

LITURGY ON THE EDGE OF COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

In this article we present two perspectives of the relationship between liturgy and the needs of the society as the church seeks to live out her faith. The one perspective is from the white Dutch Reformed Church, while the other is from the predominantly black Presbyterian Church. The main struggle of their faith is lived within a Western and an African culture. Some of the struggles are common, while others are different because of their background. We propose co-operative projects that are already running in some areas between the white Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church. That can be broadened by ecumenical co-operation between churches in order to address the problem.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper we are going to present two perspectives as viewed from the white church and the predominantly black church on the role of the movement of Christian service from the celebration in the worship service on Sunday into society where we have a mission of care and service to people in dire distress. We are looking at our diaconal-missionary service to people suffering from AIDS, poverty, joblessness, violence and despondency. Prof Pieterse will analyse the spiritual situation of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church – the DRC) as it pertains to our diaconal-missionary task, and Prof Masango will look at it from the perspective of the predominantly black church. It is our intention to open avenues for co-operation of both cultures in engaging into a joint

venture from liturgy to society in order to fulfil our Christian calling in our country.

2 DEVELOPMENTS IN MODERN WESTERN SOCIETIES THAT AFFECT THE WHITE DRC

Western societies have changed radically over the past several centuries, largely because of the process of modernisation. Although this process was already going on in South Africa, it was only after we were freed from our isolation from the rest of the world in 1990 that the impact of this development hit us with a bang. Modernisation can be understood as the process of interdependent changes in the social, cultural, political and attitudinal domains of a society rooted in the transformation of its economy induced by the purpose development of technology. Such changes have had a profound effect on the different institutions in societies, and also on religious groups. The more societies change, the more religious groups are likely to change as well (Dekker, Luidens & Rice 1997:1).

This development in a society brings to the fore a process of differentiation (Dekker 1983:19). Differentiation means a process in which social units or institutions are unbundled in smaller units which live a life of their own, for example, the development in the economic life of the family. In our own past the economic life and family life were on the same piece of land – in the black as well as in the white communities. The whole family was involved in looking after the cattle, growing maize and keeping the home in order. With modernisation a nearly incalculable number of occupations developed and the rural society changed into a mostly urbanised society. In each sphere of life, such as the medical world, the education world, the business world, et cetera, a value differentiation took place (Dekker 1983:22). In different occupational situations different values are functioning. In this way society split up in its form and its values in thousands of independent “worlds”. Father, mother and children now leave the house in the morning to go into different worlds, each with its own set of behaviour and values. In the evening (sometimes very late) they come back into the personal life world of the family which can differ radically from the worlds “out there”.

In Berger’s view each person and also religious groups within a modernising society have to choose between accommodation or resistance to the impact of that society (cf Berger 1967). Dekker notes

that all people have to accommodate the different worlds in which they function every day (Dekker 1983:24). In order to function in this kind of society the individual has to accommodate the different value systems of the workplace, the economy, politics, sport and social contacts. He or she has to act according to the value system of the workplace they are in, even if they do not internalise it. But the next moment they are functioning in another societal “world” with different values, and then again they have to play the game there in order to survive. In the life of the individual person, therefore, there is also an ongoing process of differentiation.

The amazing fact is that people accommodate and adapt in a way to this complex, massive society in order to keep sane. And they do it by *withdrawing into an own private, personal life*. Do not bother them when they arrive home at night! The doors are locked and not opened readily to others. The problem is that the more complicated society is becoming, the less it is being understood (Dekker 1983:25). In this personal, private world people can have a grip on it and understand it. In this way the world of the individual develops in a personal and impersonal world. In this impersonal world out there most people feel that they cannot oversee it, cannot get a grip on it and have no insight in it. People feel estranged from it. They cry for something sure and simple that they can hold onto. In our view this is one of the social reasons for people’s choice for fundamentalism.

The process that we have described above leads to different mechanisms of handling the situation: role distance and role segmentation (Dekker 1983:26). In role distance people play different roles in different situations in order to comply with the expectations of that situation while they do not subscribe to the values and expectations required from them in the specific “world” of the broader society. Therefore, they live with role segmentation. Each role they have to play in the different worlds they live in is separated from the other. In the workplace you do not speak about your private, personal life, and in the church you do not speak about the role you are playing in the business world in complying with the values that apply to that world.

