



*W.J. Schoeman*

---

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EXPLORATION OF CONGREGATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA: SEEKING SIGNIFICANCE

It is possible to ask questions and to do research about a wide variety of topics within the study field of practical theology. An important question would be about the relevance of these research questions and findings. What difference does it make to explore within this field of practical theological investigation? The aim of this introduction is to describe a framework for doing significant practical theological research, but also to seek significance within the field of congregational studies. The field of study within the discipline of practical theology evolved over the past fifty years. There was a move away from the “clerically dominated view of pastoral care and the consequent emphasis upon other ways in which the wider church engages with its social and political context” (Reader 2008:6). The movement became even broader to include a wide variety of faith practices, not only within a clerically dominated focus, but also the role and influence of religion and theology within society. In his presidential address to the International Academy of Practical Theology, Ganzevoort identified the object of practical theology as ranging from the ordained ministry and the church to culture and society at large (Ganzevoort 2009:e-source). The search for relevance is not only within the clerical paradigm, but also to seek a wider scope and research field in order to identify significance within practical theology and, specifically, congregational studies.

Significance could be viewed as a statistical concept that defines the relationship between concepts, to describe the probability that a certain parameter falls within the specified range (Babbie & Mouton 2001:476- 581). In this instance, the argument is not for statistical significance, as important as it may be in doing empirical research, but it is a quest for a wider

---

*Prof. W.J. Schoeman, Dept. Practical Theology, University of the Free State, South Africa. E-mail: [schoemanw@ufs.ac.za](mailto:schoemanw@ufs.ac.za)*

understanding of significance by seeking relevance or doing research that is making a difference within communities and society. “Most of the research produced through theses, dissertations, journal articles and books make very little difference in the world of scholarship for one common reason: the lack of significance” (Jansen 2011:139). The search is for a broader understanding of significance that makes a difference.

It may be assumed that all practical theological research should, by definition, be significant. Practical theology may be viewed, deductively, as the application of general Biblical principles within a certain situation, or it may be understood only as the learning of practical skills to do theology. These likely orientations may then lead to a very narrow understanding of the relevance of practical theology that lies within the application of texts or in the acquisition of certain skills. Taking the argument a little further, a congregation that is functioning within a survival mode or as a closed community may have hardly any or no relevance to its environment and surrounding community. The search for relevance and significance are, therefore, important questions to ask and could contribute to the relevance of practical theology and congregational studies, specifically.

Practical theology, as all theology should be, is practice oriented (Hermans 2014:126) or needs to be historical; this implies more than a good function or a few well-rehearsed skills. “The task of practical theology as an original science demands a *theological* analysis of the particular present situation in which the Church is to carry out the especial self-realisation appropriate to it at any given moment” (Rahner 1971:3). A practice and historical orientation, as a particular present situation, are thus important in the search for a significant and relevant practical theology.

Practical theology is a hermeneutical enterprise that works with both text and context (Ganzevoort 2009:e-source; Osmer 2008:20-23). The academic discipline of practical theology is both theological and practical. This highlights four concepts, namely theology and praxis as well as text and context.

- Theology and praxis

Theology is about doing theology and not only about studying theology. Studying is an essential academic activity to explore and excavate a tradition (De Gruchy 2014:38), but doing theology implies much more. It is “a committed engagement, a way of being, a passion, a contemporary and existential engagement with the gospel in the world of daily reality” (De Gruchy 2014:39). Does “practical” only refer to a field of study, or to a broader understanding of a way of doing theology within a certain context from a specific perspective? Praxis is about the actions and

meanings operant in the ways in which human beings live, interact and relate to the divine (Ganzevoort 2009e-source). *Praxis* is understood as the actions of individuals and groups in society, within and outside the church, who are willing to be inspired in their private and public lives by Christian tradition, and who want to focus on the salvation of humankind and the world (Heitink 1999:151). The congregational praxis is more than the ministry of the congregation, but could include, for example, the praxis of its members in society.

