practitioner. It may also be that a person with a disability is solely seen as a faceless welfare case that is to be pitied, or even shunned. The medical approach undervalues people with disabilities and their human rights are dishonoured (World Health Organization and World Bank (2011) in Statistics South Africa 2014:13; cf. Reynolds 2008a:26). This approach, Williams (1996:1209) believes, originates from its biological roots and is useful not only to the medical and allied professions, but also to economic and political groups. In contemporary society, however, it is limited, intellectually and politically, as a way to respond to disability and its problems.

Fritzson (2009:242) understands the term disability to be a political concept:

It was formed to name a certain category of persons who were understood to have special needs that the society had a responsibility to meet. I do not agree that the term 'medical model' accurately describes the traditional understanding of disability. We should rather use the term 'poverty model', as traditionally society has constructed people with disabilities as being part of the larger group of poor people.

It depends on the eye of the beholder whether a person is seen as disabled. Johnson (2005:17-20) reckons the concepts disability and non-disability, similar to issues such as gender and race, are based on social construction (cf. Varenne & McDermott 1998; Haraway 1991; Butler 1990; Foucault 1978; see McNair & Sanchez 2008:37-38; Corker & French 1999; Webb-Mitchell 1996:126).

Disability and nondisability are also constructed through the language used to describe people. When someone who cannot see is labelled a 'blind person,' for example, it creates the impression that not being able to see sums up the entire person. In other words, blind becomes what they *are*. The same thing happens when people are described as 'brain damaged' or 'crippled' or 'retarded' or 'deaf' – the person becomes the disability and nothing more. Reducing people to a single

dimension of who they are separates and excludes them, marks them as 'other', as different from 'normal' (white, heterosexual, male, nondisabled) people and therefore as inferior (Johnson 2005:19).

The disability perspective is thus a social construction (Anderson 2003:34). And similar to society, religious communities consider their preference for able-bodied persons as 'normal', and they are not necessarily aware of their excluding attitude towards persons with disabilities.

Scholars of and advocates for disability support the social model, as opposed to the medical model (Creamer 2012:340; cf. Erevelles 1998:6). Mertens (2009:24) contends,

[p]eople with disabilities form a cultural group that has been systematically discriminated against and oppressed by society. The 'problem' is not 'in' the people with a disability; rather it is in the inadequate response from society to accommodate their needs.

For people with disabilities, tension is created between privilege and oppression, because the basis of reality is power and a struggle for identity (Creswell 2013:37; cf. Swinton 2011:278). Subsequently social action is required with a view to persons with disabilities enjoying full participation in everyday life (World Health Organization 2001:20). The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation and the Disability Alliance (UPIAS & Disability Alliance 1997) present the following perspective on disability:

In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society.

According to these organisations (UPIAS & Disability Alliance 1997), disability is not seen as a 'personal tragedy', but a

situation, caused by social conditions, which requires for its elimination, (a) that on one aspect such as incomes, mobility or institutions is treated in isolation, (b) that disabled people should, with the advice and help of others, assume control over their lives, and (c) that professionals, experts and others seek to help must be committed to promoting such control by disabled people.

With the social model, people with disabilities are approached as human beings, rather than 'diagnoses' (Creamer 2012:341). However, this model also has its limitations; for example, it does not address or reflect on the physical suffering of some persons with disabilities. Stuart (Anderson 2003:34) states:

For however true it might be that disability is a social construction, pain and degeneration constitute a different sort of suffering from that created by society unable or unwilling to embrace the disabled body and any attempt to theologize positively about them is unconvincing. ... Being disabled is to experience a double oppression in the sense that while disability is certainly a social construction and the interpretation of the disabled body by society is oppressive to disabled people, one cannot be liberated from one's own body and if your body is a site of pain, a liberatory theology of disability will not be enough.

Williams (1996:n.p.) contemplates on it being indisputable that the 'quality' of daily life for many disabled people consists of navigating their way through an unkind, antagonistic world beset by obstacles – thoughtlessly created by people who are not disabled and who are in charge of their world and environment. And while civil rights movements are powerfully useful in highlighting the ways in which disability is oppressed, 'they are not the whole story' (Williams 1996:1205). In reality, Williams continues, most disability in modern life is due to chronic illness which develops slowly. Also, anyone is liable to be or become disabled, especially in terms of ageing. Then there is also the dimension of pain or discomfort of bodies as an 'oppressive quality' which affects many.

It might be 'politically correct' to use the appropriate language in referring to disability – but even so to continue not to take the plight of persons with disabilities to heart. Some persons with a disability may describe themselves with words that others regard to be inappropriate. In fact, persons with disabilities will use language that describe themselves best. For example, Nancy Mairs, the well-known feminist writer with a disability (para. 7.1), prefers the word 'cripple' to refer to her, and not 'disabled'. The latter term is ambiguous, and refers to a variety of physical or cognitive impairments (Eiesland 1994:26). In similar vein, under the broader term of visual disability, a distinction is made between blindness and visual impairment (Greyling 2017). According to Greyling (2017), blind persons have specific needs, and this distinction makes it easier to identify their needs in relation to the needs of persons with partial loss of eyesight.

Consequently, the social model should not be favoured at the expense of recognising the medical challenges associated with most conditions of disability. The medical model should be supplemented by the social model (Reynolds 2008a:26). Medical and other psychosocial interventions are sometimes not only necessary, but essential; and for persons with disabilities to view able-bodied persons as ‘the enemy’ is counterproductive (Shakespeare 2006). A good example of a social and medical friendly approach is that of the *Gesundheit* Institute where patients are treated as friends. The movie *Patch Adams* is based on the work of the institute (Van Niekerk 2012:369). At the L’Arche communities, caring assistants live an ordinary life alongside persons with severe mental disabilities (cf. Van der Merwe 2015:33). Another example is the GW Institute for Spirituality & Health with its mission to foster more compassionate and caring healthcare systems and restore the heart and humanity to healthcare. We do this by developing education programs supported by scholarly and research-based initiatives which train physicians and other healthcare professionals to more fully integrate spirituality in their professional work with patients (Puchalski n.d.).

Hospivision (n.d.) is ‘touching lives and giving hope in government hospitals’ of Pretoria, Cape Town and George. The organisation assists ‘people to regain as much of their humanity and dignity and integrity as possible, despite their health struggles’. They ‘comfort and counsel the person, her family and caregivers as she undertakes her journey through illness’.

Statistics South Africa (2014: xxiv) defines disability as

[t]he loss or elimination of opportunities to take part in the life of the community, equitably with others that is encountered by persons having physical, sensory, psychological, developmental, learning, neurological or other impairments, which may be permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, thereby causing activity limitations and participation restriction with the mainstream society.

Disability refers to the concurrence of a physical condition and particular social factors, according to the holistic definition suggested by Reynolds (2008a:27). Due to external physical and/or social barriers, an individual’s participation in society is obstructed by a physical impairment which restricts him or her from meeting some or other social role expectation (Reynolds 2008a:27). The *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health* (ICF) (World Health Organization 2001:20) employs a ‘biopsychosocial’ approach’: the social and medical models are combined in a holistic

fashion. The ICF (World Health Organization 2013:17) is organised in two parts; with two components each:

- Functioning and disability
 - Body functions and body structures
 - Activities and participation
- Contextual factors
 - Environmental factors
 - Personal factors

Every person is found within a context: ‘functioning and disability are results of the interaction between the health conditions of the person and their environment’ (World Health Organization 2013:17).

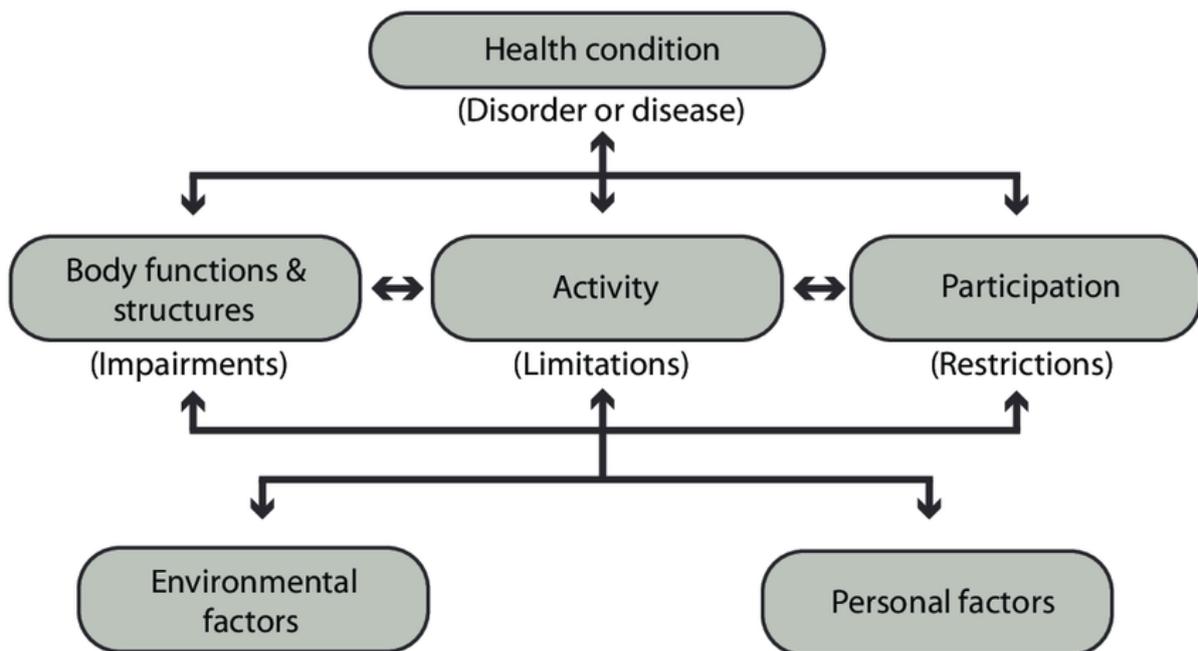


Diagram 7.1 Components of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)

Source: World Health Organization 2001

All contextual factors, whether personal or environmental, include ‘attitudes, values, and personal and social meaning assigned to disability’ (Gaventa 2016:310). Gaventa

(2016:311) is of the opinion that '[o]ne cannot explore the realm of meaning without taking into account spiritual and religious attitudes, beliefs, experiences and practices'.

In recent times medical practice has increasingly changed from its disease-centred focus ('biological garage') to being patient-centred (humanisation movement) and, most recently, person-centred (personalisation movement) (Saad, De Medeiros & Mosini 2017:5). As aspects of spirituality have thus gained ground, it has become a matter of greatest importance for these to be fully understood and incorporated for a real shift to occur in standards of clinical practice and training – especially in terms of mental health. But, spirituality needs to embrace the 'biopsychosocial–spiritual model'. Only this would bring about a meaningful change to the concepts of health, disease, treatment, and cure (Saad et al. 2017:5-6).

Creamer (2012:340-341) discusses two other models of disability, *inter alia* the moral and the limits models. The moral model is seen as an older version of the medical model, and disability is viewed as either good or bad. A good example is found in Leviticus 21:16-24: persons with a defect, e.g. being crippled, blind and lame, are forbidden to offer foods to God, and another is also Jesus' faith healings (Creamer 2012:340). The limits model challenges assumptions of 'normality' and 'disability'. Being normal is based on illusion, because everybody has some or other limitation (Creamer 2012:341; cf. Claassens 2013:64). Anton van Niekerk (2013:106), director of the Centre of Applied Ethics at the University of Stellenbosch describes it as a '*philosophical* conception of disability':

Disability must always be understood in terms of real limitations that are experienced in bodily and/or mental functioning. In this sense disability is significantly different from allegedly socially constructed disadvantages like ethnicity or skin colour. A hermit who is unable to walk is disabled, irrespective of the fact that he lives entirely on his own and not in a society. A limitation or failure of functioning, however, is only a disability if it amounts to the impairment of human flourishing.

Wink (Hartsig 2005:12) opines that most persons are conscious of their own individual disabilities and it is not a matter of 'either/or, but a continuum that runs from slightly disabled to extremely disabled'. Neither one true model exists, nor one correct definition of disability. As persons with disabilities, Marsha Saxton and Florence Howe, argue:

We are not bound by traditional definitions of what it means to be disabled. The more insight we gain, the more we realize that nearly everything the culture has told us about the experience of disability and illness (the burden, the tragedy, the suffering, the limits) is based on arbitrary sets of values. There is no evidence that our experiences are universally negative or bad. In other cultures, some native American, for example, people with disabilities are regarded as spiritually special and are assigned healing powers and leadership roles (Deland 1999:74-75).

Reynolds (2013:18, 23) reminds us that eventually there is no clear line or barrier between ability and disability, but rather 'a nexus of reciprocity that is based in our vulnerability'. All persons are vulnerable but some are more vulnerable and others are less so, and in distinct ways, such as related to race, gender, class, etc., including the specifics of the immediate environment and space in terms of where anyone finds themselves.

7.4 Disability on South African soil

Discourse on theology and disability in South Africa is scarce. The conference *Theology, Disability and Human Dignity* held at the Stellenbosch Faculty of Theology in 2011 was thus recognised as an important contribution (Claassens, Swartz & Hansen 2013:9).

Authors on theology/spirituality and disability refer to the statistics of people with disabilities in their own respectively 'developed' countries (e.g. Eiesland 1994:19; Do Rozario 1997:427; Creamer 2009:3, 14; Creamer 2012:340). Approximately 15% of the world's population live with some form of disability (World Health Organization and World Bank 2011 in Statistics South Africa (2014:1). These people are often marginalised, and live a life of 'poverty and discrimination in almost all societies' (Statistics South Africa 2014:1; cf. Thompson 2005:245; Creamer 2012:345). They can easily fall prey to crime and abuse (Creamer 2012:345). For example, the quoted figure of 144 mentally ill patients in Gauteng who died as a result of neglect and mismanagement while in the care of mainly unlicensed health care providers contracted by the provincial health department during the Life Esidimeni massacre in 2016, is possibly deflated (Masilela 2018; Child 2018). Initially these patients were well cared for by the privately controlled Life Group. The health department had cancelled Life Esidimeni's contract in order to cut costs – leading to these patients dying from

thirst, hunger and cold. The Life Esidimeni saga is consequently more than a story of medical negligence and abuse; it is a socio-political narrative of utmost cruelty against persons who mattered only once they died (Capri, Watermeyer, McKenzie & Coetzee 2018:153). Furthermore, most vulnerable are children with developmental delays and disabilities. They are also at high risk of becoming victims of sexual abuse (Van Niekerk 2014:2). People with disabilities 'form one of the largest minority groups in the world, estimated to exceed 600 million. The majority of these live in the least developed countries, and are among the poorest of the poor' (Kim & Anderson 2011:450).

Table 7.1 Prevalence of disability according to province

Source: Statistics South Africa 2014:v, 57

Province	With disabilities		Without disabilities		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Western Cape	222 333	5,4	3 914 513	94,6	4 136 846	100,0
Eastern Cape	472 106	9,6	4 448 179	90,4	4 920 285	100,0
Northern Cape	92 731	11,0	747 310	89,0	840 041	100,0
Free State	234 738	11,1	1 888 869	89,0	2 123 607	100,0
KwaZulu-Natal	620481	8,4	6 728 673	91,6	7 349 154	100,0
North West	254 333	10,0	2 285 298	90,0	2 539 631	100,0
Gauteng	485 331	5,3	8 627 419	94,7	9 112 750	100,0
Mpumalanga	205 280	7,0	2 727 519	93,0	2 932 799	100,0
Limpopo	282 797	6,9	3 846 966	93,2	4 129 763	100,0
South Africa	2 870 130	7,5	35 214 746	92,5	38 084 876	100,0

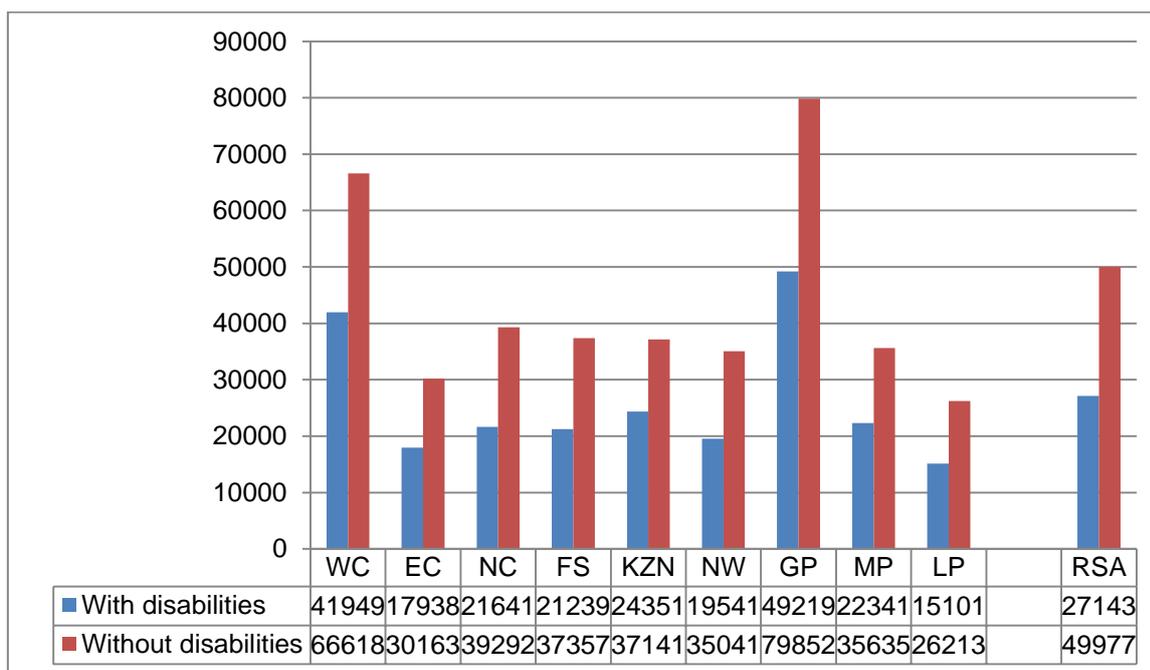
In 2011, nearly eight out of every hundred (7,5%) persons aged five years and older in the South African population were persons with disabilities (Statistics South Africa 2014:v, 152) (table 7.1). The statistics are an underestimation, however, due to the exclusion of the institutionalised population, persons with psychosocial and certain neurological disabilities (Statistics South Africa 2014:152). The incidence of disability varies according to province, age, sex, population group and place of residence. For

example, disability has its highest prevalence (11%) in the Free State and Northern Cape provinces respectively (Statistics South Africa 2014:v, 57).

There is a disturbing correlation between disability and poverty, as seen in table 7.2 (Statistics South Africa 2014:134). Inadequate, limited or even the complete lack of access to education and employment, have kept persons with disabilities hostage on the lowest step of the socio-economic ladder (Statistics South Africa 2014:153). Lekgetho (2015) reports: 'In South Africa, daily exclusions from education, employment and health services keep many living with disabilities trapped in cycles of poverty'. The rural areas are worst affected due to illiteracy and unemployment, according to the former Minister of Social Development, Bathabile Dlamini. She added that disability is both a cause and consequence of poverty, leading to job losses, low earnings, additional expenses, and difficulties in attaining education and skills. Other challenges also exacerbated economic hardship, including disability and limited access to essential health care (either to prevent the occurrence of disabilities or to prevent existing disabilities becoming worse) (Health24 2016).

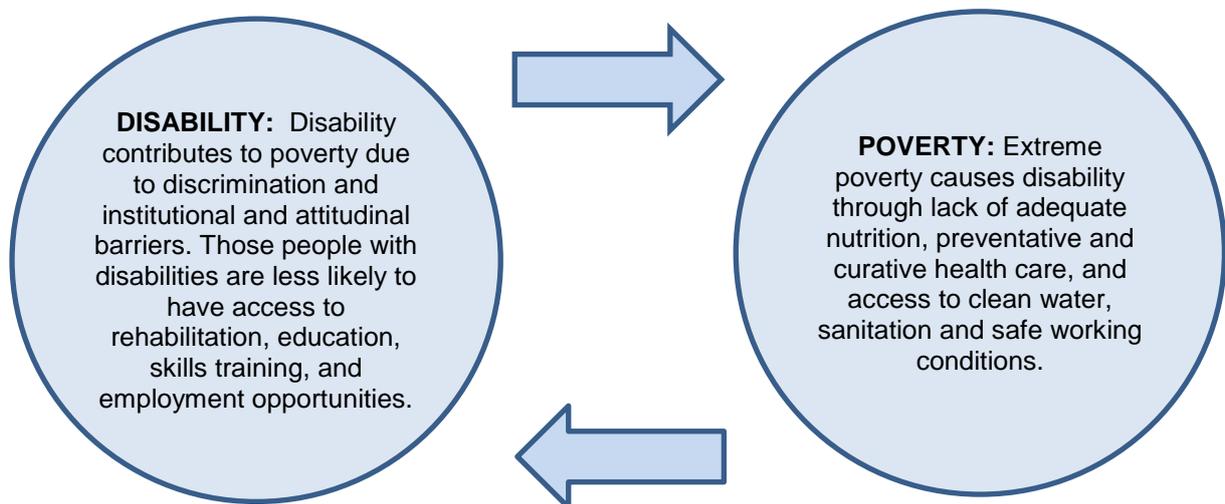
Table 7.2 Correlation between disability and poverty

Source: Statistics South Africa 2014:134



Kretzschmar (2018:30) refers to the disability-poverty cycle (diagram 7.2) that is very relevant to the South African context.

Diagram 7.2 The disability-poverty cycle



Despite the protection of the rights of people with disabilities as set out in the Constitution of South Africa (108 of 1996), many persons with disabilities suffer to a significant degree. The injustice caused by the apartheid system continues to be visible (Statistics South Africa 2014:153). In the section on 'Disability' in *The Bill of Rights Handbook* (Currie & De Waal 2016:234-235), it is stated that '[d]isability is one of the most under-litigated grounds of differentiation'. Differentiation refers to the right of some people to receive differential treatment based on valid reasons (Currie & De Waal 2016:218). Concern about the current status of people with disabilities in South Africa is shared. It is argued that the nature of a particular disability may require special measures with a view to ensuring that the needs of people with disabilities are not only considered, but that obstacles preventing general participation in the economy should be effectively removed to combat unfair discrimination.

7.5 Theologies and/or spiritualities of disability

Where disability is concerned, religious inquiry is compelled to plumb the depths of human experience for what disability tells us about ourselves, God and life together in community. We need the *voice* and *presence* of people with disabilities to realize a richer revelation of God and ourselves (Anderson 2003:36).

'Theology of disability' is the popular term used, but also 'spirituality of disability' (e.g. Hull 2003). In his research report *Who is the God we worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities*, John Swinton (2011:306) claims, 'the theology of disability is central to our understanding of what it means to know who God is and to know what it means to be a human being living fully under God'. This claim is substantiated by reflecting on five God images through the lens of disability (Swinton 2011:281):

- God as disabled,
- God as accessible,
- God as limited,
- God as vulnerable, and
- God as giver and receiver.

7.5.1 A disabled God by Nancy Eiesland

Eiesland's seminal work, with the title *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (1994) has inspired many written works on disability theology. As a person with a physical disability, as well as sociologist of religion and theologian, Eiesland (1994:29) regards her work as liberation theology, and states:

My contention is that a liberatory theology of disability is a theology of coalition and struggle in which we identify our unique experiences while also struggling for recognition, inclusion, and acceptance from one another and from the able-bodied society and church.

Her focus is on 'oppressive structures and beliefs, and on fashioning new images and practises' (Eiesland 1994:9, 31), and on the real life experiences of two women with disabilities. The narratives of Diane DeVries, whose amputation is congenital, and Nancy Mairs (para. 7.1), provide three themes (Eiesland 1994:47-48):

- '[T]hey embody [...] contingency and difficulty not only with anger and disappointment but also with respect for its unique value'.

- ‘Embodying disability is not an extraordinary feat; rather it too is a process of symbolically and corporeally constructing wholeness and ordinary physicality.’
- ‘[They] accurately distinguish between the physical contingency that is part of ordinary life and socially constructed barriers that make ordinary life impossible; and both demonstrate self-valuation and struggle for justice in the face of persistent discrimination and devaluation.’

The minority group model (better known as the social model) of Eiesland (1994:66, 25) is linked to the civil rights movement. It gives a social framework by which persons with disabilities, as well as individuals without disabilities committed to social equality, can understand the effect of social issues such as stereotyping of, discrimination against and prejudice towards people with disabilities. While social harm brought about by separation and marginalisation is exposed, the framework also provides the opportunity to construct new ideas with a view to facilitating positive change (Eiesland 1994:66). However, this model is generally not operative in Christian churches (Eiesland 1994:67). Persons with disabilities have access to the church on the basis of others’ pity and/or favour, instead of on the basis of empowerment (Eiesland 2005:584).

The primary problem for the church is not how to ‘accommodate’ disabled persons. The problem is a disabling theology that functionally denies inclusion and justice for many of God’s children. Much of church theology and practice — including the Bible itself — has often been dangerous for persons with disabilities, who encounter prejudice, hostility, and suspicion that cannot be dismissed simply as relics of an unenlightened past. Christians today continue to interpret scripture and spin theologies in ways that reinforce negative stereotypes, support social and environmental segregation, and mask the lived realities of people with disabilities (Eiesland 2005:584).

Eiesland’s theology of liberation is known not only from her experience as a person with disability, but more so through an epiphany (Swinton 2011:282) which is considered ‘the driving force behind her work’ (Fast 2011:421).

My epiphany bore little resemblance to the God I was expecting or the God of my dreams. I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair, that is, the chair used mostly by quadriplegics enabling them to manoeuvre by blowing and sucking on a strawlike device. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering

servant. In this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright. I recognized the incarnate Christ in the image of those judged 'not feasible', 'unemployable', with 'questionable quality of life'. Here was God for me (Eiesland 1994:89).

Eiesland utilises her experience as a disabled person (Swinton 2011:283) for a hermeneutic lens. A good example is her reflection on Luke 24:36-39:

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.

The hands and feet of the risen Christ whom the disciples met still showed the wounds of the resurrection – he was disabled (Swinton 2011:283). Three perspectives are associated with the Christological reflection of this image (Yong 2007:12):

- With his death on the cross revealing the extent of the rejection he suffered, Jesus – the incarnation of the Son of God – became like his brothers and sisters in every way (Heb. 2:17). '[I]mago Dei would thus be inclusive rather than exclusive of the human experience of disability' (Yong 2007:12).
- After his resurrection, Jesus had the scars from a sword that wounded his side and nails that penetrated his hands and feet (Lk 24:39-40 and Jn 20:24-28). The resurrected Jesus continued to be imperfect.
- During the Holy Communion, the focus is on the broken body of Christ and therefore on the 'disabled God'. 'Christ's broken body not only unites the fragmented ecclesial body, but also heals the brokenness of our individual bodies precisely through including each person around the Eucharist fellowship regardless of his or her in/ability' (Yong 2007:12).

Every Christian believer worships this disabled God. Both the individual with a disability and the able-bodied person need to be reconciled with the broken body of Christ (Eiesland 1994:25). People with disabilities require new rituals and beliefs with a view to participating fully in the community of God.

According to Eiesland, God is present *within* disability and shares the experience in God's very being. This signifies an aspect of God's self and presence that God is *with*

the disabled in their physical impairment and social exclusion, rather than merely walking beside or sympathising with the disabled. Then disability is no longer a barrier to their full participation in church-related matters. Alternatively, understanding this aspect of God's true nature cries out for the necessary political action towards justice and change (Swinton 2011:283).

Eiesland goes on to say that through the experience of human disability, a radical contextual exegesis of the image of God is gained. This experience can therefore be the chief interpretive vessel for gaining a deeper understanding of God (Swinton 2011:284). Eiesland (2005:586) articulates the need for a theology of disability to be integrated into the Christian life and community. A shift in perspective is required, away from viewing it as a special interest or minority group concern, an indication of sin or a platform for opportunistic righteous endurance or altruism. The church is called to repent and transform, to recognise the gifts of all minority groups, including those of persons with disabilities (see Keum 2018:8-12).

Evaluative remarks on Eiesland's theology

Every theology has strong and weak points. The evaluation is also dependent on the interpreter's own life circumstances and presuppositions. As indicated in chapter 2, any proposed concept or image of God is human-made and subjective. To picture God is not easy; and God cannot be condensed into one concept.

Eiesland's proposal of the disabled God has an influence on the development and direction of most theologies of disability. When her theology is viewed to be radical or controversial, the struggle of persons with disabilities for inclusion could be missed. Eiesland's activism is praiseworthy; her concern about church practice and continuous involvement in its liberation are indicative of her hope in the church. Eiesland (2002:13) writes:

For a long time, I experienced a significant rift between my activism and my faith. My activism filled me with a passion for social change that would acknowledge our full value as human beings. But my theological and spiritual questions remained unanswered: What is the meaning of my disability? The movement offered me opportunities to work for change that were unavailable in the church, but my faith gave a spiritual fulfillment that I could not find in the movement.

Chopp (Eiesland 1994:11) highlights a pertinent point that Christians 'do not have an able-bodied God as their primal image. Rather, the Disabled God promising grace through a broken body is the centre of piety, prayer, practise and mission'. By bringing the idea of the disabled God into the disability and theology dialogue, Eiesland clarifies that the prejudices and biases used in constructing our images of God are unearthed. The church is thus challenged to consider why several clearly oppressive theologies and practices are deemed acceptable (cf. Swinton 2011:284). As indicated above, God is known through justice (para. 2.7.1).

From Eiesland's liberation theology perspective, acting for justice is at the heart of the Gospel. According to the minority group approach, an oppressed minority can mobilise and challenge painful or distressful theological and political views and conduct (Swinton 2011:284). Instead of a church *for* persons with disabilities, it is a church *of* the persons of disabilities.

Creamer (2012:342) interprets Eiesland's proposal of the disabled God as an active driving force in a broader intersection of religion and disability. This idea not only rebuffs the notion of disability linked to individual sin (the sinless Jesus became disabled), but further postulates that individuals with disabilities have an epistemological advantage, as their experiences with disability have granted them insights into God, themselves and life that able-bodied individuals do not have. She goes one step further in drawing on Latin American liberation theology and claiming that God proactively sides with people with disabilities.

However, according to Swinton (2011:284-286), Eiesland's image of a disabled God and her application of liberation theology exhibit shortfalls:

- Jesus' risen body was just as able as before crucifixion. As discussed in chapter 3, Jesus was even more able, by walking through walls and disguising himself. Jesus body was wounded and beaten, but not disabled.
- Jesus' body on the cross can be associated with disability, but not after his resurrection. The theology of the cross should be complementary to a theology of glory (cf. Louw 2005:99; Fast 2011:429).
- '*Jesus' scars are marks of redemption and hope, not of oppression or disability*' (Swinton 2011:285). The resurrected body of Jesus does not reflect on disability as a social phenomenon.

- Her theology can be seen as one-sided and exclusive, considering that God loves everybody (Jn 3:16).
- People with severe mental disabilities are unable to participate in the liberatory process. Eiesland's theology presupposes participation of independent cognitively able persons (cf. Creamer 2006:9). Furthermore, Eiesland's Christology of a disabled God does not necessarily empower people who have negative feelings regarding their disability.

7.5.2 An accessible God by Jennie Weiss Block

Weiss Block, who has an MBA, had a consulting practice in the disability field before she started theological training. As a Roman Catholic, she wrote an MTh thesis with the title *Copious hosting*, based on the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx on hospitality and inclusion in the church (O'Connor 2002:101). Weiss Block (2002:12-15) shared some of the challenges with which she was presented as the primary caretaker of Bobby, her adopted brother with a disability. He was intellectually disabled and severely abused before the death of his biological parents.

The publication of Weiss Block's book, *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities*, followed in 2002. Its first aim was to start a conversation between Christian theology and disability studies. Moreover, it strove to develop a theology of access, inclusive of people with disabilities. As Swinton (2011:287) puts it, 'the Disability Studies concepts of *access* and *inclusion* [are employed] to clarify our understandings of God and enable these things to become realities within Christian communities' [my addition in brackets].

Although Weiss Block (2002:28-29) agrees with the idea of defining persons with disabilities as an oppressed minority, she is aware of the weakness of the 'exclusionary dynamic within the liberatory approach' (Swinton 2011:286-287). The categories of 'oppressed' and 'oppressor' are problematic (Swinton 2011:287). According to these categories, she would be labelled as an 'oppressor' because she is a person without a disability. Weiss Block thus opts for an inclusive model for Christian communities.

According to Weiss Block, church communities have a duty to challenge oppressive structures. They should also adjust to include people with disabilities and provide them

with full access. Her theology of access is based on the inclusive ministry of Jesus, who makes no distinction between nationality, class, race, gender and ability:

When we live for God in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we cannot help but give hope to others, and we cannot help but be inclusive. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a call to a new world where outsiders become insiders. The church as the body of Christ is the quintessential inclusive community, where Jesus Christ, the one who is always identified with the outsider, presides as the copious host (Weiss Block 2002:132).

Through the lens of disability, Weiss Block (2002:22) relates to images of God that are consistently associated with inclusion and access: 'the mandate for access and inclusion is biblically based, central to our baptismal promise and commitment, and rooted in the Triune God'.

Like Jesus, Christians are sometimes guests and other times hosts (Swinton 2011:287). According to the concept of 'co-hosts' that imitates the hospitality of Jesus, individuals with disabilities are not understood as guests only. Christians, including those with disabilities, should be there for others and in the process discover what loving them means in that context. Flowing from this, an inclusive community of believers develops, wherein each member gives and receives from each other.

With a theology of access, Weiss Block emphasises the full participation of people with disabilities in all processes of decision-making. Apart from the fact that her 'pastoral theology ... arises from praxis' (O'Connor 2002:102), her theology is a concrete and sensible aspiring for inclusion (Creamer 2006:5). For instance, she refers to the extensive remodelling of a chapel to improve accessibility for people with disabilities. But the designers had failed to consult any wheelchair-users, and upon completion of the renovations the chapel remained inaccessible since it did not allow for the turn radius of wheelchairs. Her suggestion is that those involved made both a practical error and a theological error in excluding people with disabilities from the decision-making process. They overlooked the gospel mandate of inclusion and their actions were inconsistent with what she terms the 'accessible God'. Her focus therefore goes beyond the image of God, and extends to the conduct and responsibilities on every level of human activity demanded by that image.

Weiss Block (2002:122-123) acknowledges, however, the difficult and demanding requirements of becoming inclusive in communities of faith. There should be

introspection about the systematic exclusion of persons with disabilities in one's community and the acknowledgement of one's own discriminatory attitude towards, and presuppositions about, people with disabilities. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves the following questions in order to ensure accomplishing our calling:

How can we become more inclusive? What actions do we need to take? What skills do we need? How must we change to make this gospel demand a reality in our communities? Becoming inclusive is a complex, demanding task that asks more of us than we are probably willing to give. It requires the traits of patience and vigilance that are in short supply in our fast-paced, outcome-oriented world. And yet, we cannot be faithful to our Christian vocation if we are not serious about the Christian mandate for inclusion (Weiss Block 2002:122-123).

Although Weiss Block (2002:158) is fully committed to her call for advocacy of the total inclusion of people with disabilities in church spaces and practices, she has reservations:

[M]y experience has shown me that they are not enough. No laws, bishop's letters, human services paradigms, or parish accessibility committees will ever provide access to people with disabilities. Liberation and equal access to the community will only be realized through personal relationships that develop into genuine friendships.

Evaluation of Weiss Block's theology

A theology of access is essential in that it reflects Jesus' gospel of access and responds to a 'Christian mandate' to create access for the marginalised (Weiss Block 2002:120). Weiss Block succeeds in prioritising persons with disabilities as a marginalised group on the agenda of the church. Wilfred (George 2011:102) comments, '[t]he agenda from the periphery (*the margins*) is the agenda of God ... The real future of humanity is there [on the periphery] because persons in the margins constantly challenge the established order about its ways of exclusion, and strive towards a world of inclusion and justice'.

Furthermore, Weiss Block's theology reflects on hospitality, the practice of welcoming everyone. According to Reynolds (2008a:20), hospitality is the 'Christ shaped character of God's reconciling love, displayed not in power but in vulnerability'. Nouwen (Hernandez 2006) regards all of ministry as hospitality, and a dimension of spirituality.

Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines (Nouwen 1975:71).

But, like Eiesland's model, Weiss Block's also has its shortcomings. Creamer (2006:9) asks the question: 'Is Block's proposal of the accessible God intelligible for those who experience chronic pain?' Swinton (2011:288) reflects on the problem relating to her use of a 'mutual critical conversation' between disability studies and theology. Disability studies are not actually interested in dialogue with religion or theology (see Creamer 2009:78). Instead of a symmetrical, equal partnership between theology and disability studies, theology is an unequal partner. (See diagram 5.1 and the discussion on the intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches in movement 2). Disability studies and rights influence the theology of disability, while theology has little impact on the disability studies perspective (Swinton 2011:288). From a Christian theological and ecclesial perspective, disability rights are

important, but only as they relate to the goals of the coming Kingdom. That being so, rights without love won't work ... But, in the present, love without rights leaves people vulnerable to the fallout from human sinfulness (Swinton 2011:305).

7.5.3 A God of Limits by Deborah Creamer

Creamer (2006:1) describes herself as both a scholar of religion and of disability studies. She proposes a theology of limits. While Creamer acknowledges the different principles of the medical and minority (social) models, she proposes the necessity for a more inclusive approach, and has therefore developed a complementary 'limits model' (Creamer 2009:93; 115; cf. Swinton 2011:289). This model is based on the following theological propositions (Creamer 2009:94-95):

Limits are

- an unsurprising characteristic of humanity.
- an intrinsic aspect of humanity.
- good or, at the very least, not evil.

The life of humans is bound by unavoidable limits, e.g. 'we cannot fly' and 'we all tire and die' (Creamer 2012:341). These limits are unbiased and collective to all humans (Swinton 2011:290). The limits model does not cement disability 'as a distinct and

separate category of otherness, [but] this lens encourages us to consider the ways in which limits are normal, unsurprising, fluid, and even good' (Creamer 2012:341 [my addition in brackets]). Creamer's model avoids any generalisation of disabilities, such as a person with Down's syndrome, or a person blind from birth and a person in a wheelchair after an accident, being equally categorised and labelled as 'disabled'. Furthermore, sweeping statements such as 'we are all disabled' are rejected (Creamer 2012:341).

It is not surprising that Creamer's theology of limits, based on human experience ('theology from below' – Swinton 2011:290), ends up modifying God's image. 'If limits are a natural aspect of being human and if human beings are made in God's image, then it is possible to make claims about the nature of God by reflecting on human experience' (Swinton 2011:290). Creamer (2009:112) reasons:

Similarly, this idea of limits is also relevant for our understandings of God. When we think of limits, we think of limit-ed. We tend to imagine that a God with limits (e.g., a God with an impairment) is less (at best) or defective (at worst). Why would we worship, or even want, a limit-ed God? If God has an impairment, we tend (from a limited-ness perspective) to think of what God is not (a blind God cannot see, a deaf God cannot hear). However, applying the limits model may instead give us a very different way to think of God.

The perspective of a limited God is aligned with the Christian tradition. In Jesus 'God took limits willingly' (Creamer 2009:112); it reminds us of the *kenosis* motive, e.g. Philippians 2:5-11 (cf. Swinton 2011:290; see Keum 2018:37-39).

Evaluation of Creamer's theology

Creamer (2009:118) does not intend to refute experiences of iniquity and anguish, but rather gives recognition to the intricacy of experiences by the limits model. Consequently this model is only one metaphor among others used to describe God. Swinton (2011:290) questions this, 'How are we actually to find any truthful and definitive images of God that will guide us all?' He continues to query Creamer's openness to the exploration of new and different models of disability, stating that it may vanish into a 'sea of relativism'. Probably Creamer (2006:9) will agree with these concerns, because she states: 'every model of God is metaphorical, as Sallie McFague says, offering just "one square in the quilt, one voice in the conversation, one angle of vision"'.

7.5.4 A vulnerable God by Tom Reynolds

In his book *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality*, published in 2008, Thomas Reynolds writes both as a systematic theologian and the father of Chris, a young man with a disability (para. 7.2). His personal experience as a parent has enriched his perspective as theologian (Fritzson 2009:241), and his main argument is:

[W]holeness is not the product of self-sufficiency or independence, but rather of the genuinely inclusive communion that results from sharing our humanity with one another in light of the grace of God. To exist as a finite creature is to be contingent and vulnerable. This means we are beings that face limitations and are capable of suffering from a range of impairments. There is a profound theological implication here. It is precisely such vulnerability that God embraces in Christ, entering fully into the frailty of the human condition, even unto a tragic death. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us (Reynolds 2008a:18-19).

It is through the embodiment of Jesus that God specifically conveys to humans – in the most accessible way – how the divine shares each and every human quality and experience. Jesus is ‘the icon of a vulnerable God’ (Reynolds 2008a:198); and the ‘exemplar of the fully human life’ (Reynolds 2008a:199). Jesus ‘embodies God’s loving regard for – and gratuitous solidarity with – humanity precisely in its incapacity, vulnerability, and indeed its brokenness’ (Reynolds 2008a:199-200). What God demonstrates, without romanticising it, is that this being at one with humans allows humans also to be at one with God. This lifts humans up to God’s being, and provides entry to the divine. ‘Redemption then is a welcoming, an empowering act of hospitality’ (Reynolds 2008a:19).

Similar to the schema of the Trinity, Reynolds’s theology declares vulnerability just as much a part of God’s creation as anything else. It is in Christ that a loving God meets humans in their vulnerability. Since the church is the body of Christ, this is the place where humans come together in their diversity to celebrate what they bring to one another. The stranger is welcomed in church, and will come to enjoy hospitality. (However, strictly speaking, there are no strangers in church.) Hospitality includes vulnerability, and it happens naturally when strangers, or guests and hosts, meet. It is no wonder then that Reynolds (Fritzson 2009:242) concludes, ‘there is nothing inherently wrong with disability or with people who have disabilities’.

God is the creator of all humanity, and continues to love all of creation, even when rejected. The essential characteristics of God are seen in the act of creating and him subsequently relating and being available to what he has created. When Reynolds (2008a:15) contemplates on 'wholeness and ability', it is not in terms of 'productive power and individual completeness, but ... vulnerability and interdependence'. It is empirically shown that all humans, non-disabled and disabled alike, are vulnerable and dependent on another (Reynolds 2008a:47; cf. World Council of Churches 2016:12; Swinton 2011:292). '[I]mperfections are among the few things' that all humans share (Scott Peck 1987:231). According to Scott Peck (1987:231), vulnerability is not only 'to risk being wounded', but also demonstrate woundedness in its different forms, such as brokenness, limitations, failures, deficiencies and disabilities. It was not only as a 'sacrificial act' that Jesus joined the marginalised and disabled, but also because Jesus knew where community was to be found.

'Fundamentally, love involves welcoming another into a space of mutual vulnerability' (Reynolds 2008a:119). Making ourselves available to others is in fact the practice of freedom.

[F]reedom is a relationship of availability for the other wherein we bind ourselves to her by offering the gift of ourselves. This is what God does for humanity. And being created in the image of God commissions humanity to the ongoing task of doing the same for others (Reynolds 2008a:185-186).

However, the offer of this far-reaching availability to others is accompanied by our own acceptance of vulnerability, since the latter is the very essence of love. Availing ourselves as the space where others can feel safe and be cared for, is a demonstration of the holy, according to Reynolds (Swinton 2011:293).

Evaluative remarks on Reynolds's theology of vulnerability

God's response – and by implication also that of the church – towards society's 'injustice and exclusion' is found in visible acts of solidarity, e.g. 'sympathy, compassion, vulnerability, relationality, hospitality and inclusion', according to Reynolds (Lynch 2008). In her book review, Lynch (2008) correctly argues that Reynolds's perspective on solidarity is limited, and she questions a 'vulnerable and suffering God[s]' solidarity, if it implies only suffering with the 'marginalised and oppressed' and not also 'fighting and resisting' oppressive structures. She continues,

[i]n his keenness to present Jesus as the epitome of compassion and gentleness, Reynolds misses the possibility that the 'The marginalized and oppressed ... find liberation through Jesus's presence' maybe partly because Jesus is not silent in the face of oppression. ... While sympathy in the face of oppression might have its place, *it is an empty and rather patronising gesture if not accompanied by moral outrage at those structures and practices that give rise to oppression.*

However, according to Swinton (2011:298-299), Reynolds yields to disability rights and consequently 'politics remains an option even though there are clear tensions between the idea of vulnerability and the aggressive nature of liberal democratic politics'.

Reynolds's critique on and rejection of the 'cult of normalcy' (a phrase adopted from the expression 'tyranny of the normal' coined by Stanley Hauerwas) is widely acknowledged and appreciated in the disability discourse. Reynolds (2008a:60) reckons the 'cult of normalcy' claims possession of 'power and privilege' in society and does not tolerate deviation. Any bodily divergence from the socially constructed standard for bodily appearance is therefore regarded as 'not normal' and consequently viewed as disease or pathology. The roots of the medical model are to be found in the 'cult of normalcy'. The modern and liberal group identity consists of, 'values such as freedom, equality, independence, rationality, productivity, efficiency, and prosperity' (Reynolds 2008a:70). Anybody who adheres to these values is accepted and welcomed, while persons with disabilities are shunned, because of their inability to keep up with the Joneses ('normal and enforced standards'). It is therefore necessary that the vulnerable should be on their guard against the 'cult of normalcy'. Reynolds (2008b:25) writes in an article, *The Cult of Normalcy*:

Against the cult of normalcy, disability foregrounds vulnerability as a fundamental condition of sharing life together. It reminds us that wholeness is not self-sufficiency, but the genuine communion that results from sharing our vulnerable humanity with one another in light of God's grace.

Closely related to normalcy, viewed as being able-bodied, is the concept 'ableism' (cf. Reynolds 2013:21; World Council of Churches 2012: 168). According to Campbell (2009:5), 'a chief feature of an ableist viewpoint is a belief that impairment or disability (irrespective of 'type') is inherently negative and should the opportunity present itself, be ameliorated, cured or indeed illuminated'. Bonhoeffer (Vosloo 2006b:24) cautions,

'against a vitalistic absolutising of life as an end in itself ... [he] calls this error the mechanisation of life', which means a person's 'usefulness (*Nutzwert*) to the whole'. Instead of focussing on ability versus disability, Reynolds (2013:21) proposes the exploration of 'human vulnerability' as a unifying factor in our human diversity.

7.5.5 God as giver and receiver by Stanley Hauerwas

In *Timeful Friends: Living with the Handicapped* (2005), the ethicist and theologian Hauerwas reflects on the lives of people with profound intellectual disabilities. He investigates the theology and philosophical wisdom of Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche, a network of communities for intellectually disabled people; reflecting on and integrating Michael Bérubé's perspectives in his book *Life as We Know It: A Father, a Family, and an Exceptional Child* (1996). The book shares the reshaped lives of the Bérubé couple, both college professors, after the birth of their son James Lyon with Down's syndrome (Hauerwas 2005:11-12; Swinton 2011:295).

Hauerwas (2005:13-14, 17) has expressed sensitivity towards making persons with profound intellectual disabilities useful subjects for a personal theological agenda (para. 7.2). While the importance of being *with* persons with profound intellectual disabilities should be acknowledged, including getting to know them as friends, he admits that he has not had such a friendship lately (Hauerwas 2005:13). However, back to the discourse of disability theology; Hauerwas's interest lies in the 'corrosive influence of modernity on Christian theology' (Swinton 2011:295). The pretence found in modern society is most obvious in the presence of persons with intellectual disabilities (Hauerwas 2005:14). An emphasis on and presumptions of autonomy, independence, awareness and reason, all markers of modern humanness, are seriously challenged by persons with severe cognitive disabilities. These qualities cannot be fundamental to being human if 'those who will never, even with the best efforts, be able to read or write' (Hauerwas 2005:14) is considered.

The lives of persons with severe cognitive disabilities expose Christians to the essence of humanness. We are all dependent creatures:

As Christians we know we have not been created to be our 'own authors,' to be autonomous. We are creatures. Dependency, not autonomy, is one of the ontological characteristics of our lives. That we are creatures, moreover, is but a reminder that we are created for and with one another. We are not just accidentally communal, but we are such by necessity. We were not created to be alone. We

cannot help but desire and delight in the reality of the other, even the other born with a difference we call mentally handicapped (Hauerwas 2005:16).

Compared to modernity's assumption that every person has the right to write her or his own story, Christians only have one story, the story of human creation and the mutual necessity for salvation through Jesus' cross and resurrection (Hauerwas 2005:16; see Swinton 2011:296). According to Hauerwas (Swinton 2011:296), Christians recognise themselves as creatures totally dependent on God and one another. This understanding nullifies any thoughts of being able or unable – everybody is a dependent, susceptible and imperfect creature who has nothing to give. According to Swinton (2011:296), 'the true condition of all human beings' is being helpless, powerless, weak and vulnerable, and is disclosed to us by the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor 2:10) through the lives of persons with severe intellectual disability. To get to know and to care for them is to love God. Hauerwas (Swinton 2004:105) explains, 'in the face of the retarded [sic] we are offered an opportunity to see God, for like God they offer us an opportunity of recognizing the character of our neediness. He furthermore suggests is that the innate value of people with intellectual disabilities is based on a spirituality shared with all of us (Swinton 2004:xiii). A good example is Nouwen's ministry at L'Arche, while caring for Adam, a young man with severe intellectual disability. Nouwen writes that it is because of Jesus' vulnerability that Adam's extremely fragile life is of utmost spiritual significance. His weakness makes him a unique instrument of God's grace, revealing Christ in our midst (Nouwen 1997:30; see Hernandez 2006:80).

By their simplicity and authenticity they break through my intellectual defences, challenging me to be as open towards them as they are towards me. Their handicaps unmask mine. Their anxiety mirrors my anxiety. Their vulnerability allows me to have a look at my own vulnerability (Nouwen 2010:160).⁸²

Christians are supposed to glorify the God whose Son is Jesus Christ and who seeks to have a relationship with a people. The cross neither testifies to God's self-contained power, nor to self-absorbed interest. The image of God is thereby revealed (Hauerwas

⁸² *'Door hun eenvoud en hun echtheid breken zij door mijn intellectualistische verdedigingslijnes heen en dagen zij mij uit om net zo open tegenover hem te zijn als zij tegenover mij. Hun handicap ontmaskert de mijne. Hun angst weerspiegelt mijn angst. Hun kwetsbaarheid laat mij mijn eigen kwetsbaarheid zien.'*

2004:104). According to McGill (Hauerwas 2004:105), the quality that makes God divine is

[I]ove and not transcendence, giving and not being superior. ... Since giving entails receiving, there must be a receptive, dependent, needy pole with the being of God. It is pride—and not love—that fears dependence and that worships transcendence.

It follows that people with severe cognitive disabilities represent the basic neediness of all humans (Hauerwas 2004:105). Human beings are intended to need God and one another. According to Swinton (2011:296), the reference to need fulfilment by Hauerwas should not be associated with the idea of shortage, but rather as referring to the essence of the nature of God and self: 'we are as we relate'. This perspective is actually in accordance with the classical theology of the Trinity (Swinton 2011:296).

Evaluation of Hauerwas's theology

Hauerwas's perspective of 'the disabled God' differs from Eiesland's. Hauerwas re-symbolises humanness according to our knowledge of God, while Eiesland re-symbolises God in reaction to experiences of disability (Swinton 2011:297). Hauerwas views God's 'disability' as no disability at all. 'It just looks like one under the gaze of modernity's expectations' (Swinton 2011:298). He is uneasy with any politically active mode of transformation and rejects the politics of modernity. His focus is on an ecclesiological theology.

Hauerwas is cautious of Christians' involvement in modernity politics. However, he does see a need for 'new politics: a politics of the church and the coming Kingdom' (Swinton 2011:298). Swinton (2011:299) rightfully raises his concern: The avoidance of politics may increase persons with disabilities exposure to oppression, while there are many churches that do not actively oppose injustices within society.

Hauerwas's theological reflection on persons with intellectual disabilities allows for a possible interdisciplinary relation between theology and medical ethics (see Demmons 2009:34). For example, Coulter, a paediatric neurologist, writes with great appreciation about the influence of Hauerwas's theology on his work. 'Hauerwas helped him to recognize that persons with intellectual disabilities have intrinsic value and that this value is based upon a spirituality that is shared with all of us' (Coulter 2004:xiii). The perspective of Hauerwas not only enabled Coulter to develop empathy for persons with disabilities, but also to honour the significance of human life. In response to

Coulter, Demmons (2009:34) comes to the conclusion about the interdependence of disability theology and the medical profession where intellectual disability is concerned.

7.6 'Is God disabled?' – A case study

Wati Longchar's article *Is God disabled? Teaching theology from the margins* (2012) is based on a case study. He has discussed and commented on the responses of a particular group of 29 B.D.-iii students who attended one of his courses, 'Inclusive community; disability perspectives'. The course is one of two initiated by programmes of the World Council of Churches, Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network and Ecumenical Theological Education.

Longchar (2012:29) introduced the course with the question, 'Is our God able or disabled?' Only one of the 29 Bangalore candidates for the ministry answered: 'God is disabled'. This candidate said: 'Jesus was nailed [to] the cross and that is the sign of the disability of God'. Longchar (2012:29-30) reported, those who responded 'God is able' motivated their answers by *inter alia*:

- God is the Creator and he saw everything [as] 'good' and 'perfect' – so he is an able God.
- God demands righteousness – this represents the able nature of God.
- The Bible says that we should not offer a blemished sacrifice; God loves those that are perfect and holy.
- God is Holy and holiness represents the able nature of God.
- The Bible speak[s] of God as King, Lord, Savio[u]r, Almighty, all powerful, Warrior, Master – these images speak of the able nature of God.
- God is Almighty Father and he is the liberator.
- God punishes sinners by blinding them.
- God became human in Jesus who was an able person.

Longchar (2012:30) continued with some rhetorical questions: "Isn't our God Spirit?"; 'Are these images of God metaphorically constructed?'; and 'Aren't these images construct [sic] of the abled people for the abled people?' With these questions, Longchar touched on the crux of his argument. Our understanding of God is shaped by the way we perceive ourselves (para. 2.2.2). Longchar continues: 'Can we allow

disabled people to also construct their images of God?' The sad reality may be that people with disabilities are influenced by a need to hear the alternative to be liberated from a mainly superior perception of God. The students were reminded of the influence of earlier views on Christian theology, e.g. Gnosticism (Longchar 2012:32-33).

The Holy God does not come into contact with the sinful material world. ... Within this framework, able-people construct a patriarchal, successful, beautiful and a perfectly orientated image of God like Ruler, Lord, King, Almighty, Father, Master and Warrior. ... Though God is merciful, loving, comforting, suffering, compassionate and liberating, we tend to over-emphasise the triumphalistic [sic] images of God. ... These images have made Christianity a religion of the rural [sic], elite and upper-class (Longchar 2012:32).

The reason for upholding these elitist images of God, consciously or unconsciously, places churches in a serious crisis. They fail to liberate the 'poor and the marginalized', e.g. persons with disabilities and those among us living with HIV (Longchar 2012:33). Therefore, the theology that supports an 'institutionalized-patriarchal-hierarchical-dualistic view of life' should be deconstructed (Longchar 2012:35).

Longchar (2012:30-31) then turns to a practical consideration. A scenario of two persons who both applied for a vacancy for the position of pastor in their congregation is sketched. One applicant passed his studies with an A+ and is a person with a disability (a person in a wheelchair). The other applicant passed with a B- and is a handsome man. The question of who the students would prefer as pastor was posed. Only three students preferred the person in a wheelchair, the balance (26 students) chose the handsome applicant. The majority of students argued against the person with disability. One student responded, 'We do not need a person who has to be helped; otherwise we have to appoint one more person to look after him'.

Longchar (2012:31) continues with contemporary success stories, such as those of Stephen Hawking, Nancy Eiesland and Samuel Kabue, as well as the story of Moses. Longchar (2012:31-32) writes: 'Most students shared "success stories" of achievements by persons with disabilities; and he noticed in some of the students that they "were disturbed and became restless"'.

The empirical validity of this case study could be questioned. But Longchar's task was to teach a course and it is clear that his way of interactive teaching allows him to share his observations of the students when he reported on the content of his course in the

article mentioned above. However, one may question the generalisation evident in the responses provided. But the value of his study may also sensitise readers of the article to listen carefully to the general attitude of people without disabilities towards those with disabilities.

7.7 'We are all imperfect'

'None of us is whole, at least not yet. We are a damaged, broken, and wounded lot' (Hernandez 2006:112). We all need to embrace the reality of imperfect bodies. Our bodies are like tents (2 Cor 5:1), 'vulnerable, exposed to the powers of nature, wind and weather; bodies that could be contaminated with viruses and venom' (Van Niekerk 2012:370, P. van Niekerk 2013:151). All human beings are like fragile clay jars (2 Cor 4:7). Paul's metaphor reveals 'weakness, lack of eloquence, ordinariness, fragility, suffering, and hardships' (Ashley 2008).

Approximately 80% of Americans will experience a disability for more than six months during their lifespan, according to the the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (UCC Disabilities Ministries 2016:13). The American biblical theologian, Walter Wink, estimates almost everyone is disabled in one way or the other. While disability theologians like Creamer (para. 7.5.3), might raise their eyebrows to this generalisation of disability, Wink's focus (Hartsig 2005:12) is not on the issue of disability *per se* and its literal understanding, but on the concept of normalcy:

Press anyone who looks 'normal' and you will probably find, instead, a person with disabilities. Yet such people do not define themselves as 'disabled.' They think of themselves as normal people with disabilities. Now those who are sensitive to these issues are trying to help us see that all of us are acceptable, regardless of our disabilities. The problem, then, is not with those with disabilities, but with the very idea of 'normalcy'. ... The idea of normalcy is not only at the root of the mistreatment of people with disabilities, it is a pathological notion that creates illness, persecution and the rejection of our God-given uniqueness.

To continue viewing disability as 'abnormal', we deny ourselves the opportunity of meeting the certainties of our human corporeality; and we should rather be conscious of our shared 'natural human diversity' (Tataryn & Truchan-Tataryn 2013:121). A culture of perfection, an endless drive towards excellence, and an attitude which

stresses 'winning', exist in most contemporary societies. The general promotion of superficial perfectionism is obvious in the contents of advertisements. Clinical psychologist Ciaramicoli (2004:5-6) claims that the resulting 'performance addiction' has a powerful effect on everybody. No wonder the feminist liberation theologian Lisa Isherwood (2004:153) questions and agitates against the 'Slim For Him' culture. She proposes the promotion of 'big female bodies' as an act against discrimination and of transgressing society's boundaries. When modern people are plagued by perfectionism, not only do persons with disabilities feel condemned for not having acceptable bodies, but those with adequate bodies may also feel judged, according to Wink (Hartsig 2005:16). Robert Vosloo (2006b:30-31) challenges 'the myth of the perfect body' while reflecting on Bonhoeffer's understanding of the body: '[T]he way in which the body is portrayed in consumer culture ... is often part of ... an ethos of competitive, individualistic production. Given such an ethos, sick and unproductive bodies are ignored or marginalised'. '[A]n ethos of vulnerable interdependence' is proposed instead. This reminds of the reasoning of Berry (1982:955):

[T]he root of the human malaise is our giving in to the idolatrous desire to become just such a 'No-Limit-Person'. ... Faith comes as the gift of accepting ourselves as 'a person with limits' – not grudgingly, not spitefully, but gratefully.

However, not everyone believes in Berry's conceptualisation of 'faith'. Joel Osteen is a pastor at Lakewood church in Texas, one of the mega churches in America. Besides Americans, he also has followers from countries all over the world who watch his sermons (Fuller 2008:52). He is also a very popular author, and in one of his books, *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day* (2007), Osteen's trust in achieving excellence in life as a Christian is even more prominent than in his earlier writings (Fuller 2008:52). Osteen (2007:xiii) states that God 'didn't create us to be average'. He doesn't want us to settle for 'good enough. He wants us to keep stretching, to keep pressing forward into the next level'. Osteen (2007:5) also claims 'You were never created to be average. You were never created to reach a certain level and then plateau. You were created to excel. ... There's no limit to how high you can go in life' (cf. Chesnut 2012:216). Fuller (2008:53) comments that Osteen's claim of Christian excellence will leave most people ashamed. Furthermore, this message may also be psychologically or spiritually harmful to persons who already struggle with the idea of perfectionism.

7.8 Prosperity theology

Osteen's 'faith preaching' on *inter alia* perfectionism is part and parcel of the prosperity gospel. When a reporter enquired if Osteen considered himself to be a prosperity gospel preacher, Osteen's first response was that he did not really know what prosperity gospel meant. However, he 'believe[s] God wants you to prosper in your health, in your family, in your relationships, in your business, and in your career ... I don't believe we are supposed to go through life defeated' (Banda 2013:68; cf. Lioy 2007:45; M. Webb 2012:54). The prosperity gospel was broadly defined by the Lausanne Theology Working group in 2010 (Heuser 2016:1) as

[t]he teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the 'sowing of seeds' through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings.

The prosperity gospel teaches that the consequences of faith is 'health and wealth' (Chilenje 2013:14); therefore the prosperity gospel is also known as the 'health and wealth gospel' (M. Webb 2012:54; Chesnut 2012:215). God's people are blessed with 'security and prosperity', and 'sickness and poverty are curses to be broken by faith' (Chilenje 2013:14; cf. Banda 2013:70; Ellington 2013:36; Chesnut 2012:216; Lioy 2007:44). According to Walker (Chilenje 2013:15), believers of the prosperity gospel are little gods or divine beings who possess all or some of the distinctive attributes of God. As little gods, believers can therefore emulate God, who spoke all things into existence. This means words are containers of power. Whatever one speaks will occur, be it negative or positive. Therefore one should only speak positive or faith-filled words.

One of the doctrinal pillars of the prosperity gospel is *rhematology* (faith as spoken word) (Banda 2013:70; see Lioy 2007:42). Its emphasis is on an inherent self-confidence in the power of believers' words and thoughts to turn into actualised realities (Banda 2013:70; Lioy 2007:42; cf. M. Webb 2012:54-55). Believers, who are absolutely positive, have remarkable power in forcing God to action (Brace in Banda 2013:70). According to Brace (Banda 2013:69), faith is 'something which requires God to give us everything we want, whether it is ever-radiant health, financial affluence or that spectacular gift to impress fellow-believers! If we do our bit, then God *must* act!' Health is a right and can be demanded from God, who is open to manipulation.

Other pillars on which the prosperity gospel stand are 'divine giving and tithing' (Heuser 2016:2), and also 'seed-faith' (cf. Heuser 2016:2; Gbote & Kgatla 2014:1). A quantifying relationship between 'sowing and reaping' exists: The more you give to God and the church, the more you are blessed (Heuser 2016:2). Gbote and Kgatla (2014:1) raise the question, 'Does God base his blessings to church members solely on giving?' They agree with biblical scholars that there are biblical passages that reflect on giving and prosperity (Gbote & Kgatla 2014:1). God does bless people for observing the instruction to give, but giving is no precondition to being blessed (Gbote & Kgatla 2014:1). The authors (Gbote & Kgatla 2014:8-10) warn against the manipulation and misinterpretation of biblical texts to serve our needs and remind us to use true exegesis and sound hermeneutics.

According to Longchar (2012:33), the basis of the theology of the prosperity movement is clear:

Any theology that measures life only in terms of blessings, money, perfection and success, is called a prosperity theology. This is not the teaching of the Bible. This is called domestication of God. It is equal to worship of mammon.

God's kingdom stands outside the realm of wealth. Only in renouncing riches, grandeur and self-indulgence does joy appear – which challenges the practices of the 'prosperity gospel' that focuses on gifts from God comprising excessive wealth and lifestyles of indulgence (Keum 2018:370).

The dogma of the prosperity gospel is rightfully questioned. Adherents to this theology regard faith not as a 'theocentric act of personal will, or simple trust in God', but a 'spiritual force' directed at God (Jones in Banda 2013:69; cf. Lioy 2007:41, 60). Sarles (Lioy 2007:49) clarifies that 'theocentric providence' is replaced with 'anthropocentric prosperity'. According to Horton (Gbote & Kgatla 2014:9), 'the prosperity gospel uses faith to decree health, wealth and happiness that depict faith as a matter of believing in created things rather than believing in God as the Saviour, the Lord and Liberator'.

The prosperity gospel is a 'Christianized version of the American Dream of capitalism and upward mobility', according to Gutterman and Murphy (2015:89); it is 'a dream that pursues materialism as a fundamental source of happiness' (Gbote & Kgatla 2014:6). It is a neoliberalisation theology that emphasises individualism and financial success as markers of divine favour (Gutterman & Murphy 2015:89).

In the late twentieth century Gifford (1990:383) anticipated that if 'the Gospel of Prosperity continues to be a fairly standard part of the African evangelical revival, it will eventually be a significant element in world Christianity'. The roots of the prosperity gospel have spread promptly indeed; as a faith movement its influence is growing faster than any other in Sub-Saharan Africa (Chilenje 2013:13; Kroesbergen 2013:6; Zulu 2013:28; Liroy 2007:42).

While the doctrine of the prosperity gospel poses a threat to the interdependence and communality of African communities (e.g. the ethos and ethics of *ubuntu*), it also acutely distorts the interrelationship (*perichoresis*) and acts of the Triune God, and God's *kenotic* love (para. 4.5; cf. Banda 2013:73). Of even greater concern is the fatalism it creates among marginalised people, i.e. sick, disabled and poor persons whose 'faith' is not strong enough to overcome Satan's power. For the proponents of prosperity faith, their egocentric, selfish, non-compassionate and judgemental attitude towards persons with disabilities has proved to be 'justified'. That is because some prosperity preachers benefit from the less educated, the poor, and persons with cognitive disabilities. Health and wealth are promised to these individuals in exchange for already limited assets, to which they respond by giving everything they have and are regularly left destitute (Chilenje 2013:19; cf. Keum 2018:37-38; Gbote & Kgatla 2014:7; Chesnut 2012:217).

Although the well-known televangelist and author Joyce Meyer denies claims of being affiliated with the 'prosperity gospel', she confessed that in the past she was misguided by teaching about prosperity and faith (Gibson 2019):

Every time somebody had a problem in their life, [I thought] it's because they didn't have enough faith. If you got sick it's because you don't have enough faith. If your child died, it's because you don't have enough faith.

M. Webb (2012:55) points out that the philosophy of the prosperity gospel validates prejudice towards persons with mental illness. 'According to the assumptions of prosperity, individuals with mental illnesses are failing to exert the faith necessary to overcome their disorders' (M. Webb 2012:55). This argument does not only apply to persons with mental illness, but also to those persons who are considered to be imperfect in some or other way, and consequently persons with disabilities as well. According to the prosperity gospel, anybody who is imperfect lacks faith.

However, some scholars identify certain positive attitudes towards life among followers of the prosperity movement, e.g., they feel, 'less powerless, are less afraid of the future, and are more willing to accept change', according to Dickow (Heuser 2016:8). Nevertheless, Heuser (2016:8) rightfully suggests that more empirical proof is needed to value the social impact of prosperity theology (cf. Chesnut 2012:219). My personal experience of, and confrontation with, a prosperity faith healer left me not only suspicious of the movement, but also more vulnerable (para. 1.2). The lyrics of *Strate van goud*,⁸³ a song composed by Koos van der Merwe, gives a poignant reflection on the faith issues associated with prosperity theology practice. A free translation into English follows.

Streets of gold

People scurry hither and dither / speeding towards rest and peace
 pursuing satisfaction in empty wastes / causing a din while seeking quiet / and I
 wonder where all this is heading
 To me it seems like we can't see / Who will bring this madness to an end / and
 help us find the way
 I follow the finely groomed preacher / on a christian tv channel / he promises
 everything better / If I just bring my chequebook along
 And my son watches the prophet / and declares dad there is something wrong /
 Wet and shiny from perspiration / he preaches about the streets of gold
 On sunday there was a healing ministry / he told her let go of your crutch and walk
 / and monday she pleaded Lord help me

⁸³ **Strate van goud** (Koos van der Merwe CD *Ter wille van die opdaag*)

Die mense jaag in dolheid / om na rustigheid te spoed

waar dit leeg is soek almal volheid / en dit raas soos ons stilte soek / en ek wonder waar dit alles heengaan

Want dit lyk my ons is blind / Wie sal die malligheid dan kan laat stilstaan / en ons help om ons pad te vind

Ek kyk na die blink gladde spreker / op die christen tv kanaal / hy belowe my alles sal beter / Ek moet net my tjekboek gaan haal

En my seun sit en kyk die profeet / Hy sê pa hier is mos iets fout / en die prediker blink van die sweet / soos hy preek oor die strate van goud

Daar was sondag 'n genesingsveldtog / hy't haar beveel gooi jou kruk weg en loop / en maandag bid sy Here help tog

Ek moet 'n nuwe kruk gaan koop / en hartseer sit sy en wonder / Die man het dan gesê sy's genees / sy's maar seker te swak en vol sonde / en bestem om so kreupel te wees

O kom tog Here en help ons / want die dinge het deurmekaar geraak / bring waarheid en liefde tot by ons

Dat ons die kromheid tog reguit kan maak / Kom stuur ons op paaie van omgee / Stuur ons na die nood en die pyn / Verlos ons van hoogmoed en voorgee / O verlos ons van hebsug en skyn

I've got to buy another crutch / and sadly she ponders / The man did say she is
healed / maybe she's too weak and sinful / and meant to be cripple
O Lord come and help us / as nothing makes sense anymore / bring truth and love
to us
that we can straighten that which is bent / Send us on the way of empathy / Send
us to those in need and in pain / Deliver us from pride and pretence / O save us
from greed and feign

7.9 Jesus and perfectionism

One may reason that Osteen's and other prosperity gospel preachers' claim of perfectionism in the name of Jesus is biblically sound. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus urges his followers 'be perfect, just as God is perfect'. This may sound as if perfectionism is a 'spiritual imperative' from Jesus (Fuller 2008:55). However, according to Wink (1992:268), Jesus could not have said 'be perfect', because it was an unfamiliar word and concept at that time:

The word used by Matthew, *teleios*, was, however, a Greek aesthetic term. It described the perfect geometric form, or the perfect sculpture. It was seldom used in ethical discourse, since moral perfection is not within the grasp of human beings, and would even have been regarded, in Greek piety, as a form of *hybris*.⁸⁴

Given the context, *teleios* is best translated with 'whole, complete, finished, entire, to have integrity' (Fuller 2008:55; cf. Hernandez 2006:89-90). Due to the fact that Matthew 5:48 is part of Jesus' realistic guidelines for moral behaviour in the Sermon on the Mount, it is doubtful that Jesus would have required something impossible. According to Wink (1992:269), Jesus is therefore rather saying, 'like God, [be] all-encompassing, loving even those who have least claim or right to our love' (cf. Hernandez 2006:89). The passage thus reveals 'perfect love', especially for the 'unlovable' (Hernandez 2006:89). From a theological point of view, it is not about striving to be perfect, but about 'growing in love and wholeness' and developing 'spiritual maturity' (Fuller 2008:56; cf. Hernandez 2006:90). Scott Peck (1987:54-55) states, 'we can never be completely whole in and of ourselves', although we are called

⁸⁴ According to Hartsig (2005:15), *hybris* refers to 'divinely-punishable pride'.

to 'wholeness'. The essence of human life is relatedness, because we have been made 'social creatures'.

Nobody is perfect. 'Health and disease are embraced as ways of living' (Van Niekerk 2012:374). Everybody falls ill at some time or another; however, some illnesses are more serious and might even be life threatening.

Illness is an element on the growth continuum of conception-birth-life-death-and eternal life. It is a distortion of the comfortable and direct line of growth we idealize, from birth to self-actualization; but it is not the opposite of growth. Indeed, it is often a growth inducer (Ellens 1987:15).

However, while the current realities of division and discrimination are faced and the struggle towards all-inclusive justice-loving societies continues, it is still necessary to distinguish between persons who are victims of marginalisation due to their illnesses or disabilities and those who are not. Persons from the margins are prophetic witnesses. (See *Mission from the margins*, para. 8.6.) Wink (Hartsig 2005:18) comes to the following conclusion:

So the world is divided up into two groups after all. Not, however, the normal and the abnormal, or the able and the disabled. Rather, the line is drawn between those who are aware of their disabilities, and those who are not. Those who are more obviously disabled, or who have been forced by life to come to terms with their disabilities, have a prophetic task to play in awakening the rest of us to the uniqueness of who we are under God.

We should all be reminded that, '[t]he wonder of our creation as *imago Dei* encompasses the spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental fabric of our creation. We are whole beings—imperfect, yes; broken, perhaps—but not fragmented' (Anderson 2003:49). We all are imperfect, regardless of our faith or no-faith. A body with cracks is definitely not a nobody, but the space in which God wants dignified humanness to flourish. 'God's compassion for frail and weak people and the special [missional] task God has in mind for them', is metaphorically described by the writer of Deutero-Isaiah: God will not break a bruised reed (Is 42:3) (Van Niekerk 2012:370).

7.10 Conclusion

This chapter commenced with contemplating the importance of our bodies in theology. It is with our bodies that we experience God-self who became flesh. I have reflected on the fact that Christian faith is embodied faith and therefore that every inquiry into theology should take embodiment seriously.

The body matters to God precisely because it *is* the human being, the locus of human activity and experience. And the fact that a member of the very Godhead has human flesh means that we cannot dismiss en-fleshed humanness any longer. We must come to terms with the fact that Jesus' flesh reveals to us that flesh is *good*, and flesh is how the Kingdom of God comes (Coyle-Carr 2014:n.p.).

I have focussed primarily in my theological inquiry on persons with disabilities; it is central to my thesis. Persons with disabilities help others to understand the brokenness of humanity and, even more importantly, they reveal God's love and vulnerability. A theology of disability is fundamental to knowing God and to know what it implies to be a human existing totally in God.

Furthermore, the cult of normalcy reminds us that 'there is no "natural" able-bodied person' (Reynolds 2013:21). Reynolds continues, '[a]nd because of this, there is the possibility of deconstructing ableism and opening up multiple ways of being human together'.

I have reflected on images of God through the lens of disability. Surely, the image created by Nancy Eiesland of the 'disabled God' is most ground-breaking, although also controversial. An extreme and powerful exegesis of the image of God is achieved through her personal experience of disability. One can imagine what immense power these liberative images of God may have on persons with disabilities, and their potential value for self-image. However, one should remind oneself of the limitations inherent to any human perception of God. As seen in chapter 2, God cannot be bound by thought and language to categories created by humans; God is more than our perceptions of God. Swinton (2011:300-301) reminds us that '[h]uman beings cannot make any categorical ontological claims about God other than those which God chooses to reveal. Human knowledge and concepts simply cannot contain or even reveal anything categorical about God'.

Swinton (2011:302) warns against fixed assertions about God, although he affirms 'God is love' (1 Jn 4:8) and that 'God loves us' (1 Jn 4:19) (cf. Rollins 2011:118). 'We

can know that that love is self-sacrificing and open to all people' (Swinton 2011:302-303).

The *kenotic* love of God in Christ and the divine Spirit is expressed in Christian hospitality. A *kenosis* attitude, the embracing of hospitality, and the entering of mutual friendship is the embodiment of the *missio Dei* towards vulnerable people, such as persons with disabilities. In the framework document on the missional nature and calling of the Dutch Reformed Church, 'powerlessness and vulnerability' together constitute one of the four dimensions of the incarnation (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:8). It states that

Jesus Christ's incarnation (Phlp 2:6ff) means that He came to live among us as the lowest of the low. He upset all vorns [sic] of power in order to show that vulnerable service has the power to change history and the whole world.

People with disabilities are recognised as powerless and vulnerable, especially those who are, additionally, socially and economically marginalised. Despite my argument that everybody is imperfect (para. 7.7), persons with disabilities mostly experience different degrees of discrimination, are easily stigmatised (cf. Anderson 2003:4) and regularly marginalised. Christians and communities of the Christian faith should make an effort to listen to the plight of persons with disabilities and embrace everybody, especially those who are the most vulnerable and powerless. According to Isherwood (2004:148), Jesus' incarnation calls us 'to deep connection ... [which] is best rooted in bodies not metaphysics'. From this perspective, the narrative of Jesus makes it possible for flesh to become word, instead of 'The Word made flesh' (Isherwood 2004:148). Isherwood's interpretation of the incarnation brings creative insight to the discourse on disability theology.

Furthermore, Swinton (2011:274-275) emphasises the potential of transforming theology by listening to persons with disabilities:

[H]uman disability is a way of shaping, forming and reforming theology within the boundaries of historical doctrinal thought. ... In listening to such voices and reflecting on life experiences of people with disabilities, it hopes to re-think and recalibrate aspects of theology and practice that serve to exclude or misrepresent the human experience of disability.

The vulnerability of persons of disabilities helps us see our own weaknesses (cf. Reynolds 2013:23). Reynolds (2013:23) quotes Vanier, who suggests that those who are less powerful in appearance – i.e., people who exhibit disabilities – and are viewed as insignificant by society, have the most important lessons to teach us. According to him, they break down the barriers of false security and exclusion so that we could meet our own vulnerability and allow it to be known. Nouwen's work and friendship with Adam (para. 7.5.5), serve as an example of the deep spiritual lessons one could learn from persons with severe disabilities. Adam taught Nouwen

a lot about God's love in a very concrete way. First of all, he taught me that being is more important than doing, that God wants me to be with God and not to do all sorts of things to prove that I'm valuable ... then he taught me something else. He taught me that the heart is more important than the mind ... Minds thinking, having arguments, discussing, writing, doing, that is what a human being is ... Well, Adam didn't think. Adam had a heart, a real human heart. I suddenly realized that what makes a human being human is the heart with which he can give and receive love. Adam was giving me an enormous amount of God's love and I was giving Adam of my love ... I suddenly realized that Adam was not just a disabled person, less human than me or other people. He was a fully human being, so fully human that God even chose him to become the instrument of His love. He was so vulnerable, so weak, so empty, that he became just heart, the heart where God wanted to dwell, where He wanted to stay and where He wanted to speak to those who came close to His vulnerable heart. Adam was a full human being, not half human or less human ... Suddenly I understood what I had heard in Latin America about the preferential option for the poor. Indeed, God loves the poor and He loves Adam very specially. He wanted to dwell in his broken person so that He could speak from that vulnerability into the world of strength, and call people to become vulnerable (Nouwen 1989:n.p.; cf. Reinders 2011).

To summarise this chapter and to introduce the next chapter, I conclude with the assessment given by Hernandez (2006:134): Nouwen brings community forward to counter individualism; Nouwen highlights the value of living for others by caring as a counter to self-absorbed selfishness; and emphasises weakness, powerlessness, and imperfection rather than the obsession with success, power and perfection.

MOVEMENT 4 INTEGRATION

The word integration refers to an 'act of bringing together the parts of a whole'. It derives from French *intégration* and from Latin *integrationem* meaning 'renewal, restoration'. It is the opposite of segregation or compartmentalisation (etymonline.com).

Scott Peck (1987:234) writes community is an integration of 'different sexes, ages, religions, cultures, viewpoints, life styles and stages of development'. The whole that is formed is greater, and 'better – than the sum of the parts'. Integration is indeed a bringing together of distinct aspects which continue to exist and do not lose their individual characteristics as they come together to form this 'greater', illuminating whole.

CHAPTER 8 ON BEING SPIRITUALLY MISSIONAL

8.1 A paradigm shift

In chapter 4 I have referred to Christian spirituality which should be embodied, based on the incarnation and *kenotic* life of Jesus, and the inspirational agency of the Spirit's kenotic power. This chapter focuses on the importance of a missional spirituality with its unavoidable dimension of the mission from the margins and values of hospitality and friendship. A section on healing and (broken) wholeness is included.

It is widely accepted that Christian spirituality is the same as mission(al) spirituality; it is used interchangeably (cf. Pretorius & Niemandt 2018:1, 3; Balia & Kim 2010:323). Karina Kreminski, lecturer in Missional Studies, disagrees. She provides seven reasons why missional spirituality differs from Christian spirituality (Kreminski 2016) (para. 8.3). I tend to agree with her. Not all Christian spiritualities are missional.

We live in post-modern, globalised and post-Christendom times (cf. Niemandt 2007:8-34). It is mostly the post-Christendom period which challenges the Christian faith and has brought about a paradigm shift. However, post-Christendom does not necessarily mean post-Christian (Murray 2018:10; cf. Niemandt 2007:14). Murray (2018:11) says 'Christendom is dying, but a new dynamic Christianity could arise from its ashes'. A new era needs new approaches; a new way of thinking, doing and living (cf. Lk 5:33-39; Rm 12:2). In the post-Christendom period, churches find themselves not at the centre anymore, but at the margins. This position requires a different insight into, and an innovative and brave engagement with, the shifting culture, as well as 'fresh ways' of practising the gospel (Murray 2010:5; cf. Guder 1998:4, 11). Niemandt (2007:13) quotes Eddie Gibbs:

In the post-Christendom era the church increasingly finds itself culturally marginalized in the face of religious and philosophical pluralism and relativism. The local church is no longer a central institution in society but has become a mission outpost. The pastor is no longer a chaplain to the community but has become a mission leader.

Shenk (2005:73) acknowledges 'only a *missional* church will dynamically engage a changing cultural context effectively'. From the beginning the nature of the church is missional; the existence of the church is defined by mission (Keum 2018:15; cf. Bosch 2012:381). The 'new insights into the church' (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed

Church 2013:4), have strong biblical roots. We need to rediscover the missional origin of the church, and unlearn Christendom's perceptions of mission work (see Murray 2010:13-14). 'Everything that the church is and does, has a *missionary dimension*. Stated even more strongly: the church *is* mission, the church *is* its mission' (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:5). The Spirit of Christ inspires the mission of the church and at the same time sustains the living church, therefore the connection between them is very closely related. Jesus Christ breathed the Holy Spirit into the church as he sent it into the world (John 20:19-23) (Keum 2018:15). Pope Francis (2013:25) dreams of a

"missionary option", that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for self-preservation.

This chapter focuses on the internalisation of a missional spirituality by post-Christendom and post-colonial missional communities, who are being vivified through the agency of the Divine Spirit; and which reflects on spirituality's interwovenness with marginality.

8.2 What on earth does 'missional' mean?

The adjective 'missional' is repeatedly mentioned in different contexts in this dissertation. Under the heading *missio Dei*, I briefly reflect in chapter 2 (para. 2.7.2) on a 'general' understanding of what is meant by 'missional'.

According to Stewart (2013), the broad etymology of the concept 'missional' refers to

1. 'the idea of "sending" or being "sent" (Latin *missio*)';
2. 'a mission in the sense of the purpose of an organisation';
3. 'a mission in the sense of a critical task';
4. 'the technical theological concept of the *missio Dei* ("mission of God")'; and
5. 'the idea that Christians are "missionaries" to their local communities and cultures'.

The meaning of the words, *missioner* (noun) and *missional* (adjective), differ from the original terms, *missionary* and *mission*, which can be used as both noun and adjective (DuBose 1983:35).

The term 'missional' was popularised by the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, edited by Darrell Guder and published in 1989 (Stewart 2013). Guder (2005b:114) uses the term 'missional' because

[w]e needed, somehow, to find a way to talk about the fundamentally missional nature of the church without using terms freighted with all kinds of baggage. By proposing the term 'missional' we wanted to claim the right to define what it means.

Guder (Stewart 2013) later recognises that the 'word "missional" became a cliché, a buzz word, a catch-all phrase that could mean everything and nothing' (cf. Synan 2011:529; Jones 2009:177). But the term missional significantly succeeds by not reflecting the shameless and colonial interpretation of mission and action associated with most of the old world order missionaries (cf. Kaunda & Hewitt 2015a:1; Stewart 2013). Mission was 'Euro-centric', was understood to be from the 'West to the rest', from the 'powerful to the powerless', about 'saving souls to escape their context for another place, referred to as heaven' (Kaunda & Hewitt 2015a:5; cf. Youn 2018:226). Fortunately, missional movements like the 'South African Partnership for Missional Churches (SAPMC)⁸⁵ and the 'Church Innovations Institute' in the U.S.A., continue to keep the process of understanding what 'being missional' means active, contextual, creative and innovative, but also vulnerable, and, importantly, are persistently discerning with regard to the agenda of the Triune God.

According to Van Gelder (2007:27), it is valuable to consider that the adjective 'missional' recasts the total agenda of what has traditionally been referred to as 'church and mission'. This is inclined to establish a division that cannot be escaped from without the inclination to favour the one over the other. The missional church, however, presents a different picture, by accepting the very nature of the church as being missionary. This is also a view in which every context is a missional context, and every congregation a 'missional congregation' – with the responsibility to take part in God's mission 'in that context'.

As with the phenomenon spirituality, the term mission is multi-faceted (cf. Gittins 2005:443). 'Mission is complex and multiple: witness, proclamation, catechesis, worship, inculturation, inter-faith dialogue. These activities are carried out ... in concrete situations' (Phan in Balia & Kim 2010:11). Pesch (Bosch 2012:16) lists

⁸⁵ 'Venootskap vir Gestuurde Gemeentes in Suider-Afrika'

approximately ninety-five Greek terms used in the New Testament relating to aspects of mission (cf. Gittins 2005:443). “Mission” is a rich, polyvalent term which many people nevertheless find ambiguous and confusing’ (Gittins 2005:442). However, the importance of mission in the development of theology is fundamental. Bosch (2012:15) agrees with Martin Hengel that ‘the history and theology of early Christianity are, first of all, “mission history” and “mission theology”’ (cf. Bevens 2001:22; see Kasting 1969:127). Therefore, mission is ‘the mother of theology’ (translation of Martin Kähler’s words) (Bosch 2012:16; cf. Bevens 2001:25). Andrew Kirk (1997:51) states that mission is not only

the roof of a building that completes the whole structure, already constructed by blocks that stand on their own, but both the foundation and the mortar in the joints, which cements together everything else.

‘Mission’ is not an ‘innocent word’; it reflects the ‘radical missionary nature of the Triune God’ and the church (Bevens 2001:27). Mission originates from the ‘interpersonal, communitarian nature of God which overflows in creation of and involvement with all of reality’ (Bevens 2001:27-28).

8.3 Authentic spirituality

One may argue that a missional spirituality precedes Christian spirituality and is authentic. Kreminski (2016) is of the opinion that the most accepted Christian spirituality is rather confounded and distorted by worldviews which contradict a missional character. She (Kreminski 2016) gives seven ways of missional spirituality that differs from Christian spirituality:

- ‘Disembodied vs. Embodied’
- ‘This-Worldly vs. Other-Worldly’
- ‘Service-Orientated vs. Self-Actualised’
- ‘Engaging vs. Withdrawing’
- ‘Incarnational vs. Excarnational’
- ‘Cruciformly vs. Upward Mobility’
- ‘Trinitarian vs. Individualistic’

The ideal is that all Christian spiritualities should embody the values of a missional spirituality, but that is unfortunately not the case. However, as seen in chapter 4, a Christian spirituality might have the same characteristics found in missional spirituality, e.g., spirituality should be 'grounded in embodied practice' (Kreminski 2016).

The influence of Gnosticism, with 'often an anti-world dimension in these beliefs' (O'Loughlin 2005:325) in Christian spirituality, should not be underestimated. It is often noticeable in humans that they feel they are a divine light trapped in material creation (O'Loughlin 2005:325). The possibility of the creation being a loving space for existence provided by God, opens up only after the discovery of the presence of the Spirit of Christ and then being liberated by it (O'Loughlin 2005:325). Michael Frost (2014:33) finds the basis of 'excarnation' (defleshment) in Christian dualism, of which Taylor (2007:554) cautions against. Taylor defines excarnation as a transfer from embodied, 'enfleshed' forms of religious life, to those which are more 'in the head'. I opt for a spirituality that is grounded in incarnation and in concreteness - a spirituality "from below" (Schneiders 1989:682). Frost (2014:119) finds the result of excarnation in mission increasing, and suggests the resistance of the 'excarnational forces' in Christian life, if we 'come closer to the mission God has for us when we intentionally root ourselves in a messy, missional community of faith'.

Instead of being an inspiration to serve humanity in whatever way possible, it can sometimes happen that spirituality becomes a vehicle for goal-orientated, self-centred improvement (Kreminski 2016). 'There is no place for personal development/growth if that development does not lead to a life focused outside of ourselves and lived for the sake of the world' (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:11). Keum (2018:6) warns against an 'individualistic spirituality' that makes the Christian faith fallacious if we believe that we belong only to God and not to our neighbour. By believing this, 'we will fall into a spirituality that simply makes us feel good while other parts of creation hurt and yearn' (Keum 2018:6). God's love is spread from within the missional church to an outside world much in need of compassion, according to Guder (1998:135).

Spirituality is missional. It is about people moving into the world to encounter life 'out there' with the power of God. Christian spirituality is often regarded as a private practice in seclusion, away from the difficulties of the world, and has become

overwhelmed by ideas that cover its true identity, but this is a mistake. We are sent by God to fulfil God's mission in society (Kreminski 2016).

Missional spirituality embodies the gospel. Guder (2005a:22) states:

The centrality of the community to the gospel means that the message is never disembodied. The word must always become flesh, embodied in the life of the called community. The gospel cannot be captured adequately in propositions, or creeds or theological systems, as crucial as all of these exercises are. The gospel dwells in and shapes the people who are called to be its witness. The message is inextricably linked with its messengers. If there is good news in the world, then it is demonstrably good in the way that it is lived out by the community called into its service. The early church in Jerusalem lived in such a way that they had 'the goodwill of all the people' (Acts 2:47).

We, while living the Lord Jesus, are becoming the living gospel: that is missional. All the time, while we are transforming our lives through this movement in God's presence, we acknowledge his quiet voice motivating us to realise God's kingdom on earth in completion of God's mission (Kreminski 2016).

A missional spirituality is 'always a spirituality of the cross' (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:11). The cross provides significant depth and meaning to spirituality; and it challenges our lifestyle. Bosch (2012:525; cf. Balia & Kim 2010:16-17) reminds us that Jesus was crucified because of Jesus' identification with the marginalised and Jesus' negation to act according to popular conventions. Moreover, the cross tells us that no mission could take place when 'we are powerful and confident, but only when we are weak and at a loss' (Bosch 2012:57). Bevans (2001:38) confirms that because of Jesus' dedication to his mission, Jesus died; and Jesus' resurrection represents 'God's seal of approval' on Jesus' earthly lifestyle:

This understanding of Jesus' death and resurrection points directly at the fact that at the center of Christian life is the cross – or, more precisely, the paschal mystery ... It was no accident that when the gospels narrate the appearance of the Risen Lord to the disciples, he appears with his wounds. *Kenosis* is at the heart of Jesus' mission, and needs to be at the heart of the disciples that share and continue that mission.

According to Anderson (2008:189),

[t]he missional church movement challenges churches to look deeply and honestly into what God is up to, to imagine how we might bring the best of our gifts to that mission, and to offer our lives and our church as a living sacrifice in that mission.

With reference to Romans 12:1-2, Anderson (2008:189 footnote 68) comments that this is in essence what God calls us for. There is no place for egotistic ambitions in missional spirituality. We set our hearts on alleviating suffering by coming to terms with our enemy and learning to accept and love him, and by surrendering our own desire (Kreminski 2016).

Missional spirituality is Trinitarian. Mission is classically regarded as 'God's sending forth: the Father sending the Son, both sending the Spirit, and the Trinity sending the Church into the world' (Gittins 2005:443; General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:4; see Van Gelder 2007:28). But, Anthony Gittins will agree with Stephen Bevans (2001:28) stating, '[a] contemporary theology of mission, however, rooted in the mission of the trinitarian God, points to the fact that the church does not so much have a mission as the mission has a church'. Already in 1931, Emil Brunner (Bevans 2001:28) wrote, '[t]he Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning'. Perhaps the best way to describe the relation between mission and church are the words of Pretorius and Niemandt (2018:2): The church is simultaneously the product and participant of God's mission.

The relational nature of the Triune God is also fundamental to the understanding of a missional spirituality. The Trinitarian God is a 'dynamic, relational community of persons, whose very nature is to be present and active in the world, calling it and persuading it towards the fullness of relationship calls salvation', according to Bevans (Balía & Kim 2010:23), and 'equality and justice are modelled on trinitarian relationships' (Boff in Balía & Kim 2010:23). I have discussed the relational character of God (para. 2.6) and the *imago Trinitatis* in reference to the human being-in-relationship who reflects God's being-in-relationship (para. 3.7). The 'deep, mutual and interdependent relationship' of the Triune God (Kreminski 2016) imitates the relationships between persons. The *imago Trinitatis* 'guides the church in understanding the relationships within the Trinity, the relationships between people and the relationship between church and world' (Niemandt 2015a:5). A missional spirituality can never be individualistic and independent (Kreminski 2016). The

proposal of the relational Trinity reminds the church that we are constantly present in each other (indwell) and live (dwell) together in the flow of love, mutuality, intimacy, and submission.

There is only one way that the church in mission can cultivate true spiritualities, and that is through communion with the Trinity which is imbued with love. By being grounded in this love is the only way that we as true Christians can live out our mission (Keum 2018:8).

Living the Trinitarian faith means living as Jesus Christ lived: preaching the gospel; relying totally on God; offering healing and reconciliation; rejecting laws, customs and conventions that place persons beneath rules; resisting temptation; praying constantly; eating with modern day lepers and other outcasts; embracing the enemy and the sinner; dying for the sake of the gospel if it is God's will (LaCugna 1991:401).

One should also keep the economic Trinity – ‘the theological tradition that tends to focus on the one nature within the Godhead in relationship to the work of the three persons’ (Van Gelder 2007:29) – in mind, which precisely highlights God's gift and love. Moreover, the economic Trinity focuses on the sending work of God: The life of the Trinity is a missional life and the communion in the Trinity is a communion that flows outward (*missio Dei trinitatis*).

8.4 A missional spirituality is transformative and liberative

Missio-formation and spiritual formation have much to do with transformation, which is fundamental to a missional spirituality. Instead of focusing on a spiritual formation that creates a missional culture in congregations (cf. Pretorius & Niemandt 2018), I propose a reciprocal transformative action between *missio*-formation and spiritual formation in forming a missional spirituality and identity. Both mission and spirituality need a process of transformative reconstruction to form a missional spirituality.

‘Abundant life, hope and renewal’ is the essence of the message from the gospel that Christians learn and mature into. As this process of understanding and deepening of the message takes place, we begin to discern between discipleship and leadership, each with a place and a calling; the disciples to guide others and the leaders to take responsibility in a wider society. In this wider society it is important to stand up for

freedom of religion and be open-minded in politics and economy. By leading and living in the way of the Christ, the message is shared in an authentic way (Keum 2018:41).

The Arusha call to transformative discipleship (World Council of Churches 2018) states *inter alia* that while there are some signs of hope, virulent powers are destabilising the world order and spreading much suffering. These include excessive wealth accumulation emanating from the financial order worldwide. This benefits a few, but reduces many to destitution (Is 5:8) and is central to many 'wars, conflicts, ecological devastation, and suffering (1 Tm 6:10)'. The financial market has become a fetish of our time and shores up climates of control and injustice that push millions to the periphery, creating situations of 'vulnerability and exploitation'. We know that those on the margins suffer the most. There is nothing new about this to our time, but the Holy Spirit crucially calls on Christian congregations to answer with a 'transforming discipleship'. Discipleship is both a gift from God and a mission to act in partnership with God to bring change in the world (1 Th 3:2). We share in God's mission. This means we seek justice and peace in ways that are 'different from the world (John 14:27)'. In this way we follow Jesus' call (Lk 4:16-19).

As individual and collective disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called 'by our baptism to a transforming discipleship' (World Council of Churches 2018); and to

- focus on the true worship of the Triune God and not that of modern idols;
- proclaim the good news of life in all its fullness in word and deed;
- participate in the life of the Spirit through the empowerment of those who live on the margins of society;
- discern the word of God by perceptively reading the signs of the times;
- live as servants in a world that lives by the exercise of power;
- emphasise our solidarity with the dispossessed;
- promote peace, justice and the integrity of creation for all, especially those under threat from the abuse of God's creation;
- live together as an inclusive pilgrim people in a world that promotes exclusion;
- dialogue and offer hospitality to people of other faiths and no faith;
- follow the *kenotic* example of Jesus; and

- adopt the resurrection life of the new creation and live by hope.

It does not matter if we disciples are cracked and chipped earthen vessels, because by God's grace, which is without limits, the task shall be blessed and fulfilled (Zch 4:6) (Keum 2018:41). In contrast, I am astonished by the 'performance' given by the majority of 'prosperity gospel' and other television and celebrity preachers – while wearing, most probably, designer clothes. Their physical and outward appearances reflect perfection, wealth and prosperity.

Faith, hope and love serve as the foundation of the reign of God. It is essential for a confident Christian messenger to be unprejudiced on the basis of these three integrated values. To live as such, ensure a wider perspective which enriches the world we live in (Keum 2018:43).

The World Council of Churches' official mission and evangelism statement, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* edited by Keum (2018, 2013), expresses a 'profound paradigm shift in the understanding of the church's missional identity, vocation and witness in the world' (Kaunda & Hewitt 2015b:379). *Together towards Life* proposes a deep transformative and liberative *missio*- and spiritual formation model. It challenges the misuse of power in mission and exposes the abuse of power in society; but it affirms the empowerment of the powerless (Kaunda & Hewitt 2015b:379). The 'missional model proposes mission as struggle and resistance in the quest for justice and inclusivity, healing and wholeness' (Kaunda & Hewitt 2015b:379). Furthermore,

[i]n order that mission be transformed, missionaries and missional formation need to be transformed. Every Christian is called to be a missionary of the triune God, and thus missional formation is a task of the whole church to all her members, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, culture, social standing, legal or health status and sexual orientation (Keum 2018:45).

Jesus came to serve, support the lowly, heal the sick, inspire the disciples and participate in community affairs. Jesus is our example of how to accomplish the *missio Dei* to the benefit of the creation of our One God who oversees history, time and space as well as a person's work. God's will is for liberation and freedom and therefore works towards the removal of all hindrances to such. So that God's creation can live in the fullness of God's joy (Keum 2018:11).

While Gittins makes no explicit mention of spiritual formation, what follows is an appropriate description of it, in my understanding:

Spirituality is shaped by and responds to the actual world(s) in which we live and the actual people (images of God) we encounter. It must enable us to discover the significance of our changing selves and of the experiences that a missionary dynamic exposes us to – poverty, victimization, displacement, war, injustice of every kind. Unless a self-proclaimed Christian changes and grows from such experiences, he or she is selfish and shallow, perhaps blatantly unjust, but certainly not yet an authentic disciple (Gittins 2005:443-444).

Willard (2002:22) defines spiritual formation as a 'Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself'. Mulholland (2016:14) describes it as 'the process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others'. Kourie (2009:167) refers to the 'union with the Risen Jesus' as a 'mystical transformation in Christ' (cf. Gl 3:20), which has 'social implications'. It reminds me of Christensen's (2006:x) quote when he refers to an '[i]nward transformation' showing the way to an 'outward conformity to God's image and likeness'. The signature of an authentic, Christian missionary spirituality is a 'me-and-God-for-and-with-others relationship' and thus calls for public and social relationships. This is, after all, the example that Jesus lived for us to follow (Gittins 2005:444). Indeed, '[m]ission spirituality is always transformative' (Keum 2018:8). He continues by explaining that missional spirituality resists perilous systems on all levels of society, even in churches, and strives to transform it. God's grace blesses the world through the ongoing mission of spiritual people who, through commitment, create positive change (Keum 2018:2).

Missional spirituality is authentically grounded in the embodiment of God (see chapters 3 and 4). In comparison to most Protestant churches, the Eastern, Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches view the incarnation seriously (Bosch 2012:524). Liberation theology focuses sturdily on the 'incarnate Christ's' words and deeds; for liberation theologians it serves as a hermeneutic lens for Christian mission (Bevans 2001:38; cf. Bosch 2012:524; Balia & Kim 2010:27-28). No wonder Gittins (2005:443) pronounces: 'As Jesus' life was missionary, so must ours become'. Jesus' actions of compassionate justice towards the marginalised should influence the 'nature and

content of mission today. Churches that refuse to be in solidarity with the marginalised are irrelevant, according to Bosch (2012:525).

As indicated before, missional spirituality is not an individual sacred business, but a relational journey towards God, the self, others, and the world. Gustav Gous, a theologian and motivational speaker, shares his experience as a young assistant to David Bosch. He remembers a picture on a wall of Bosch's study with six words (in Afrikaans) that summarise the gospel: 'From Above, Inwards, Outwards'.⁸⁶ It describes the flow of God's love for God's people and through God's people to the world – in terms of today, it means being a missional church, according to Gous (Jackson 2017). The church, Christian communities, followers of Jesus' way, are all sent into this world for the sake of others, to be faithful to others, especially the weak, outcast and marginalised. Rene Padilla (Balía & Kim 2010:241; see Nouwen 1991:88) states that 'Christian spirituality is a gift and a task':

It requires communion with God (contemplation) as well as action in the world (praxis). When these two elements are separated, both the life and the mission of the church are deeply affected. Contemplation without action is an escape from concrete reality; action without contemplation is activism lacking a transcendent meaning.

8.5 The symbiosis of the Divine Spirit and Christ

The dynamic (deep) incarnational Christology should never overshadow the empowering pneumatological theology in the formation of a missional spirituality. Balía and Kim (2010:24, 25) accentuate the inseparable relation between Christ and the Holy Spirit:

Linking Christology and pneumatology avoids exclusive Christocentrism in our understanding of the person and work of Christ, neither neglecting the creative activity of the Spirit in creation, mission and redemption, nor emphasising a false autonomy of the Spirit that displaces Christology and the Trinity.

However, Bevans's (2001:37) 'trinitarian theology of mission' influenced by Elizabeth Johnson, John Taylor and Frederick Crowe, focuses 'on the pneumatological character of God's saving presence'. Bevans shows a particular interest in Crowe's

⁸⁶ 'Van Bo, na binne, na buite'

proposal of giving priority to the agency of the Spirit. According to Crowe (Bevans 2001:37), “God first sent the Spirit, and then sent the Son in the context of the Spirit’s mission” to bring God’s mission to fulfilment’. Jesus’ inaugural sermon reflects a ‘pneumatological mission theology’ (Balia & Kim 2010:24). ‘The mission of Jesus begins with the Spirit – already loose in the world since the dawn of creation – being poured upon Jesus (e.g. Lk 4:18) sending him forth to preach, serve and witness the imminent Reign of God (e.g. Mk 1:15)’ (Bevans 2001:39).

Missional spirituality is a life of ‘living in the Holy Spirit’, instead of being task driven (Balia & Kim 2010:28). Balia and Kim (2010:28) refer to an ‘Indian’ pneumatically driven ‘mission theology’ in dialogue ‘with other contextual theologies’, and it fits my understanding of missional spirituality: ‘Crucial to this theology is the discernment of the Spirit’s presence and activity in creation, in contemporary movements, in spiritualities and in individuals by the criterion of the fully human life of Jesus Christ’.

Together towards life is missional and pneumatically centred. The essence of mission is a life in the Holy Spirit (Keum 2018:2, 4), which is discussed under the following headings:

- ‘Spirit of Mission: Breath of Life’;
- ‘Spirit of Liberation: Mission from the Margins’;
- ‘Spirit of Community: Church on the Move’; and
- ‘Spirit of Pentecost: Good News for All’.

From the very first moment of creation, God has been there ‘through the Spirit, breathing life, stirring up prophecy, bringing about healing and reconciliation’. And it is by becoming human in Jesus and as ‘Risen Lord’ that God sent the Spirit into creation again, but with a new aim (Bevans 2001:37). The ‘Breath of Life’ came ‘to undo injustice and redo justice’ (Kaunda & Hewitt 2015a:11). In *Together towards life* (Keum 2013:47), the discussion of the Spirit in mission is concluded with the remark that by ‘the Spirit we participate in the mission of love that is at the heart of the life of the Trinity’. The Spirit is also the Spirit of Community, indwelling the church and empowering and enabling its members to participate in the realisation of God’s mission (Keum 2013:59).

Spirituality, after all, is empowerment by God's Spirit, who we invoke to 'come ... and renew the face of the earth'; it is our way of responding to inspiration, our way of being 'inSpirited' by God's own Spirit, the Spirit of mission (Gittins 2005:444).

8.6 Mission from the margins

Pope Francis (Riccardi 2018: Kindle Location 77), the then-archbishop of Buenos Aires, contends,

[t]he Church is called upon to come out of itself and go to the margins, not only out of itself and go to the margins, not only geographical, but also in human terms, where the mystery of sin, pain, injustice, and ignorance dwell, where there is contempt for religious and for religious thinking, and where there are all kinds of misery.

Pope Francis's theology (papacy) is based on the calling of Christians to leave their comfort zone and 'going forth' to reach the peripheries with the gospel (Pope Francis 2013:19-20; Riccardi 2018: Kindle Location 88). 'Christianity must be reborn from the marginal and excluded worlds and thence reach or return to the center', according to Pope Francis (Riccardi 2018: Kindle Location 100).

Hewitt (2017:107) warns, however, that 'mission of the margins' as a concept is contentious and open to misconception – it could be used by those in charge of the reigning power structures to generalise, alienate and depersonalise those who are at the margins. Therefore, the best way to approach the term is 'missiologically': to understand it as a description of the actions of the care structures of *diakonia*. This implies collaboration with and acceptance of the marginalised, by following the example of what Obery Hendricks calls the 'Politics of Jesus'. Jesus' *diakonia* mission requires 'political engagement' that could lead to action against injustice and for human dignity. Keum (2018:66) reminds us that margins exist because of oppressive structures:

The centre and margin (or periphery) can be understood not only as geographical notions but also as spaces of power (centre) and vulnerability (margin), of dominion (centre) and weakness (margin). Unfortunately, in the church itself there exists margins as well as spaces that establish themselves as the centre.

The margins are also regarded as 'the sinned against' or considered to be 'less normally human' (Hewitt 2017:107). Persons who are marginalised are *inter alia*, the

'poor, prisoners, the blind and other people of disability, the oppressed and the deeply in debt' (cf. Lk 4:18-19) (Keum 2018:57). They can be Indigenous people, refugees, victims of xenophobia, LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning) people etc. As discussed in chapters 6 and 7 persons with disabilities are sometimes restricted by structural barriers, with the result of becoming marginalised. Their experience is aptly communicated by the deliberations of Justice Langa (MEC for Education and Others v Pillay) on equity as part of disability law,

[d]isabled people are often unable to access or participate in public or private life because the means to do so are designed for able-bodied people. The result is that disabled people can, without any positive action, easily be pushed to the margins of society.

Riccardi (2018: Kindle Location 552) describes how every physical domain on the periphery, whether it be a home, land or body, is 'in some way' the domain – or place – where Jesus, 'the teacher of Nazareth', continues to live permanently. It is there that Jesus 'becomes marginalized, a beggar, a prisoner. Jesus comes to us in that guise, with those needs, in presenting himself to Christians. It is from the periphery, the margins that Christ's teaching starts and spreads to embrace the world, according to Riccardi (2018: Kindle Location 485). 'We could say that the gospel message of salvation comes first of all from the margins, from Galilee and the land of Israel, subject to Roman rule' (Riccardi 2018: Kindle Location 503).

What happened over time is that there was a schism between the church and the margins – and the nature of this schism often related to aspects of the church's history. At times, the faithful again 'rediscovered' the poor and responded through action. It must also be asked, however, whether the marginalised had a 'voice' in 'spirituality, in the life and theology of the church'. Or were these actions of care merely charity? (Riccardi 2018: Kindle Location 592; cf. Keum 2018:10).

According to Macdonald (2018), the 'mission from the margins' is the rehabilitation of an important subject of Scripture and the early church. Keum (2018:10) states that it invites the church to start its mission anew – as a calling from God's Spirit that offers the 'fullness of life ... for all'. The Just and Inclusive Communities programme of the World Council of Churches (WCC), published in 2012 as an extensive theological document entitled *Mission from the margins: Toward a just world*, is a collective work by representatives of WCC-associated networks who have a close experience with

people who are discriminated against and on the margins of society and the church. This document reminds us that from a traditional perspective, mission has been practised from positions of 'privilege, power and possession'. But, it continues, if mission is the life's work of every Christian, how do we understand the mission of the poor, powerless or dehumanised? An understanding of this opens up new possibilities (World Council of Churches 2012:154-155):

- First, God – Biblically – puts the marginalised first; not due to paternalistic compassion, but in solidarity. As God's first community, they were witness to the future reign of God as established by Jesus. What Jesus practised translates into the reign of God for the marginalised and poor – and this is a rejection of power and privilege. Thus, the church's mission starts with God's mission as lived by Jesus among the poor and outcast.
- Second, it reveals God's mission as being more than to build the church or to maintain the latter's *status quo*. Instead, it expresses itself in the struggle for 'dignity, justice and life', meaning that the mission of God is to transform the world through 'courage and hope'.
- Third, it asserts that mission attempts to expose sinfulness rather than being acts of charity or caring for victims. Mission 'confronts the forces of evil', bringing about transformation so that the purpose of God may triumph.
- Fourth, by equating mission to the proclamation of the good news of salvation, it emphasises that mission is more than the story of salvation in Christ alone, but is that of 'prophetic utterances', 'the speaking of truth to powers and holding them accountable'. This is mirrored by the life of Jesus, who rejected the temptations of easy access to power and glory and opted instead for the way of the cross.

The marginalised as subject is no longer the 'good works' factor in the message of the church, but is, rather, the pivot of humanity in the times we live in. Briefly put, this is much more crucial and necessary than an outpouring of "'charitable kindness'" (Riccardi 2018: Kindle Location 357; cf. Keum 2018:9). The 'recovery' of this rehabilitated mission, as suggested by Macdonald (2018), holds forth the possibility of a paradigm shift in the teaching and work of the Christian churches.

Instead of mission from the centre to the margins, mission is proceeding from the margins; those on the margins are the vital and essential agents of mission. In addition, the margins are the vibrant centre of God's presence and work in the world. We have seen this, in so many ways, in the recent history of the churches around the world (Macdonald 2018). The relocation of the centre of religion and in human populations of the church, away from Europe and North America, is but one aspect of the multi-faceted change worldwide in the life of the church. But these changes in the understanding of mission poses 'a prophetic challenge to the established churches of a Western cultural framework' (Macdonald 2018). All Christians are summoned to listen attentively to God – who is speaking from the margins. In a basic and central way, this renewal in churches is surely related to this discernment of God's voice (Macdonald 2018).

The goal of mission from the margins is 'to affirm, safeguard, and celebrate life in all its fullness ... we recognise if we wish to participate in God's mission, we must discern where God is affirming, safeguarding, and celebrating life in the midst of death' (World Council of Churches 2012:160). It is from the margins that the church has much to learn – and marginality is present in every church. It is from the margins that the church gets its calling and witness – while, when it rubs shoulders with the powerful and those with worldly might, it loses the essential possibilities of living in tolerance, with hope, respect and meeting challenges in societies of great diversity. Marginality makes it possible to speak truth to religious power and demand accountability where 'life-denying ways' hold sway, where, to be on the side of the powerful, is to reap 'selfish benefits' which compromises 'the missional calling of the church' (Kaunda & Hewitt 2015b:388-389). *Together towards Life* affirms

[m]arginalized people have God-given gifts that are under-utilized because of disempowerment, and denial of access of opportunities and/or justice. Through struggles in and for life, marginalized people are reservoirs of the active hope, collective resistance, and perseverance that are needed to remain faithful to the promised reign of God (Keum 2018:10).

Privileged persons participating in the main stream of socio-economic life could learn a lot from persons living under marginalised conditions, e.g., about capabilities and coping skills (cf. Keum 2018:10). There are potential and capacity among the marginalised. The discipline of development studies could become a partner in the

understanding of a mission from the margins; an example is the 'Asset Based Community Development' (ABCD) approach of McKnight and Kretzman (cf. Van Niekerk 2006:13). Thompson (2005:247) points to the paradox: the marginalised existence of people with disabilities – which requires strength and support both material and non-material – can generate valuable contributions to society due to a different stance. Their view of the world comes from a different place. These contributions also include perspectives of usually excluded segments of society. Precisely because excluded persons occupy an unusual position, they are forced to think differently and innovatively. In order not to give up, or to survive at all, persons with disabilities have to find new ways of being because society is geared not towards them, but towards the enabled. At the same time, becoming such a 'prophetic voice' means occupying a singular, lonely position, which needs strength to maintain – and depends on a spirituality focusing on the all-encompassing love of God. 'The wisdom from the margins' (Bevans 2001) is necessary in the transformation of authentic and contextual mission and spirituality.

8.7 Healing and (broken) wholeness

To be missional is to be involved in the healing of people. From the very beginning, the word 'healing' has been closely connected to 'wholeness' and 'welfare' (Bosch 1990:52; Van Niekerk 2018:174). In ancient times, healing meant the return to an all-embracing state of wholeness or harmony. The Old Testament concept of *shalom* – which refers to 'physical health, peace of mind, healthy human relations, social justice and peace with God' – expresses this wholeness aptly (Van Niekerk 2018:174; cf. Bosch 1990:52; see Harris et al. 1980:930-931). 'According to the traditions of hospitality practised by Abraham, health care was available to all – not only the elite' (Gn 18:1-33) (Van Niekerk 2018:174; cf. Winslow et al. 2016:186; Nouwen 1975:66; Kim 2015:91).

Healing is also pivotal to the ministry of Jesus, as reflected in the numerous accounts of healing in the Bible. The focus of Jesus' healing was on restoring wholeness, rather than on correcting supposed defects. Jesus set the example, as his healing was greater than physicality and focused on the restoration of people to their 'rightful places within the fabric of the community' (Keum 2018:13; see World Council of Churches

2016:15). God's preferred option for the poor and for our brokenness is encompassed by the life of Jesus' inclusive justice and love, hospitality, healing and salvation. Though 'Jesus did not have a theory of distributive justice, his teaching and healing ministry clearly showed that the core value of his love extended beyond justice, to everybody, and crossed all boundaries, to include all' (Van Niekerk 2018:174; cf. Benn 2011:13).

In line with the biblical-theological history of the church, health is perceived as more than simply physical and mental well-being. Health is thus seen as wholeness, which is the recognition of the interconnected and multi-dimensional nature of humans relating with God, others and creation. 'To become whole the parts that have become estranged need to be reclaimed' (Keum 2018:13). Barriers to becoming whole include discrimination (based on physical illness and/or disability), individualism and injustice. However, we discern signs of God's reign on earth wherever wholeness is practised. We see God's hand through the integration and inclusion of all of the excluded parts of our lives and all of the abandoned and rejected people in our community. Health is further linked to God's future promise of his kingdom fulfilment and is a legitimate possibility in our circumstances in the present, according to Keum (2018:13).

Another feature of Jesus' healing is the call for us to carry on Jesus' work (Mt 10:1). Healing is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:9; Ac 3) and the Holy Spirit aids the church in the fulfilment of Christ's embodied mission (Keum 2018:13, 14). A fundamental expression of this mission is action that fosters healing and wholeness of people and communities. This mission should foster the full involvement of all people, including those with illness or disability. The manifestations of this mission can be seen through comprehensive church involvement in health and healing. This includes advocating for equal access to quality health care across the globe and creating mission or supporting local clinics, hospitals and health programmes; counselling and pastoral care (Keum 2018:14).

To an extraordinary degree which has been well documented, the early church was deeply touched by those who were physically or spiritually unwell, taking to her bosom all people who suffered due to events beyond their control (Bosch 1990:51). Cochrane (2006:60) writes 'Christianity has a long history of care for people; healing is an important part of the life and work of the Jesus of the gospels, and medical missions were a significant part of its spread across the world'. As a ministry of faith, for example,

organised and institutionalised health care came about due to the growth of Christianity (Winslow et al. 2016:186; cf. Van Niekerk 2018:174). The modern hospitals of today have their origins in the ministry of healing of the early church. It was this ministry that illustrated salvation that is all-encompassing (Bosch 1990:51; cf. Van Niekerk 2018:175) and gives hope.

As a community of imperfect people, and a part of a creation groaning in pain and liberation, the Christian community can be a sign of hope, and an expression of the kingdom of God here on earth (Rom. 8:22-24) (Keum 2018:14).

A missional community serves people from a position of humility, acknowledging its own weakness and brokenness. One such touching example was the mission physician Gerrit ter Haar, mentioned by Bosch (1990:54). Ter Haar had joined a hospital in the Transkei in the late 1950s, at a time when a white person's word was law and a white mission doctor could rule as though his hospital was his own private kingdom. When the hospital later became a government hospital, Ter Haar lost that power – but he stayed on, and in 1986, he wrote:

I honestly believe that having no power in a worldly sense is to my advantage as a modern missionary. I have often complained about it, but I have come to the realisation that it is to my advantage. When I no longer have power to do what I want to do, I am dependent on the ... Holy Spirit ... I cannot force my way. It is a gentle way (Bosch 1990:54; cf. Van Niekerk 2018:176).

8.8 Embracing Jesus' hospitality

I agree with Henri Nouwen's (1975:66) statement that, 'if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality'. Van der Merwe (2015:45) writes that Nouwen develops the biblical concept of hospitality into one of a healing ministry because it removes the vision that wholeness can simply be transferred from one person to another. The pain and loneliness remains, but if the giver feels 'at home' in his or her own situation, it becomes possible to make a space without fear for others, where they can 'recognize their pain on a level where it can be shared'.

Both Weiss Block and Thomas Reynolds emphasise Christ-like hospitality in their theologies of disability. Their theological perspectives on hospitality further fits the

agenda of the ecumenical missional movement, e.g., the Seventh Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS VII) held in 2012 with the theme of 'Embracing and Embodying God's Hospitality Today' (Brandner 2013:95). Tobias Brandner views hospitality as an emerging paradigm in mission. The practice of hospitality transforms the church into an 'open church ... open to the transcending movement of God's Spirit and of the gospel' (Brandner 2013:99-100; cf. Kim 2015).

Hospitality is also today a powerful form of being a missional church. Mission is, most simply speaking, the movement of the gospel – of God's grace and love – beyond walls of separation and exclusion, whether ethnic, linguistic, national, political, social, cultural, religious, or even ecclesial in nature (Brandner 2013:99).

The World Council of Churches' affirmation on mission and evangelism, *Together towards life* (Keum 2018:18) declares that God is the host that sends us:

God's hospitality calls us to move beyond binary notions of culturally dominant groups as hosts and migrant and minority peoples as guests. Instead, in God's hospitality, God is host and we are all invited by the Spirit to participate with humility and mutuality in God's mission.

Furthermore, Christians are called to imitate Jesus' hospitality (para. 7.5.2). The perspective of hospitality commands Christians to offer the preferential option to the stranger, the marginalised, the poor, the disabled, etc. (Kim 2015:92; see Van Niekerk & Jones 2017:62-64; Niemandt 2007:94-97; Vosloo 2006a). Kim (2015:94), remarkably, writes:

The practise of hospitality is a necessary condition to enter into the real meaning of life in the faithful response to the invitation of the Triune God who graciously invites us to the real life of true humanity in and through the sacrificial hospitality of Jesus Christ.

As an Asian systematic theologian, Kim (2015:100-101), shares his suspicion of Western Christianity's practice of hospitality and he therefore pleads for a 'new interpretation – a hermeneutics of reconstruction' of Christian hospitality as being necessary in this age. But it already exists, and his new perspective correlates with Weiss Block and others' understanding of hospitality. Reynolds (2013:27) warns about a false hospitality which can create a facade of the host as master and keeps the host dependent on giving 'gifts of welcome'. However, Kim's insight into Christian hospitality is worth reflecting on. According to Kim (2015:103), 'Jesus [is] both a human

stranger and divine host, [...] the Christ who has established once and for all the ontological space for us to be fully human'. Furthermore, Kim (2015:101) compares the 'relationship between a host and guest' with a '*yin-yang* relationship' – it is a 'dynamic relation', 'interdependent', 'dialogical', 'exist[s] together' and is 'interchangeable'. 'As *yin* can become *yang* anytime, it is always possible for a host to turn into a guest, and *vice versa*.

Kim's link to *kenosis* in the hospitality discourse is striking. He (Kim 2015:100) writes:

Before mentioning any type of hospitality, we would ask of the host a total *kenosis* of oneself (self-negation), a full respect or reverence for guests, and a partnership among strangers, just as the Triune God did for us in and through the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus completely self-emptied himself until death, paid the fullest respect to the people washing their feet, and lived among the *minjung* comforting and healing them so as to accomplish his mission of 'embracing and embodying God's hospitality' for us.

The *kenotic* love of God in Christ and the Divine Spirit is necessarily expressed in Christian hospitality. This hospitality is acknowledged in the same manner as described by Rollins (2011:169) when he refers to listening attentively to somebody and entering 'into an "I/Thou" relationship in which we encounter the other in such a way that they are no longer reducible to various properties'.

A *kenosis* attitude, the embracing of hospitality, and the entering of mutual friendship is the embodiment of the *missio Dei* towards vulnerable people. e.g., persons with disabilities. In the framework document on the missional nature and calling of Dutch Reformed Church, 'powerlessness and vulnerability' together constitute one of the four dimensions of the incarnation (General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church 2013:8).

A missional spirituality should embrace the values of the *yin-yang* relationship and *kenosis*. The character of welcoming the other (and for purposes of this study, 'the other' are marginalised persons with disabilities) is well described by Miroslav Volf's application of the 'metaphor of embrace' (Volf 1996:29,140-147). Volf (1996:140-147) identifies four 'essential elements of embrace' and he describes them as different acts in the 'drama of embrace':

1. 'Opening the arms' – A gesture of invitation that offers a sign that space was created within oneself for the other to enter, and that one is also ready to move into the space created by the other.
2. 'Waiting' – This is a sign allowing the other to participate, in case an embrace had started off as one-sided. The other may not be coerced or manipulated, since the goal is reciprocity – or there is no completion of the act.
3. 'Closing the arms' – In embracing, a host becomes a guest and a guest becomes a host. A *soft touch* is also necessary for free and mutual giving and receiving to take place.
4. 'Opening the arms again' – Letting go of the other in order to preserve her alterity, identity (or genuine dynamic identity), while the self also needs to step back into itself and own identity. But both are enriched by the presence of the other.

Volf's (1996:141) focus on the embrace is not aimed at the physical process *per se*, but on the 'dynamic relationship between the self and the other [that the] embrace symbolises and enacts'. The metaphor of the embrace is useful, but not crucial, since the embrace is fundamentally about

the will to give ourselves to others and "welcome" them, to readjust our identities to make space for them, is prior to any judgement about others, except that of identifying them in their humanity (Volf 1996:29).

One uses one's body to embrace another. Anderson (2003:50) reminds us that '[b]odies connect us to others, and allow us to form relationships'. He continues to say that people with disabilities offer others the wisdom of their embodiment by sharing an understanding of what it means to experience disability. It is only in relationship that anything can be conveyed from one to the other, and that there is the privilege of knowing the other and of being known. '[I]n the process, we learn more about ourselves and God as well.'

Another meaningful characteristic of Christian hospitality is friendship. I refer briefly in chapter 2 and 3 to God as a friend of humanity. The relationship between somebody and God is like those between friends. Sallie McFague suggests friendship as a metaphor to illustrate the relationship between the divine and human: a representation which shows 'qualities of mutuality, companionship and a shared concern for the well-

being of the earth' (Pryce 2005:316). Pryce (2005:316) states that, traditionally, many Reformed hymns place a religious emphasis on Jesus as a friend in illustrating God's intimate knowledge and care for individuals, while modern hymns move the focus to Jesus' divine relation with or to the human condition.

God in Jesus enters into friendships with human beings who are radically unlike God's self. In so doing God lays down a principle of grace that forms the pattern for friendships that claim to be genuinely Christian; friendships that reach towards, embrace and are embraced by those whom society considers to be least like 'us'. In so doing the incarnation is radically lived out and becomes an enduring presence in the lives of the people of God as they live lives that anticipate the coming Kingdom (Swinton et al. 2011:16).

Vanier (1979), Swinton (2000), Reinders (2008) and Hauerwas (2005) are a few of the theologians who are known to have reflected on friendship as an important feature of a theology that takes people with disabilities seriously. In his article *Timeful Friends* (2005), Hauerwas echoes the life experiences, wisdom, philosophy and theology of Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche communities for people living with mental disabilities. Hauerwas (2005:12) discovers the importance of 'friendship' and 'timefulness', which make the communities so noteworthy. Becoming 'friends of time' denotes a form of friendship that seeks 'to be with' people with developmental disabilities in ways that are meaningful rather than to use or hide behind activity – 'to do for' – in terms of spending time together. The L'Arche communities put the spotlight on the difference between 'living with' and 'doing for', which becomes the basis for creating relationships. It is more than sharing in daily tasks and rituals: instead there is the development of 'interdependence, truth and gratuity' which allows for the voices of the handicapped to be heard and for their gifts to be received (Hauerwas 2005:12; cf. Reynolds 2013:19).

It takes time and hard work for those who want to help persons with mental disabilities, mainly due to the inability of helpers to recognise their own weaknesses (Vanier 1979:88; Hauerwas 2005:22). Reynolds (2013:17, 27) shares his relationship with his son Chris. It has taught him that to watch over others is not a matter of providing 'aid' from a position of superiority, but of perceiving our own vulnerability and being open to how we receive from others or accept what they bring. Then we can accept that others – incorporated with their 'disabilities' – could become essential to our own

welfare and benefit the communities in which we all thrive together. Relationships like these open up the energy of giving by first becoming open to receiving, such as Reynolds does from his son, Chris.

Similarly, Reinders reflects on his friend Kelly. Kelly is diagnosed with micro-encephalitis (Reinders 2008:20). For Reinders, ‘the gift of friendship that we received from God needs to be extended to intellectually disabled persons, “even when not reciprocated”’ (Reinders 2008:15). He stresses the dependence of Christian friendship on truthfulness in terms of our identity in relationship and highlights how difficult we find it to receive – accept – the ‘gift of God’. This is particularly so when we use our strength as a protective shield when we are with others who are dependent on us. But, he (Reinders 2008:16) says, God’s gift cannot be received in self-processing strength. ‘Christian friendships are a place where we *physically* encounter God’ (Swinton et al. 2011:15).

The challenge to us by Hauerwas (2005:22) is to open our eyes to our need to noticeably become companions of time, as well as companions to those individuals who set aside their time for us. To enable this, we need to call on God, who in his timelessness is with us in our time and is willing to get to know us. What we need to figure out, is how to develop the kinship offered to us by the rationally incapacitated.

‘Friendship requires justice, but justice requires friendship for its actualisation’ (Swinton 2011:306). Swinton reminds us there are no requirements or preconditions in terms of our abilities in order for us to be loved by the mysterious God, or to receive that which we are given. It comes as a gift, resulting from Jesus’ friendship, which is negotiated through a relationship with all humankind. (See World Council of Churches 2016:9-10.)

Jesus’ life approach of ‘acceptance’, ‘grace and justice’, mostly towards the discarded and marginalised, reveals his friendships (Swinton 2011:303-304). These principles characterise a ‘new community’ (Swinton 2011:304). It is a missional community with a spirituality of self-sacrifice and humility; love and justice; hospitality and compassion.

8.9 Summary

We know according to Matthew 25 that ‘Jesus is in the poor, the sick, the hungry, those whom society chooses to describe as strangers. Indeed a failure to recognize this fact is a criterion for Divine rejection’ (Swinton et al. 2011:15). As Christ takes shape in our life, Christ takes on the shape of an outcast, or a needy person. And God tensely waits to see whether love drives us towards our neighbour (Deist 1990). This love needs greater depth of acquaintance and greater comprehensive discernment by distinguishing between good and bad, and what is important and what is unimportant (Phlp 1:9-10).

God is God; and we recognise that God reveals only what God wants to make known. We realise nobody has ever seen, touched or even heard (in any case not directly) God. What do we know of God? (1 Jn 4:12; Swinton et al. 2011:15). In no uncertain terms, the biblical writer John repeatedly states ‘God is love’ (1 Jn 4:8, 12, 16). This ‘[I]love is not an attribute of God, it is an ontological statement about what and who God is. The question, ‘*But how do we know what love looks like?*’, is answered by Swinton et al. (2011:15) as follows:

Through our relationships, our family, our associates, our friendships. We cannot learn what loves looks like unless it is embodied in action. Love is therefore an embodied relational act that we receive from one another; as we receive it we learn what love looks like and feels like and ultimately what it is. As we discover what love feels like so we begin to understand what it means to know, love and be loved by God.

God is not only a God of love, but also of justice. The prophet Jeremiah states: ‘He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me declares the Lord’ (Jr 22:16 NIV). On reading this verse, Swinton et al. (2011:15) come to conclude, ‘To *know* God is to *do* justice’.

An inauthentic Christian spirituality is uncomfortable about the body, resulting in humans’ lack of confidence in the practice of love. Its inclination is to separate body and spirit. But to love requires full engagement – which demands meeting people, as they are and where they are, including in ‘their embodied selves’. The coupling of ‘mission’ and ‘spirituality’ in reference to authentic Christian (missionary) spirituality is therefore both a summons and a command, according to Gittins (2005:444). As a follower of Christ, one is driven and sent by the Divine Spirit and involved, in word and

deed, in compassionate-love of thy neighbour. A missional spirituality is not only bodily integrated, filled with love for the other in flesh and blood, but also justice orientated (cf. Mic 6:8) and compassionate. Article 4 of the Confession of Belhar (1986) reflects something about a missional spirituality with these words:

We believe that God has revealed Godself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace on earth; that in a world full of injustice and enmity God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that God calls the church to follow in this; that God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry ... that God wishes to teach the people of God to do what is good and to seek the right; that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

According to Nouwen (1977), the Christian vocation 'compassion' is at the core of spiritual life, which is noticeable in 'solidarity', 'voluntary displacement' and 'discipleship'. Nouwen refers to 'voluntary displacement' as the 'discipline of compassion'. It means to move away from the usual and formal situations, to get in 'touch with our inner brokenness as well as with the brokenness of our fellow human beings ... [W]e, like other people, are pilgrims on the way, we are broken in search of healing' (Nouwen 1977). To be missional is never static; it is a movement to the unexpected, most probably to the unpopular places where the unwanted live.

Missional spirituality is clearly and closely interwoven with the mission from the margins. All Christian theologies should recognise its missional origin and need to primarily focus on the marginality of people. The life experiences and spirituality of persons with disabilities give new insights towards the re-thinking of theology in word and deed; it challenges theology and spirituality to compassionate action. Human disability helps us to understand humanity's bodiliness, brokenness, and finiteness; it makes an embodied spirituality a reality, making the deep incarnation of Jesus becoming flesh significant; it inspires through the Divine Spirit's life-giving energy, *kenotic* power; and reveals the Spirit's vulnerability and solidarity with the weak. Persons with disabilities give full meaning to the concept of humanity and spirituality. Moltmann (2009b:2018) stated at a congress on disability:

In Jesus Christ, God has accepted the whole and true humanity and has made it part of his divine life – mortal humanity, too, and also disabled humanity. In this respect there is no reduced life and no disabled life either. Every life is in its own way part of the divine life and a reflection of God in the world. The moment we talk about ‘disabilities’ we are taking as our standard the perfect, the capable, and the beautiful. But that leads us astray. Isn’t every disability an endowment of its own kind too, and one which must be respected? In the community of Jesus, aren’t ‘disabilities’ also ‘charismata’ of the Holy Spirit?

The mission of God (*missio Dei*) is characterised as all-embracing and totally inclusive; ‘temporarily-abled’ persons and persons with disabilities are all included in God’s mission of love to the world. This inclusivity of love should be reflected in missional communities. No wonder that Moltmann (1992:193) refers to the incompleteness of the ‘Body of Christ’ when he states ‘[c]ongregations without any disabled members are disabled and disabling congregations’. Vischer (1979:1) writes that the ‘wholeness of the family of God in and with the handicapped’ should be rediscovered; and everybody should uphold every person as ‘partners in life’, because

[i]n practice, Christian communities — whatever their traditions — are open to the handicapped only to a very limited extent. The churches have done considerable work in building special institutions. They have contributed greatly to encouraging society at large to make greater efforts. But have they really included the handicapped in their own communal life? Mutual acceptance of “normal” and “handicapped” members is the test of true community, and the answer to God’s love lies in our acceptance of others as he accepted us. So, is it not the place which we give to the handicapped that indicates the degree to which our community is really the community of Christ?

Newbigin (1979:25) also pleads for the liberation of the church. He says that it is the misconception of the ‘strong, the whole, the healthy’ that they are pivotal to the life of the church, with the persons with disabilities being at the margins – but the centrality of the cross, and Christ’s agony there, should banish this illusion. The church would be contradicting the meaning of Christ’s suffering if it does not include the persons of disabilities as central to its life.

The church as *missio ecclesiae* have to focus on the periphery of community life. The churches and congregations should unlearn their placing most of their energy into the maintenance of their infrastructures, and stop trying to control society, as was done in

the Christendom era. Everything is done in the name of self-preservation, instead of the self-denying ethos of *kenotic* love and ethics of justice. The church has reached a *kairos* moment – the time has come to be missional. Congregations and followers of Christ ought to embrace a ‘centrifugal mission aiming to participate in Jesus’ movement of the reign of God in order to embody God’s rule in the world outside the church’ (Youn 2018:239). It is possible not to find Christ in a church. But the church should be there where Christ is. We encounter the risen Christ in fulfilment of Jesus’ promise to meet Jesus’ disciples in Galilea, the land of the alienated, rather than in Jerusalem, the centre of power. Even today we meet Christ through the activity of the Holy Spirit in the midst of alienation – with the poor, sick, oppressed, suffering and dispossessed. This is where we discover Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit – in the Spirit’s work of ‘*diakonia* mission for the just and loving rule of God’, according to Youn (2018:231-232).

The thirteen interviewees’ experience of meaningful relationships personifies their spirituality (para. 6.4). Their faith in God is positive; and mostly, family and/or friends are important to them. In the light of the missional spirituality discourse the significance of mutual and interdependent relationships that give meaning to people and connection with everybody, should not be underestimated. True to the nature and character of the Trinitarian community of God, humans can correspond through their unified humane relationships with one another. Hans Reinders (2008:274) reminds us that we ‘are truly human because we are drawn into communion with God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Spirit’.

8.10 Epilogue

A spirituality of vulnerability, imperfection and marginality is the primary modus of mission and humanity. The altered embodiment of persons with disabilities makes an embodied spirituality contextually relevant and should reflect in a missional spirituality. The following insights should be taken seriously by missional communities, e.g., churches and theological departments, and could serve as recommendations for the implementation and continuous development of a missional spirituality:

- The need to develop 'new' and creative images and constructions of God by listening to different and marginalised voices to ensure everybody experiences *imago Dei* as real and transformative.
- The insights of a theology and/or spirituality of disability should significantly contribute to the diverse, integrative, all-embracing character of the *missio Dei*.
- The deep incarnation, God's radical presence in flesh (and blood), makes God an essential part of nature's vulnerability, pain and suffering. The Christology-broadened anthropocentric, biocentric and cosmocentric scope should be recognised and internalised in a missional spirituality.
- The Divine Spirit's co-suffering and vulnerability, apart from the agency of being life-giving, should be acknowledged and further discovered in missiological studies.
- The *missio ecclesiae* should focus on mission from the margins and not on self-preservation, power and perfection. The dysfunctional nature and growth in sub-Saharan Africa of the prosperity (health and wealth) gospel should be noticed and opposed.
- Much prominence has been given to the notion that the church is supposed to be an inclusive, though alternative, open community of believers. However, it is more important that the church spends its energy at the margins where God is already present.

A missional spirituality should always embrace and embody imperfection.

Sela ☺

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ADDENDUM 1 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introduction: Each one of us is on a life journey – our path has a past, a present and a future.

Tell me what stands out about your journey up to now? (icebreaker / background)

What gladdens your heart or fills you with joy? / What makes sense or gives meaning to you on your life's journey? (meaning / values)

How do you feel about/see yourself? (self-image)

What helps you get through the day? (coping)

What role do other people play in your life? (support network)

Who gives meaning to your life?

How do other people, in general, make you feel?

How do you manage your “disability” in society/the community?

Do you experience a sense of loss due to your “disability”?

- If yes, how do you handle it?
- If no, tell me more.

Do you experience a higher Hand on your life's journey?

- If yes, tell me more about it?

What picture/image do you have of God?

- Tell me more about it if it has changed over time.

How do you feel about the way ahead?

What makes you excited?

Do you have a dream or dreams for the future?

- If yes, tell me about it.

You are welcome to share anything else with me that might come up in relation to the questions.

How was your experience of this conversation?

ADDENDUM 2 FIELDWORK REPORT

Introduction

The two researchers, Dr Ilse Eigelaar–Meets and Wynand Louw were approached by Dr Pieter van Niekerk, a retired theologian, to conduct a number of in-depth interviews with people living with a disability in the Western Cape. The purpose of these interviews is to complete the empirical component of a second PhD that Dr van Niekerk is doing. The PhD, titled *Missional Spirituality and Embodiment of Imperfection*, is registered at the University of Pretoria and being executed under the supervision of Prof. Nelus Niemandt.

The Research Team

Ilse Eigelaar–Meets, a sociologist is Director of a social research consultancy, Soreaso, based in Somerset West. She has extensive experience in the designing and managing of both quantitative and qualitative research projects, as well as conducting field work in diverse socio economic settings. Wynand Louw retired in 2012 as senior lecturer/researcher at the Institute for Social Development, based at the University of the Western Cape, Bellville. Apart from his involvement in sociological research studies for 35 years, he lectured in the post graduate Development Studies Programme in inter alia research methodology to Honours and Masters students. He is currently a senior associate of Soreaso.

Research Focus

The execution of the fieldwork was guided by a short questionnaire schedule, the content of which was informed by the central research question of the PhD. Different themes were covered during interviews, i.e. a short biographical introduction dealing with participants' life stories, followed by their level of independence and reliance on friends and a support system. The main thrust of the interview centred around the meaning and value of spirituality in living and dealing with disability, as well as the impact of their impairment on their future perspective(s).

The Participants

The sample constituted a convenient sample selected by means of a snowball sampling technique, a non-probability sampling method. A total of 13 disabled people participated in the interviews. Their age ranged from early twenties to early seventies.

Ten were male. The predominance of males in the sample is reflected in the specialized institutions that accommodate people with disabilities from which a number of participants were drafted from. The formal educational level of those interviewed displayed a strong variation, with some that boasted with a post graduate degree, while others dropped out of senior secondary school.

The sample included all racial groups of South Africa, with whites and people of mixed race in the majority. All but one respondent had spinal injuries and are dependent upon a wheel chair for their mobility.

All participants had agreed to participate in the study voluntarily and were assured of absolute confidentiality regarding their identity.

The Interview

Interviews were conducted in relative privacy, sometimes at the place of work, at specialized institutions of caring, in private homes and in coffee shops. Interviews varied considerably in duration, ranging from around 45 to 90 minutes.

There was considerable variation in the ability of participants to comprehensively respond to some of the more philosophical and abstract themes that were explored. This, predictably, but not exclusively though, corresponded with the level of formal education that participants achieved.

An encouragingly positive quality of the interview dynamic was that all participants were extremely open and comfortable to respond to often personal and what can be deemed as awkward questions (e.g. how they feel when they see themselves reflected in the mirror). In none of the interviews were respondents unwilling to answer questions, with all respondents responding to all the questions posed by the researchers. In fact the openness of respondents and willingness to reflect on their reality and everyday physical and emotion struggles on such a personal level was humbling. This openness of respondents and honest vulnerability exposed by respondents is testimony of both the validity and reliability of the information generated by these interviews.

Wynand Louw

Ilse Eigelaar–Meets

September 2018