Seen from the side of society as a whole, the unity of society is broken into numerous worlds. Seen from the side of the individual, the unity of life is also broken with the implication that people’s values are in fact only valid in the private, personal life.

3 THE PRIVATISATION OF RELIGION

Luckmann taught us long ago that in this modern society our church related faith is privatised – it is pushed back to the subjective, personal life of Christians. Furthermore, the religious themes of our day originate in this private sphere, such as the strong emphasis on religious experiences over and against rationality (cf Luckmann 1963;1967; see also the classic book of Berger 1967). Moltmann, from a theological perspective, confirms this sociological insight of the privatisation of our Christian religion (cf Moltmann 1969). He is convinced that our religion is isolated from public life into the private, personal life of people with informal relationships. Religion plays a stabilising and consoling role in this personal sphere of people's lives, but has no meaning any more for public life and the wider society. It has become irrelevant for society (Moltmann 1969:108–115). One of the results of the modernisation process and the impact on religion in Western societies is that the range of influence of the Christian faith is limited to the personal life of people, and that the manner of expressing our faith is also influenced by this fact. According to Heitink the discrepancy (“storing”) in the relationship between church and society as a result of the nature of modern culture has the impact of the privatisation of our faith (Heitink 2007:333, also 73). People come to church with certain “consumerist” expectations that the worship service has to satisfy (Niemandt 2007:151–152). Therefore, all over the Western world churches are lame ducks regarding a public outreach to those who suffer in their own societies.

It is no surprise that these developments also took place in the Dutch Reformed Church. In this church there is a longstanding ethos (of at least four decades) of no public outreach to suffering people (Bischoff 2007:4)

3.1 The impact of this development on the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)

There is a strong wake-up call in the Western churches, coming from important theologians during the last decade for a new missional drive in word and deed that will take the church into society again. Several authors open new visions and avenues for the church to reclaim its public calling by serving people in need with the good news of the gospel and the healing of people in need by deed and word.

The central concept is the missionary task of the church in a new understanding of the concept, namely an outreach to the poor, the sick, the homeless and the jobless. In order to reclaim the true nature of the church she should be re-formed into a new way of existence (cf for instance Keifert 2006; Minatrea 2004; Gibbs 2005; Frost & Hirsch 2003; Hirsch 2006). Theologians in the Dutch Reformed Church picked up these themes and some important publications followed for the context of this church (cf for instance the influential book of Bosch 1991; Nel 1994; Burger 1999; Pieterse 2001; Van der Ven, Dreyer & Pieterse 2003; Niemandt 2007).

The practical situation in the church, however, is still largely unchanged. Privatised faith and spirituality are the hallmark of the church. Recent research in the Dutch Reformed Church shows this face of the church very clearly. Bisschoff (2007) did research (in a team) in this church (*Kerkspieël* -- Church Mirror Research) in 2006 with the question, *inter alia*, what is done in the congregations regarding the “7 giants”. In 2003 the South African Christian Leadership Assembly (SACLA) identified the problems that challenge the South African community, namely HIV/AIDS, violence, racism, poverty and unemployment, sexism, family in crisis, and crime and corruption. They call it the seven giants that need to be slain. The questionnaire was distributed among all the 1,927 clergy of the DRC. 818 responded – a response of 42%. It is worth mentioning that some of the giants have a direct impact on the DRC and others a lesser impact. The description of the seven giants refers to the greater society of South Africa. In the white community the “giants” with the highest impact are poverty and unemployment, and family in crisis. The result shows that the issues that the congregations pay specific attention to are those that have an impact on their members. As regards poverty and unemployment 80% of the respondents say that they pay attention to it. On family in crisis 71% say that they pay attention to it. But then the percentages drop dramatically: AIDS 35%, racism 33% and sexism 14% (Bisschoff 2007:7). Bisschoff stated: “The overall response is disappointing. Less than 50% of the congregations give intentional attention to the problems created by 5 of the 7 giants!” (Bisschoff 2007:7). There is not much difference between the congregations using different ministry models: traditional, small groups and a combination of the old and the new small group model in their inward focus of the own private world regarding their faith (Bisschoff 2007:9).

Bisschoff also reported on a research done in 2005. Three synods of the DRC decided to check the reaction on some decisions taken by the General Synod in 2004. This survey was done amongst pastors, elders, deacons and small group leaders. Some 10,000 questionnaires were distributed and 3,976 completed. According to this survey family violence has the highest ranking (93%) and combating racism the lowest (59%). HIV/AIDS was the second lowest (62%) (Bisschoff 2007:6). He remarked: "It is however important to note that family violence and poverty had a bigger effect on the DRC itself than other issues. This gives the impression of an inward focus" (Bisschoff 2007:6).

Schoeman (2007) reported on research done by the Church Mirror Research Unit of the Dutch Reformed Church regarding congregational life survey which has to do with strengths and weaknesses of congregations, and which is intended to help congregations establish their own religious role and identity. A random sample of 10% out of the 1,176 congregations was taken. 81% of the congregations returned 12,522 questionnaires completed by worshippers (Schoeman 2007:2). Regarding spiritual connections he made the following conclusion from the results: "Religion is a private matter and "my" personal relationship with God is of the utmost importance" (Schoeman 2007:90). Regarding outside connections he concluded "The community is not in the sight of the congregations" (Schoeman 2007:9). Although this was only a pilot study he could make a final remark: "It seems that the worshippers in the DRC congregations are living in their own private world and are lacking involvement with each other and especially the wider community that they are supposed to serve. DRC congregations are in need of a more missional approach focussing on serving the community, being a church for the other" (Schoeman 2007:10).

This tendency of the privatisation of our faith and spirituality is deepened by the separate existence of the white church from its black DRC churches. White church members are not regularly exposed to the needs of their brothers and sisters in a face-to-face situation in the context of the everyday experiences in the church.

3.2 Critical reflection

If we apply the concept of the *missio Dei* (God's mission to the world) to this state of affairs in the white DRC we see a picture that

must be of deep concern to us. The *missio Dei* concept in theology has to do with God's self-revelation of His nature: as the One who loves the world, His involvement in and with the world, His nature and activity, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate. *Missio Dei* enunciates the good news that God is a God-for-people (Bosch 1991:10). This theological tenet struck home in the latter half of the twentieth century as a notion of God moving in the world to reach people in distress, and of the church's role in that movement. The church is no longer an organisation that takes the initiative in reaching out to people in spiritual and material need; it is God's initiative and movement in the world, which the church is privileged to join. If the church does not join in with God's movement the implication is that she will be left behind and God will do his work in His own way – but His movement will not be stopped. God's mission to the entire world "... takes place in ordinary human history, not exclusively in and through the church" (Bosch 1991:391). The driving force behind God's mission to the world is his incomprehensible love for people in distress (John 3:16). And this mission of God is part of his very being. If the white DRC confesses to be a true church of Christ she has no other option as to join in with God's mission, not only with the idea to evangelise the world in the subjective, private faith way, but also in the public "social gospel" way – to reach out to the poor and the distressed in the many ways in which people suffer in our country.

The only way in which the white DRC can put this theological assignment into practice and become a true missional church is a reformation in order to become a diaconal church – a missionary diaconal church (Pieterse 2001:111–121). We have to distinguish between the church *for* the poor and the church *of* the poor. The church *of* the poor is the church ministering in the poor communities. The church *for* the poor is the church ministering in the better-off communities. These churches should meet each other in forums, which are already established between the white DRC and the Uniting Reformed Church. They should plan diaconal missionary projects together and put these into practice *together*. These actions should also start to include *other churches in an ecumenical forum* with the goal to do projects together and to find a true *presence* in postmodern society (Heitink 2007:198–200). The church has to embark with a greater focus on teaching and spiritual formation. The vision is to

strive for the fulfilling of our calling as a church of the Kingdom of our Father where not only personal spiritual needs are addressed (“zielenood”, the Tax Collector-misery, Luke 18), but also the Lazarus-misery, Luke 16 (Noordmans 1949:50).

4 LITURGY AND COMMUNITY IN THE PREDOMINANTLY BLACK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Presbyterian Church has always centered its ministry on teaching and preaching of the Word of God. Holy Communion has never been emphasised as a highest point in the service, but is recognised as an important part of worship. As a result of preaching the Word, action is required from members; hence the church set up programmes of Christian aid that help serve the community. The unfortunate part is that our denomination as it seeks to serve the community was split into two parts – the white and black mission work. The reader will understand that a committee of Christian Aid was set up in order to work on the ministry of service. In its ministry the committee concentrated on working with black churches. For example, they started a program of feeding the poor through the ministry of soup service, building churches, opening early learning centres, et cetera. In the white congregations they set up senior citizens' homes, orphanage centres, et cetera. Some of us felt that the committee was doing patch up work. The committees never address the issue of oppression and major political problems experienced by black members. In other words, energy was spent on repairing instead of tackling the major problems.

As I, the author came into ministry in 1974, I found myself being involved in committees that had good intentions but were less effective in healing broken people. I kept asking myself what the aims and objective of the Christian Aid committee was, and could not get a clear focus of their work, except helping in service. On the surface we had a good committee, but with no clear vision. This fact made me raise questions on how one could minister in a divided denomination. The author came into ministry at the time when the black church was concerned with oppression – and liberation theology was extremely important. Cone's method of questioning oppressive structures was important to the author. He reminds us that: “The biblical God is the God whose salvation is liberation. He (sic) is the God of

Jesus Christ who calls the helpless and the weak into a newly created existence” (Cone 1975:139). The above reminded me that the main focus of service should be centered on uplifting human dignity. That is what God requires of his church. In other words (using Cone’s words) “The God of Jesus Christ invites all of us to an equal sharing of responsibilities in the discipleship of equals” (Cone 1990:21).

The two quotations of Cone helped me to start focusing on how I was going to serve the community. Gerkins and Kornfield on the other hand share insights on how Christian practices must often come into play in the counselling (services to community) session, especially in the way counsellors develop some of the practices to a high art – in attentive listening, tolerating one another in failure, suffering with one another, providing hospitality, struggling to interpret the interlocking contexts within which the counselee lives from the perspective of the divine purpose for those contexts (Cone 1998:48). The above statements remind us that pastoral counselling (or community service) takes place in the Christian community, and because preaching interprets the life of the community from time to time the sermon can help the congregation to interpret what happens in pastoral counselling from a Christian perspective. In short, the preacher (leader or caregiver) can particularly help the congregation (community) to understand that pastoral counselling (or ministry) is not simply individual therapy, but takes place for the sake of building up the community. The leader can also help the congregation or community to realise that pastoral counselling or caring (ministry) takes account of the spiritual dimensions of the self and its relationships in a way that much secular counselling does not. Finally, the leader, or preacher can help the congregation or community to understand how Christian practice comes into play in pastoral counselling or ministry. As the author grew up into ministry with the deep pain of apartheid, he soon discovered that the Presbyterian Church was seeking to serve people in a complicated racial South Africa. Its passion lay in evangelisation and education of the black community. These two aspects were their mission and vision which generated enthusiasm, and stimulated involvement among white members of our denomination. On the other hand, we had black preachers who were trained as evangelists, and they were ready to preach the Word without addressing problems faced by oppressed people in their communities. They were ready to save the soul, and lead people to heaven. In my own words, our denomination was all dressed up with nowhere to

go, because it did not contextualise its message. Watkins was right when he said that “There should be a clear congregational (denominational) mission, a vibrant energy center of action and service that gives the congregation/denomination its particular identity, and the impact of this mission which should be felt in every dimension of its life, including worship” (Watkins 1999:79). Once the church is clear about its mission, it will be able to save the community, addressing its pain and problems faced daily within that community, thus building up people around typical life disturbances such as the matter of oppression, health, death, loss of employment, crime and broken relationships. Additionally, leaders, preachers or pastors need to be sufficiently acquainted with diagnosis in counselling (ministry) in order to identify problems that go beyond their training. Ramsay explores this concept fully which would help leaders who seek to help or lead congregations, communities or denominations (Ramsay 1998:69; cf Pruyser 1976). The deep commitment of serving black members of the Presbyterian Church within the context of apartheid was a good move, but it fell short of addressing the pain and order of that day. Instead it concentrated on giving them alms. The church was active in feeding the hungry, educating them but not in addressing the oppression experienced by both black and white. Resolutions were passed at General Assembly but not followed up by action in real life. Our denomination needed a slogan and campaigns like those created by “NIKE”: “Just do it.” This would have provided our denomination with an action plan. The author is aware that our church finally came to address the political issues later in its ministry – for some of us it was too late. The black church emerged and began addressing some of the issues of oppression in Presbytery, Synod and General Assembly. Some of the whites joined us, but tension developed within the church, which helped both the black and white churches to focus their energy on what was happening as they sought to address the division among themselves. Several leaders were addressing our new slogan that was introduced by the committee on African Mission – “Enter to worship depart to serve”. The main idea was that people should come into sanctuary for worship and then depart into the world to do Christian service among the broken people of God.

The second issue which was addressed was about the notice boards that are placed outside our churches. The General Assembly passed a resolution that we should write on the notice board “all are

welcome”. This was done in order to defy the apartheid government. The denomination was beginning to address racial separation and discrimination that was oppressing South Africans. While the government was separating people the church welcomed them in the name of the Lord. It is interesting to note that the black church never placed those boards on their premises, because they believed that every one who wishes to come is welcomed. However, the vital congregations in black townships, with rhythms and deep relationships between their worship services and a mission of liberation were evident as they sought to serve the community. The author is aware that every word and phrase in worship services was mechanically connected to some mission program. It was more that one gained in the totality of worship, that is, an awareness at least of the tacit level of what our denomination was beginning to do within the community. The reader is now aware that dehumanisation has been part of black people during the time of apartheid. The author will share a story that occurred when he was attending high school. Philip shares the following story as the author recalls it. He tells of repeatedly being humiliated by white teachers at a technical school. He was brilliant but constantly being told that he was not college material. He was told to give up plans for college because, according to one teacher (who said) “You don’t have the background to make it in college. You are from Atteridgeville, poor township, and college life is more than just knowing how to read and write and do your work. You would never succeed in college, if you made it at all¹.” Phil was crushed by the reality that his diligent study and accomplishments had apparently meant nothing. The above words said by the teacher brought before him the real possibility of the same dead end future to which so many other black youngsters were relegated, which ends up discouraging them. The only way that saved him was sharing this study during worship service at the time of prayer request. Members of the church prayed for him, some encouraged him never to give up. After service his Sunday school teacher came to talk to him. She said Phil “I don’t care what they tell you, you are college material”. At that time Phil had begun to doubt himself, he reminded her of his tendency to stutter when faced with a problem. The Sunday school teacher responded by saying to him. “Moses had a speech problem.

¹ Story shared by Philip at Jonas Ledega Presbyterian Church during worship service, on a Sunday in 1970.

He put stones in his mouth to speak properly. God used him.... You go to college Phil.” The church also participated in helping him financially. The words: “Don’t let them tell you that you are not college material” stayed in his mind. One Sunday before going to college the preacher focused his sermon on Psalm 139 – “For it was you who formed me in ward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well” (Ps 139:13–14). This primary emphasis in the black church was to affirm Phil. It helped him to get to know God who is revealed in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as part of the creation of God. Phil became ever more assured that black people are neither a curse of God nor condemned by God. Lincoln actually said that “the Church should bring comfort and the security of God’s love and redemption into the hopelessness of object dereliction” (Lincoln 1999:38). The black church has always addressed problems faced by people within the community. Hence, Phil’s problems became part of the body of Christ. (emphasised by Billingsley 2000:19). The black church’s response was through prayer, preaching and singing within worship hour. Then action was taken in collecting money so that Phil could go to college. It always kept the human spirit alive and the presence of God became an assured consolation. This role of the black church and the worshipping congregation remains an essential one today; as well as how the worshipping congregation undertakes this role as part of its caring ministry. The church through its preacher reminded people (especially during apartheid times) that God is on the side of the oppressed. Cone says that “knowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming one with them, and participating in the goal of liberation” (Cone 1975:80). While Sölle says: “A society (community) is conceivable in which no person is left totally alone” (Sölle 1975:77). Back to Phil, he was not left alone in schools that sought to destroy his humanity.

Allen on the other side reminds us that preaching in a worshipping congregation “can also provide moments of reflection when members of this spiritual group can name what they experience with God through their action in the world” (Allen 2001:136). The above shows how a preacher can feed people of this spiritual stream by describing an action through which participants can draw closer to God. Sermons can encourage the community to continue in its Christian practices in the certainty that such practice will help the com-

munity make its way out of an empty spiritual valley, or manage the electricity that charges self and community. I like what Williamson says about preaching and worship. He says: "The honesty in the sermon (while worshipping) increases the bond between preacher and congregation as people identify with the preacher as a human being (Williamson 1998:87). A key to spiritual preaching is for the preacher to have a vital spiritual life. In order to have vital spiritual lives, preachers must identify their optimum modes of spirituality and engage in practices that are characteristic of those spiritualities. In short, preachers as caregivers must find patterns of practice that are most relevant to their spiritual insights. They must practice what they preach; this way opens up the community to work closer with preachers in order to address the pain and problems faced in the community. Robin and O' Donnel summarise the above concept of spirituality by saying that: "Preachers (care givers) with a spirituality of interpreting the divine presence and leading through sacred tradition and the practices of the common life had to find time to engage in the Christian practice of corporate worship and attending to the Bible and other texts with disclosive power" (Robin & O' Donnel 1990:106).

In addition to participating in worship each week, some ministers need to put devotional time on their calendars each day. Paul suggests to us that: "faith without action is nothing." Worship is not just happening on Sunday, but is a daily thing. That is why congregations embark on retreats and other kinds of ministry that seek to serve the community. The author's spirituality is refreshed through participation in worship in our congregation, and at the university where I teach, through Bible study classes that I attend. The above help me to participate in the community by shaping their values. Parker had this to say about the word preaching: "Regardless of the circumstances under which we encounter it, we seek to hear its word and to engage in conversation with it, and with others from tradition and contemporary life, to help the church discern God's continuing presence and purpose within the community" (Parker 1990:31).

As caregivers we are charged through our spirituality of interpreting the divine presence and leading people through action in life, in order to find opportunities through which to engage in actions that feed the self within the community. The author knows a pastor who found soul rejuvenation by interacting with township people in the afternoon at the coffee shop, listening to their problems, and sharing

in working with them to find solutions to their problems. Practice and caring within the community is an important part of ministry. Although preachers need to practice our particular spiritualities, we need to be careful not to make idols of our own approaches. We must find a spirituality that works for us. When we do we should not assume that it is a normative for everyone. We should also not forget that the plurality of kinds of people in the church and world (community) calls for a diversity of spirituality. As caregivers we must be aware of our leadership within the congregation, because we need to be aware of modes of spirituality other than those that we prefer, in order to be able to help people practice those modes. The above practice will help in lifting up people so that they can participate in the church as well as in the community. This way of working with congregations will help members to become attuned to the presence and purpose of God, which is central to the life of the pastor and the congregation. Remember that everything that happens in the congregation can contribute to (or frustrate) the community's spirituality. In conclusion a sermon should be able to interpret the spirituality of the community. As I participate in the sermon I then enrich my own spirituality.

5 CONCLUSION

Globalisation reminds us that we inhabit an ecumenical world. We can learn from other denominations, especially when we work ecumenically within the communities we seek to serve. As caregivers we need to be aware of modes of spirituality other than those that are exercised in our denominations. As we seek to serve we should avoid giving an impression that only our form of spirituality is normative. There are churches that feel they are better than others. A divided church cannot serve a community that is experiencing pain and oppression. People will feel out of place and drift away from a church that fails to address their issues.

We propose co-operative projects by churches in the contexts of poor communities in order to help them to help themselves. There are projects running in many towns and cities where the Uniting Reformed Church and the white Dutch Reformed Church are working together. This can be broadened into ecumenical actions in which the Presbyterian Church should be involved. In this way we approach the theological ideal of the *missio Dei*.

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