- Text and context

Text refers to the textual sources of the religious tradition (Ganzevoort 2009:e-souce). The emphasis should be on rediscovering and transforming the traditions within the specific context (De Gruchy 2014:45). It also concerns interacting with current context and rediscovering the voice of the tradition within the current context. The voice of the text and the context should be taken seriously.

The hermeneutical process within practical theology should enhance significance, from the perspective of both the text and the praxis. Significance refers to more than simply statistical significance. Is it, therefore, possible to describe significance from different perspectives, as markers within this hermeneutical process? At least three markers can be identified in this regard: theological significance, practical significance and contextual significance, it is necessary to describe each of these markers in more detail.

Seeking *theological significance*, not theological reflection, as an afterthought, but as part of an integrated process (Miller-McLemore 2012:24), not the final step in a case analysis. Osmer (2008:129) identifies in this regard the normative task of prophetic discernment of practical theology. “Discernment is the activity of seeking God’s guidance amid the circumstances, events, and decisions of life” (Osmer 2008:137). As indicated earlier, De Gruchy (2014:46) emphasises redefining traditions: “The danger is to control the tradition by selecting only those trajectories that support one’s argument.” Traditions stay alive through a conversation with the past, above all with the Scripture, about the meaning for the present.

As theology, practical theology is normative. It makes demands on those who practice it to live by the sacred and transcendent convictions it professes. Greater clarity about our theological and not just our practical contribution is one of our challenges but success in this realm will advance the discipline and its value for religious communities and the common good (Miller-McLemore 2012:25).

Texts and traditions should be taken seriously, within a specific context, in order to enhance theological significance.

Seeking *practical significance*, not as a form of “social science lite” (Osmer 2012:70), but to engage in a constructive way with faith practices of individuals and communities. The relationship between theological theory and ecclesiastical praxis is determined neither by a complete separation nor by an identification of the two, but by a bipolar tension-filled combination between theory and praxis (Heitink 1999:152). Practical significance is more than the ecclesial praxis or ministry of a congregation, but should also be understood as the practice of lived religion, “on what people do rather than on ‘official religion’ its sacred sources, its institutes, and its doctrines” (Ganzevoort & Roeland 2014:93). For congregational studies, practical significance would mean the study of the holistic ministry or praxis of the congregation, but also, in a broader sense, the fields of practices with which the congregation and its members engage.

*Contextual significance*: Is it possible to do any theology without a context? The answer should be negative if the hermeneutical process is taken seriously in doing practical theology. In reflecting on the context from a practical theological perspective, the work of the following two practical theologians may be used as examples:

- Browning (1991:8) described theology as a fundamental practical theology with four movements, namely “descriptive theology, historical theology, systematic theology and strategic practical theology”. The aim of a descriptive theology is “to describe the contemporary theory-laden practices that give rise to the practical questions that generate all theological reflection” (Browning 1991:47). Descriptive theology could be used to build a bridge between context and text, a movement between practice-theory-practice.
- Heitink worked with praxis 1 and praxis 2. Praxis 1 refers to the mediation of the Christian faith through communicative actions within different structures (for example, the church, school or family): “Practical theology studies how these processes take place, and how these structures can be adapted that there can be a real transmission of the Christian tradition” (Heitink 1999:8-9). Praxis 2 is about the praxis of the modern society, the domain or context of action (Heitink 1999:9). Praxis 2 is the backdrop for praxis 1 and congregations and their members participate through communicative actions in, and take responsibility for the development of society (Heitink 1999:168). Theology as a whole is involved in the relationship between praxis 1 and praxis 2, and congregations should mediate between praxis 1 and praxis 2.

Contextual (and, for the same reason, theological and practical) significance should take the African and in particular, the South African context very seriously. African geography, history and demography differ from that of the US and Europe. It is, therefore, imperative to seek the uniqueness of the African context. A contextual theology is biased towards the poor, and committed to the struggle against oppression of all kinds, and the struggle for liberation in all its dimensions (De Gruchy 2014:41). An emphasis on contextual significance may contribute to the development of a contextual theology.

In the study of congregations, it is important to identify significance as an important goal. Jansen (2011:145) identifies, maybe as a last marker, *theoretical significance* as important. Theoretical significance identifies anomalies or contradictions in existing theories, and strives to improve or extend current explanations of problems. “This is the gold standard for significance in social and scientific research: the yielding of new insights or discoveries as a result of the research” (Jansen 2011:146). Theoretical significance will remain a difficult marker, but an important goal.

A development in practical theology is that it wants to be transformational, not only to people, but also to the understanding and situation of the current context and world (Reader 2008:7). By striving for significance, congregational studies could contribute to the transformation of people and communities and thus remain relevant.

In this volume, the focus is on congregations, and raises the following question: What is significant practical theological research for congregational studies? The nine articles in this volume endeavour to answer this question from different perspectives. The following is a broad outline of the reasoning behind these nine articles.

*Research in practical theology as a broader theme is explored:* Different research strategies are discussed to do empirical research and interventions.

- The utility of practical theology: Mapping the domain, goals, strategies and criteria of practical theological research.
- Practice-oriented research in service of designing interventions.
- Survey research in practical theology and congregational studies.

*The study of congregations within South Africa:* The study field of congregational studies and guidelines for the development of a methodology for this context are discussed.

- Exploring the practical theological study of congregations.

- Empirical research and congregational analysis: Some methodological guidelines for the South African context.

*The study of congregations in the South African context using an empirical lens.* Different methodologies are used and three studies are examined from different angles, namely urban, rural and the virtual.

- Identity and community in South African congregations.
- Reasons for the migration of church members from one congregation to another.
- Leadership in rural congregations and communities – An exploration in the north-eastern Free State.
- An exploration of the use of technology by congregations.

Exploring practical theology and the study of congregations are a journey. The journey should be significant and transformational in order to be relevant to the context and its challenges. The nine articles seek, through a critical reflection, to contribute to new perspectives within the study field of congregations.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

BABBIE, E. & MOUTON, J.

2001. *The practice of social research*. South African ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BROWNING, D.S.

1991. *A fundamental practical theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

DE GRUCHY, J.W.

2014. *A theological odyssey. My life in writing*. Stellenbosch: Sun Press.

GANZEVOORT, R.R.

2009. *Forks in the road when tracing the sacred. Practical theology as hermeneutics of lived religion*. Presidential address to the ninth conference of the International Academy of Practical Theology, Chicago 2009. [Online.] Retrieved from: [http://www.ruardganzevoort.nl/pdf/2009\\_Presidential.pdf](http://www.ruardganzevoort.nl/pdf/2009_Presidential.pdf) [2015, 1 September].

GANZEVOORT, R.R. & ROELAND, J.

2014. Lived religion: The praxis of Practical Theology. *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18(1):91–101. [Online.] Retrieved from: <http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/ijpt.2014.18.issue-1/ijpt-2014-0007/ijpt-2014-0007.xml> [2015, 4 September].

HEITINK, G.

1999. *Practical theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

HERMANS, C.A.M.

2014. From practical theology to practice-oriented theology. *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18(1):113-126. [Online.] Retrieved from: <http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/ijpt.2014.18.issue-1/ijpt-2014-0009/ijpt-2014-0009.xml>. [2015, 3 March].

JANSEN, J.D.

2011. The quality of doctoral education in South Africa: A question of significance. *Perspectives in Education* 29(3):139-146.

OSMER, R.R.

2008. *Practical theology. An introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

2012. Toward a new story of practical theology. *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16(1):66-78. [Online.] Retrieved from: <http://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2012-0006> [2015, 3 March].

RAHNER, K.

1972. *Practical theology in the totality of the theological disciplines, theological investigations*. New York: Herder & Herder.

READER, J.

2008. *Reconstructing practical theology. The impact of globalization*. Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited.