

CONGREGATIONAL ANALYSIS REVISITED: EMPIRICAL APPROACHES

Author:

Malan Nel¹

Affiliation:

¹Centre for Contextual Ministry, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to:

Malan Nel

e-mail:

malan.nel@up.ac.za

Postal address:

Centre for Contextual Ministry, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, Lynnwood Road, 0083 Hatfield, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The research problem of concern here is: *What criteria should be used when congregations are analysed?* Congregations as faith communities are defined variously. Discerning the local congregation as a defined and as an empirical subject plays a major role in answering the research question. The theological points of departure are that any measure of a local congregation has to deal with issues like faithfulness to the gospel and the missional identity and integrity of the congregation as a contextual faith community. The hypothesis is that, when theologically informed and motivated, congregations can and should be analysed in the process of continuing reformation. This article describes a number of approaches to and outcomes of empirical research related to congregational analysis. Follow-up research to be submitted for publication will deal with the missional identity, the ministerial role-fulfilment of the congregation, and a proposal to analyse these in a way that is theologically faithful and contextually relevant.

INTRODUCTION

Congregations can reform

Congregations can be reformed and transformed. As Runia says:

What I mean, therefore, is a renewal of the church today, taking into full account the situation and the problems of this day and trying to find new ways to make the church again what it ought to be according to the New Testament.

(Runia 1986:277)

Or as Barna explains his reasons for writing yet another book on the church:

The last four years of my life have been especially devoted to agonised reflection on the state of the Church, the desires of God for His people, and the growing gap between those two. ... This book is a ... call for us to stop playing church and start being church by demonstrating the transformation that has occurred within us as a result of an absolute, paramount commitment to Jesus Christ. (cf. also his 1990 book with a similar plea.)

(Barna 1998:x)

Barna eventually calls it a 'major rehabilitation project. We're talking revolution!' (Barna 1998:197). Reformation is radical, as radical as the 16th-century reformation proved to be. Schaller (2005) calls it 'a mainline turnaround'. Guder (2000) calls it the 'continuing conversion of the church'.

What I have called reformation (Nel 2005:152) is now often called 'redevelopment'. Sellon, Smith and Grossman (2002:x-xii) distinguish between renewal, revitalisation and redevelopment. The sooner congregations realise that they are disconnected from their communities, the 'simpler the return to health':

When the bulk of the congregation's focus is still outward, we think of the shift back as church renewal Revitalization is what the journey is called when the church's disconnect with the surrounding community increases and the energy has turned more towards maintenance and preservation.... Redevelopment is what the journey is called when the congregation has fundamentally congealed. The church has now become primarily focussed on preserving the status quo.

(Sellon *et al.* 2002:xi)

These authors build on the concepts that Alice Mann had already used in 1999 (Mann 1999:10-12). She employed the so-called 'life cycle' diagram (which actually comes from Gallagher (1999), as acknowledged by Mann (1999:121).

When we are serious about the church being a creation of the Triune God, reformation and transformation are a given. It is an indicative: '*Gemeindeaufbau muss Trinitarisch konzipiert werden*' (Schwarz & Schwarz 1984:67). Guder and others (Guder 1998:5) rightly say that a 'Trinitarian point of entry into our theology of the church necessarily shifts all the accents in our ecclesiology.'

My understanding of building up missional¹ local churches is explained in previous publications (Nel 1994; 1998:26-37; 2005). The working formula I suggested for this approach, and from which this article departs, is:

Building up a missional local church is a ministry whereby the Triune God is at work and his congregation, under his care, is being trained and guided to:

- understand its own identity and reason for existence (a hermeneutical dimension);
- evaluate, as a motivated (identity understanding) body of believers, its own functioning, set itself goals for faithful ministry and reach those goals in a planned way (an agogical-teleological dimension);

¹ McLaren (2004:105) wrote that the 'term *missional* arose, thanks to the Gospel and Our Culture Network...It was popularized by the Network's important book called *The Missional Church*'. This is not factually correct. Callahan (1983:xii, 1-9) had already used the term by then. It is better to say that a missional, as alternative for missionary, theology developed, as pointed out by him. Missional thinking, named differently before, is much older and one should give credit to those scholars (see later in the second article). McLaren is correct to point out that Bosch and Leslie Newbigin 'began to convince people that...theology is actually a discipline within Christian mission. He is, to my mind, also correct in stating that the term *missional* reflects 'a kind of post-colonial embarrassment about the term *missionary*' (McLaren 2004:106).

- develop, as and if necessary, new structures to serve the plan of God (the coming of the Kingdom) in context (a morphological dimension) (cf. Nel 2005:17).

Returning the ministry

Building up local churches is a process of returning the ministry to God's people. Ogden (1990:29–55) uses this phrase as part of the title of his book and discusses the congregation as an organism and, what he calls, the 'institutional entrapment of the church'. To emphasise the local congregation as a living organism does not imply underestimating those who are called to be pastors, elders, deacons in local churches, or of the congregation as part of an institution. It is about the whole congregation (including its service leaders) reforming to be who God has planned them to be and do what He has created them for. In a recent article, Dekker and Harinck (2007:86–98) drew comparisons between Kuyper and Bonhoeffer with reference to their understanding of the church as both organism and institute: 'The institute is the form and is temporal, the organism is the essence and is eternal...The Institute serves the organism, and as such is only instrumental' (Dekker & Harinck 2007:91; Kuyper 1908:215). They continue and quote Bonhoeffer (1999:84): 'the church is nothing other than that part of humanity in which Christ has truly taken form'. They both emphasised, even then, what we now consider as basic to our ecclesiology of mission in this field.

Research question and hypothesis

The above approach to reformation implies change. Change, as reforming towards the will of God, has always been a problem for congregations. But one can only use the concept reformed (past tense) once you have changed and are reforming.

Change is not easy. It requires sacrifice and courage, letting go of the comfortable and familiar and predictable for some higher purpose, some greater cause. Change is painful. Change will inevitably, of course, come upon us all whether we like it or not. The question is: Can we survive it, maybe even learn to welcome it and thrive on it as a gift from God?

(Chesnut 2000:4)

Churches often shy away from change. Some openly resist it. Ammermann (1987:63) pointed out that 'at every stage of the process, the weight of habit and tradition maintain familiar patterns. Those familiar patterns often blind congregations to the change in the first place.' This is the reason for my strong emphasis on motivation and unfreezing as first and continuous phase in building up missional local churches (Nel 2005:149–175).

Congregations are being analysed anyway. People have 'opinions' of how it is going and talk about it. These untested opinions are often used by members and non-members as 'empirical' perceptions. Toler and Nelson (1999:139–160) make the point that it is just normal for people to ask the same questions of churches that they ask of business, and, in these authors' case, a local five-star hotel. People who know, love and serve the Lord may be different but those we serve in ministry are not necessarily different yet. 'People judge churches the same way they judge restaurants.' Is it right or wrong for them to do so? No matter, it is just an empirical fact. The hotel manager in the story compares measuring a congregation to 'fruit inspecting' (Toler & Nelson 1999:140). The director of ministry development replies that this is why their worship folder carries the saying: 'we count people because people count' (Toler & Nelson 1999:145).

This article will argue in favour of a theologically informed motivation for analysis and what Carroll (2002:back cover), in a brief review of the book by Woolever and Bruce (2002), called a 'data-driven decision-making in the church'. Schaller (2002:back cover), in his recommendation of the same book, asks: 'Are the decisions in your congregation based on opinions, hunches, and traditions? If you want to add a data-based approach to that process, read this book.'

Some may even ask: Should congregations be analysed at all? Are they so different as 'communities of faith' (Ammermann 2005:1) that generally accepted codes for analysing performance do not apply? If not, what does apply when analysing congregations?

The research question in this article (the first of two) is how congregational analysis can be approached in a practical and theologically faithful and scientific way?

The hypothesis that informs this article is that congregational analysis not only can be done, but should be done. However:

- the theological identity of congregations impacts and, in more than one way, determines when and how they are analysed;
- the theological and empirical identity of congregations informs the need for and the content of the analysis (approach, methods and content);
- the theological and empirical identity determines the kind of process and the outcomes of the analysis (strategies).

Approach

The approach in this article is descriptive. The focus is on some well-known researchers, how they have approached surveys and their findings. Reference will also be made to some other useful material. Follow-up research will deal with a few theological and ecclesiological markers, the essence of ministerial role-fulfilment. It will conclude with a specific suggestion for a theologically informed approach to congregational analysis as an analysis of ministries. This will be argued for against the backdrop of the empirical approaches below.

EMPIRICAL APPROACHES AND FINDINGS

Analysing congregations is not a new occurrence. The Bible contains many reports on the 'state of the nation/church'. The prophets were good at this (cf. Is 58; Ezk 16). John's analysis of the seven churches in Asia-Minor (Rv 2, 3) is another example. The sixteenth-century Reformers did so, too (cf. Neuner 1994; 1995). In the latter part of the previous century, this kind of research mainly became much more prominent.

Project: Congregational Studies

The beginning

The project for Congregational Studies was started in 1984. The reason for introducing this was the absence of sound guidance for analysing the congregation. James Hopewell (1984:Preface), on behalf of the Project team (people like Jackson Carroll, Carl Dudley, William McKinney, Loren Mead and Barbara Wheeler), wrote: 'programs for our parish exist in abundance, but methods for analyzing our parish are hard to find.' The book contains 131 questionnaires related to the four objects of inquiry: The church in context; organisation and programme; interpersonal relations and corporate process; and identity (Hopewell 1984:Preface). This book was the forerunner to the Handbook for Congregational Studies (1986).

Even earlier, the Lutherans in the USA struggled with the same issues. In 1977, Reumann edited a volume under the title *The Church Emerging (A US Lutheran Case Study)*. A member of the committee suggested that the title should be 'Traditions in Transition' (Reumann 1977:27). In the introduction Reumann (1977:1–27) explains that the book is about 'identifying the church of Jesus Christ in a time of change'. Questions that are asked involve: By what are we identified? How would the world know who, why and what we are? In their case, the Lutherans argue for a church recognisable as serving the whole human being (Reumann 1977:5).

Different disciplines involved

Carroll, Dudley and McKinney (1986:9) agreed that 'anthropology, social psychology, sociology, theology, and organizational development' provided different perspectives for approaching congregational analysis. They preferred a 'more



natural and holistic approach [as] desirable'. Their research drew upon four case studies and they eventually discerned (1986:15–21) 'four dimensions of congregations', using this to help formulate the problem(s) that might exist and need to be studied (from there the term congregational studies). The order in which they discuss the four 'dimensions' and add possibilities for analysing them is: identity, context, process and programme. Cameron and others (2005:13–18) also studied congregations, taking the same four disciplines (as above) into account. As early as 1983, Dudley already edited a book that dealt with such 'multidisciplinary approaches' (Dudley 1983:155–210). The rapid changes 'shocked' congregations into the realisation that they were dealing with new realities and that such an approach was needed.

Empirical approach in congregational research

A good example supporting the case for intensive research is Ammermann *et al.*'s (1997) investigation of a number of communities and 23 congregations, which was started in 1992. The research team identified nine communities going through three kinds of change: cultural, economic and social/structural. These changes concerned communities with gay and lesbian enclaves, with immigrant populations, and with an integrated liberal enclave, who were experiencing economic distress, changing economic realities for African Americans, and transformation by suburbanisation (Ammermann *et al.* 1997:5–34). Two congregations in each of these communities, together with five more, were identified and a total of 23 congregations were analysed over a period of six months and more. Such research is of great help in determining trends which can be used to set up instruments whereby other congregations can be helped in diagnosing where they are and how they are managing. Ammermann (1997:1) departs from the standpoint, which is equally true in the Southern African scenario, that one of the most 'enduring features of the American landscape is the steeple, a landmark signalling the presence of a congregation'. In countries with no 'state-religion', there is no guarantee that this will remain so and 'outmoded religious institutions' (Ammermann *et al.* 1997:2) will not survive. The

social processes of community formation (will) govern the rise and fall of congregations, and the spiritual energies generated in congregations (will) help to shape the social structures of communities.

(Ammerman *et al.* 1997:2)

Ammermann *et al.* (1997) found that congregations do not change because it makes sense to change. It is not a rational process at first. It does not even happen in other kinds of institutions. 'At every stage of the process, the weight of habit and tradition maintain familiar patterns. Those familiar patterns often blind the congregations to the change in the first place' (Ammermann *et al.* 1997:63).

Research such as this is invaluable in rethinking congregational analysis. It offers a good example of both quantitative and qualitative research. The 'focus questions' for reviews are documented in Appendix A (Ammermann *et al.* 1997:371–376) and the congregational survey in Appendix B (Ammermann *et al.* 1997:377–380).

Carroll (2000), as a member of the Congregational Study Team, entered the debate on a more philosophical and sociological level. He tries to identify the 'why' – the reasons for the diverse church scene – in what he calls a 'posttraditional society'. He summarises his reflections in listing 'the dominant characteristics of these congregations [and their] posttraditional ecclesial style' (Carroll 2000:51–52): their large size in contrast to the majority of traditional Protestant congregations; a willingness to leapfrog centuries of tradition, of theological conservatism without being fundamentalist; the lack of formal denominational ties; strong entrepreneurial leadership; intentionality of purpose; commitment to lead constituents to 'Fully Devoted Followers of Christ'; buildings that lack the look and feel of traditional

churches; avoidance of most traditional and classical forms of church music; informal style of dress; low-key, non-demanding, professionally conducted worship services; heavy reliance on small-group ministry; opportunities for members to become involved in outreach ministries; high commitment expectations for those who become members.

Carroll then goes on to ask:

Can those who lead or are members of traditional congregations (or who, like myself, teach in theological seminaries) learn from these innovators without swallowing the whole cake?... I cited some words from Karl Barth, including his observation that there has never been an "intrinsically sacred sociology [of the church]..." I am fairly certain that Barth would not have approved of many of the strategies of action that I have described. I believe, however, that he would have applauded the intent of finding new ways of fulfilling the church's calling to be the people of God in the world.

(Carroll 2000:53)

Carroll (2000:76–101) eventually does reflect on what we can learn from 'posttraditional congregations' – what we should we look for in faithful congregations:

- The primary 'lesson' is exercising freedom in our development of ecclesial practices – faithful to both the gospel and social and cultural challenges of the society. This asks for 'a process of reflective discernment' (Carroll 2000:81);
- The critical importance of leadership which is 'innovative, entrepreneurial leadership that often exhibits reflexivity' (Carroll 2000:82);
- The focus on the needs of members and potential members;
- The focus on effective small-group ministry as one of many ecclesial practices;
- The value of seriousness about Christian beliefs and practices and seriousness as a 'commitment to excellence' (Carroll 2000:96): 'They practice seriousness, not strictness, about the faith and about the congregation's life and ministry' (Carroll 2000:101).

Change and assessment

Dudley and Ammermann (2002) developed their book on the premise of the vital importance of congregations: 'Because we are convinced that congregations are critical to the well-being of individual faithful people and to the well-being of our communities, we want congregations to thrive' (2002:1). Change, however, is the challenge. It is common knowledge that everyone and almost everything are changing:

individual lives are a constant litany of change...the neat match of neighborhood, members, programs that existed (at least in hallowed memory) a few years ago are gone today – and what exists today will be gone in a few more years.

(Dudley & Ammermann 2002:2)

It is this challenge to congregations that makes revisiting the assessment of local faith communities a continuing reality and necessity. In Southern Africa, as in many other parts of the church world, some (many?) congregations are suffering. This point cannot be argued in this article. Denominational offices should be able to supply any reader within his or her own denomination with figures as to the 'state of the church'.²

Others who were not directly part of the Congregational Studies Team pointed to this, too. Campolo (1995:3–94), in his diagnosis of the situation of denominations, refers to issues like the loss of children (Campolo 1995:3–12), the cultural lag (26–32), the challenge of TV (33–47), the culture of narcissism (48–64) and the culture wars (65–87). Many local congregations can probably

2. For good examples of a more qualitative description of a denomination and a 'group' overlapping denominations, cf. Ammermann's (1993) book, *Southern Baptists Observed*, and her 1987 book on fundamentalists.

identify with these signs of the times. It is an empirical reality that communities have changed and are changing fast. The 'good old church days' are indeed a 'hallowed memory' in many parts of our world. 'Discerning minds know that we're in trouble... serious trouble' (Swindoll in Getz 1994:vii). Kuen (1971:283) wrote: 'Everything that bears the name church is at present passing through one of the most serious crises in history, at least in Europe'. Dekker (2000:19, 36–37) also calls the situation in Europe a crisis. As to the crisis in ministry among leaders, one only has to read the outcome of extensive research among clergy as published by Carroll. More than one of the reasons given for unhappiness and dissatisfaction in ministry had to do with stress and pastoral role issues related to the state of the local church (Carroll 2006:159–187). To this can be added what Gibbs (1994:57) had already called the 'growing nominality problem' observed in so many churches.

Once congregations know they need to change, they need some tools. Assessment can no longer be escaped. Dudley and Ammermann stated:

We believe that change has more to do with the imagination of the church's members than with programs, so the strategies we present are designed to incorporate both feelings and facts.
(Dudley & Ammermann 2002:11)

Ultimately this is about cultivating a new culture that will require 'basic congregational habits and practices to help members assimilate new cultural patterns and perspectives'.

Congregations and their important role

What the church does and can do, is and can become, takes priority in congregational analysis. Not many, however, think seriously about the role of the congregation as an agent for change in society. Ammermann noted that

ironically, many theologians were no more interested in local congregational life than were most social scientists. Arguing that the true task of God's children was to change the world, they wrote off staid organizations like local congregations as irrelevant at best.

(Ammermann 2005:1)

Ammermann (2005:3) states that her book is 'about that collective religious activity, both as it shapes the individuals who participate in it and as it enters the wider social world.' If religion is important in public and private life (between 25 and 40% attend worship on any given Sunday (Gallup & Lindsay (1999), and

if congregations are at the heart of distinctive religious experience... it seems advisable to know about just what it is they are doing and how it is possible for them to do it.

(Ammermann 2005:3)

Lyle E. Schaller 'A leading interpreter'

Schaller is often referred to as 'the country's leading interpreter of congregational systems and their vitality' (Schaller 2003: back cover). Since 1965 he has authored at least 63 books. Schaller summarises his work as:

a few slices of wisdom, insights, and lessons that have been earned and learned in the past several years. They have been drawn from my working directly on their turf with approximately 4,000 congregations over a period of four decades, from 1960 to 2000. This optimist hopes that these illustrations will be of help to congregational leaders, both lay and ordained, to be more faithful and more effective in leading their church in the path God has chosen for that particular called out community.

(Schaller 2001:15)

Schaller offered his first set of questions to help local churches discern whether they were active or passive (Schaller 1981:66–70). He is a 'parish consultant' (Schaller 1997:15). Having worked with sixty different religious traditions, he 'gradually came to

ten major overlapping conclusions about congregational life in North America'. Number ten of the 'overlapping conclusions', which has become the central theme of this book, is 'that the most effective way to influence both individual and institutional behavior is to ask questions' (Schaller 1997:11).

Ten 1997 conclusions

Because of the central importance of his empirical approach, I quote, briefly, the ten conclusions (Schaller 1997:11–15):

1. The role of the pastor is a far more difficult and challenging assignment than in the 1950s;
2. Long-established religious institutions closely resemble other institutions in culture;
3. The most serious shortage in our society is for skilled transformational leaders who possess the capability to initiate planned change from within an organisation;
4. In a rapidly changing societal and ecclesiastical context, most religious institutions face a difficult choice. They can either adapt or be perceived as irrelevant by a growing number of the population. The first requires a high level of skill in planned change that is initiated from within the congregation;
5. Societal changes surfaced earlier in Canada than in the United States (he gives several examples which are less relevant to this article);
6. The differences among congregations are becoming greater with the passage of time. 'The safe assumption today is no two are alike' (p. 13);
7. One of the most promising developments of recent decades is the emergence of the trained career-intentional interim minister;
8. The erosion of inherited denominational loyalties, and the accompanying decline in the influence of denominational systems, has underscored the importance of that word outside when a congregation seeks an outside third party to intervene;
9. Congregations, like other institutions (stores, etc.), are larger than in the middle of the previous century: 'The average (mean) size of a congregation today is three times what it was in the 1900s' (p. 15);
10. Number ten, already referred to, is that 'the most effective way to influence both individual and institutional behavior is to ask questions' (p. 15).

Expanding the questions

Schaller's 1998 publication was written to 'expand the number and variety of questions to be asked in the self-appraisal process in congregations' (Schaller 1998:13). He divided the 350,000 to 400,000 congregations in the United States into three groups:

- About 75% who wanted to become more intentional and 'display[ed] varying degrees of interest in planning for a new era in their history...' (p. 11);
- Another about 15 to 20% who organised their 'self-evaluation process around seven questions.....highly informal and ... not part of a larger design to become more intentional in ministry' (p. 12). The seven questions, among others, are: 'Do we have enough money to pay all our bills? Is our membership going up or down? Is worship attendance up or down? How many are we sending away for others to do missions on our behalf?';
- A remaining 5 to 10% at the other end of the ecclesial spectrum, which he calls

Kingdom-building churches... Their self-appraisal questions focus on transforming the lives of people, not on institutional concerns. Evangelism and missions, rather than real estate and money, drive the decisions that allocate scarce resources.

(Schaller 1998:13)

He (like Callahan 1983 & 1987:xii) points out how easily 'means-to-an-end' questions (like real estate, staffing, money, schedules and programmes) float to the top of the agenda. He places them in the sixth chapter, so that may not dominate the self-appraisal



process; they 'can be discussed more intelligently if they are not even raised until the fundamental questions on identity, purpose, role, and call have been resolved' (Schaller 1998:16).

Many of the questions have to do with what I have called (Nel 2005:158,178) a congregational profile, which, to my mind, is part of congregational analysis but not necessarily part of the real functional analysis. Schwarz & Schalk (1998:10) also call this analysis a 'church profile'.

'Giving birth to the new'

Schaller adds to the discussion of the views of pessimists and optimists (he himself being an optimist (Schaller 2001:1)) by adding another perspective:

This perspective declares that the most important line of demarcation is between those committed to perpetuating old institutions, old systems, and the old ways of 'how to do church' and those creative and entrepreneurial individuals who prefer to focus on giving birth to the new.

(Schaller 2003:11–20)

He points out how many parish pastors and members alike have opted for the second and, in spite of some failures, are enjoying the new, 'often in nondenominational missions'. Why then write a book 'on renewing the old? Why not write a book on inventing the new?' (Schaller 2003:14). His answer to this is important to my research problem:

Dozens of excellent books have been written on that topic; "a few million of us have such a deep loyalty to our own religious tradition that we cannot abandon it for greener pastures" (p. 14); "most of us believe that our denomination is filled with a quantity of assets" (p. 14) ("each one of the seven largest of what often are lumped together as 'the old mainline Protestant denominations in America' is larger in members and worshippers than 90% of all organized religious bodies in the United States that have a national headquarter. Each one represents a huge quantity of accumulated resources") (pp. 14–15); "Most influential, the Christian faith is a religion that generates hope among believers. If the only real problem is a dysfunctional system, why not redesign the system?" (p. 15); "A fifth reason for this book is to advocate a relatively easy approach to planned change initiated from within an organization" (p. 15).

(Schaller 2003:14–15)

This is in total contrast to Bill Easum (2008:89–98) who predicts that 'balance plus status quo equals decline and eventually death.

Strategy based on three paradigm shifts

Schaller (2003:15–20) declares that the strategy he suggests is based on three paradigm shifts, which is also not new but a restatement of the old:

- Congregations should be 'free to choose their affiliation with a midlevel judiciary on the basis of affinity, not geography' (p. 15). This means that denominations should open the door for nongeographical and nondenominational networks based on what 'they have in common' in ministering in their context;
- A switch in how we approach learning: from a teacher-student, leader-follower paradigm to 'a more productive peer-learning experience' (p. 16);
- A different response to the

erosion of institutional loyalties, the replacement of neighborhood institutions by larger regional institutions, and the hazards that go with building the public image of any organization around the personality and gifts of a particular individual. Therefor instead of building the public image of a congregation around real estate or denominational label or social class of the members or the pastor, this book recommends building that community image around that congregation's distinctive role in ministry.

(Schaller 2003:17)

Schaller (2003:17–20) argues in favour of the renewal of denominational systems, not because of tradition but because of the 'interdependence of congregations' (which he offers as Biblical) and because 'denominations can provide a healthy and challenging structure for expressing that interdependence' (cf. Schaller 2005:42–45 for a questionnaire for a denominational 'spot check').

**Kennon L. Callahan
Assisting churches in planning**

When Callahan (1983; 1997) published his first book, he did so 'to assist churches in their strategic long-range planning to be effective churches in mission' (1983:Preface). He wrote the book after having served as 'planning consultant' for over twenty-three years "with over seven hundred and fifty churches across the country. I have also been acquainted with the work of several thousand other churches in a wide range of denominations" (Callahan 1983:xii). Only four years later, after having consulted in another 250 churches, he published the planning workbook (1987; 1990; 1997) and the Leaders' guide (Callahan 1987; not to be confused with the Study guide (Callahan 1992). In a sense, all his books (about 14 in total) build on the 1983 publication. He wrote (Callahan 1983:xii) that 'over these years of research and consultation, twelve factors have emerged persistently as the central characteristics of successful missional churches'. (Note his word missional in 1983, long before the current popular use of the word. Keifert (2006:21, 36) talks about 'a new missional era' without any recognition of Callahan, besides a negative remark that might imply Callahan.) Apart from enabling an understanding of what is meant with the central characteristics as they have presented themselves in these churches, the purpose of the book is, firstly, to:

...deliver a general understanding of strategic long-range planning. Effective long-range planning will help a local congregation to achieve mission and success. It includes three important dynamics that enable a church to move forward. Effective long-range planning is diagnostic in its focus; is strategic in its decisions. Discussion and study are the modest prelude to major decisions; is hopeful – responsibly and courageously.

(Callahan 1983:xi)

In his explanation (Callahan 1983:xi–xii) of what he means with 'diagnostic' he contrasts it strongly with a 'data-collection' approach which is so often enslaving and paralysing churches. What he means has since been called by Schaller a 'data-based approach' (Woolever 2002:back page recommendation). Woolever and Bruce (2002:7) themselves refer to 'a case for data-driven decisions'.

Twelve characteristics

The twelve characteristics he discovered to be central to missional effectiveness are:

Relational characteristics

- Specific, concrete missional objectives;
- Pastoral and lay visitation in the community;
- Corporate, dynamic worship;
- Significant relational groups;
- Strong leadership resources;
- Streamlined structure and solid, participatory decision making.

Functional characteristics

- Several competent programmes and activities;
- Open accessibility;
- High visibility;
- Adequate parking, land and landscaping;
- Adequate space and facilities;
- Solid financial resources.

Relational and functional

The distinction concerning the two categories in the twelve characteristics is vital: six are relational and six are functional

(Callahan 1983:xii–xv). Callahan discovered that effective missional churches

have nine of these twelve characteristics. Moreover the majority of the nine are relational rather than functional. Tragically too many churches have concentrated on the functional than the relational factors that contribute to mission and success.

(Callahan 1983:xii)

He employs the concepts satisfaction and dissatisfaction to explain the importance of this distinction. The central relational characteristics are the

key sources of satisfaction and well-being in a given congregation; the more these relational characteristics are present, the higher the level of satisfaction. Likewise, the more the functional characteristics are present, the lower the level of dissatisfaction in a congregation.

(Callahan 1983:xiv)

Callahan to my mind correctly points out that

to lower the level of dissatisfaction does not raise the level of satisfaction. To raise the level of satisfaction does not lower the level of dissatisfaction. The only correlation – if one exists – is that the level of satisfaction needs to be higher than the level of dissatisfaction in order for the congregation to have a sense of confidence and competence about its mission (they) have a stronger sense of intentionality and well-being in their life in mission.

(Callahan, 1983:xiv)

He continues by drawing attention to the fact that many pastors have focussed more on lowering the level of dissatisfaction in the churches they serve – probably misunderstanding that in doing so they will not necessarily raise the level of satisfaction. With relation to my research in these two articles, the four reasons he offers (Callahan 1983:xiv–xv) for this phenomenon are important:

- As supporting, giving, caring persons, pastors are ‘more attuned to the level of dissatisfaction around them than to the level of satisfaction’;
- many of these pastors have been trained in ‘an insidious action-reflection, responsive approach to ministry. Hence they react to signals of dissatisfaction rather than acting with strategic long-range planning to raise the level of satisfaction’;
- they are prone to ‘quick closure...they move to relieve dissatisfaction and low-level pain’;
- ‘For many pastors, their commitment and guilt dynamics influence them to work harder, not smarter. They therefore preoccupy themselves with the symptoms of dissatisfaction rather than thoughtfully planning and moving forward to put in place string sources of satisfaction’. (He thinks that the move from congregation to congregation may have to do with this preoccupation; once the dissatisfaction is at least temporarily ‘removed’, like through having facilities which the pastor helped them build, most leave within the next year.)

Strategic planning

Callahan’s three remarks on how he views long-range planning as strategic sheds further light on his approach.

The strategic questions for successful long-range planning are:

- *What are our present foundational strengths, given by God?*
- *How can these strengths be expanded to serve God’s mission more effectively?*
- *Which foundational strengths can be added, that we might more successfully serve God’s mission?*

(Callahan 1983:xvi)

His understanding of strengths is that they are givens, gifts and graces from God:

Substantial power is generated as a congregation discovers and claims its strengths: power for the future is found in claiming our

strengths, not in focusing on our weaknesses and shortcomings ...they are present precisely because God has enabled His people to develop them....A church that decides to claim its strengths affirms that the power of God has been at work in the congregation.

(Callahan 1983:xv)

Rendel and Mann (2003) refer to this in the title of their book ‘Strategic planning as a spiritual practice for congregations’. I think this is what Keifert (2006) also wants to communicate through the subtitle of his book as *A Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery*. In Callahan’s (1983:xix) own understanding, long-range planning (as explained above) is a ministry of hope, ‘God-given hope that is (1) responsible and realistic, (2) courageous and compassionate, and (3) prayerful and powerful’. This golden thread runs through all of his work.

Radical missional thinking

Callahan’s radical missional thinking is expressed best (to my mind) in his 1990 publication. A few of his typical phrases (almost slogans) (Callahan 1990:3–23) sum it up:

- ‘Leadership is about life; life is about leadership’ (p. xiv);
- ‘The day of the professional minister is over. The day for the missionary pastor has come’. (He argues in favour of ministry as a profession, but not for professional ministers behaving as if qualifications, status in society, etc. are what it is about.) It is about being called to ministry:

the ministry as profession will continue to have all the marks of a professional craft or trade. The ministry as profession will continue. The professional minister, however, is finished. That is not to say the professional minister will disappear. Some ...will simply continue in their present understanding of leadership with its behavior patterns, values, and objectives until they retire. Some will “find work” as the thoughtful, polite, undertaker of stable and declining or dying churches.

(Callahan 1990:12)

- ‘For the professional minister, the understanding of the nature of leadership is inside the community of faith’ (p. 8; cf. how this ties in with what Aleshire (2008:44–46) writes about the professional understanding of ministry and leadership as ‘a function of community’);
- churches of their own initiative, the understanding of the nature of leadership could focus inside the church’ (p. 9);
- ‘The day of the church culture is over. The day of the mission field has come’ (p. 13);
- ‘The church is called to mission for the integrity of mission, not for the sake of church growth’ (p. 19);
- The day of the local church is over (in the sense of church culture MN). ‘The day of the mission outpost has come’ (p. 22).

A Callahan analysis

I have described in rather full detail (Nel 1994:173–180, 2005:205–213) how a Callahan analysis can be done. I have led more than one hundred such analyses in congregations in four denominations in South Africa since 1991. I am convinced that this analysis has merit if, and once, one understands Callahan’s radical missional thinking. It will continue to help local churches who realise their missional identity to become even more effective in mission, as a ‘mission outpost’ (Callahan 1990:22).

Christian A. Schwarz

From *Theologie des Gemeindeaufbau* to Natural Church Development Christian A. Schwarz wrote his first book (Schwarz & Schwarz 1984) as co-author with his father, Fritz Schwarz. It, most probably, was the first real attempt at giving an academic account of what they called *Theologie des Gemeindeaufbaus*. His father died soon after the book was published and he had to face the criticism on what was perceived as an attack on the *Volkskirche* in Germany on his own. With his father, he had argued that *Gemeindeaufbau* has to do with building the *ekklesia* and that the *Kirche* can no longer be reformed (my interpretation



of the argument and of the critique afterwards, cf. Nel 2005:248–249). A whole volume of articles was published as a response to the book (cf. Weth 1986). Schwarz's next large volume (1993) was not just an answer to the critique but also a further development of his understanding of church. This book was published in 1999 under the English title *Paradigm shift in the church: How natural Church Development can transform theological thinking*. In it he tries to distance himself from a Church Growth approach that is tied up in 'numerical growth'. He states that the Church Growth movement had been great in building bridges, but did not pay enough attention to fundamental theological questions (Schwarz 1999:9), and quoted Herbst (1987:265), who said: 'The church growth movement cannot permanently be spared a controlled doctrinal reflection on these questions' (ecclesiological and theological MN). Schwarz (1999:9) then continues, saying that he tries 'to link church development with some of the *loci classici* of the systematic discussion'. Trying to hold on to the 2000-year history of the church, he states: 'I am convinced – as I hope the following pages will make plain – that we will make no significant progress without changes as radical as those of the Reformation' (Schwarz 1999:11).

Why Natural Church Development?

Schwarz (1996:6–8) states that 'this book is based on a different approach to church growth. In my institute we have chosen to call it "natural", or "biotic" church development'. This is in 'contrast' to what he, in the previous paragraph, called 'technocratic church growth' – as I understand it, a very methodological approach to making the church grow.

Why call our approach 'natural church development'? Natural means learning from nature. Learning from nature means learning from God's creation. And learning from God's creation means learning from God the Creator.

(Schwarz 1996:8)

He admits that he opens himself up to being accused of *theologia naturalis*. Here, however we are dealing with *principles of church growth*, not with questions about the character of God. It seems to me that in this context, learning from creation is not only legitimate, it is a must. He refers to this 'natural' approach' as 'automatisms' (Schwarz 1996:7). Later (Schwarz 1996:12–13) he calls it the 'all-by-itself-principle' and defines it as 'releasing the *growth automatisms* by which God Himself grows His church'. How responsible this distinction is, is indeed debatable. My confession (and his), that the church and its building up is a Trinitarian concept, does not leave much room for anything natural or automatic (cf. Schwarz & Schwarz 1984:67).

'An alternative paradigm'

Natural Church Development 'views itself as an alternative paradigm of church growth' (Schwarz & Schalk 1998:8). As such, it is based on very solid empirical research. Schwarz (1996:13) states that he 'discovered the principles of natural church development from three different sources:

- empirical research...
- observing nature...
- studying Scripture'.

He continues to explain that

the major differences between natural church development and other church growth concepts can be expressed in three main points:

Natural church development

- *rejects merely pragmatic and a-theological approaches and replaces them with a principle-oriented point of departure*
- *has no quantitative approach..., but looks at the quality of church life as the key to church development (also cf. his chapter on "why quantitative growth goals are inadequate" (p. 44–45)*
- *does not attempt to "make" church growth, but to "release the growth automatisms, with which God Himself builds the church.*

(Schwarz 1996:13–14)

Universally applicable church growth principles?

'How does one discover universally applicable church growth principles? ... There really is only one way ... scientific sound research of churches around the world' (Schwarz 1996:18). It was this realisation that gave birth to a 'comprehensive research project' (Schwarz 1996:18).

Churches from 32 countries participated (1 000 churches on six continents). The survey questionnaire, which was completed by 30 members from each participating church, was translated into 18 languages. In the end, we faced the task of analyzing 4.2 million responses.

(Schwarz 1996:18)

The project was coordinated by Christoph Schalk, a social scientist and psychologist.

This project is actually the fifth stage in a series of research projects begun ten years ago in German-speaking Europe. ...To my knowledge, our research provides the first worldwide scientifically verifiable answer to the question, "What church growth principles are true, regardless of culture and theological persuasion?"

(Schwarz 1996:19)

The research eventually defined four categories of churches in relation to quality (high or low) and growth (quantitative growth and decline). The eight 'quality characteristics' generalised from the data are listed in the 'Knowledge alone does not do it' section below.

An interplay of elements

An important finding was that:

There is no one single factor that leads to growth in churches; it is the interplay of all eight elements. No church wanting to grow qualitatively and quantitatively can afford to overlook any one of these quality characteristics.

(Schwarz 1996:38)

Based on their comprehensive research, [they] were for the first time able to empirically prove the following three theses:

- *The difference between growing and declining churches in all eight quality areas are highly significant...growing churches have – on the average – measurably higher quality.*
- *There are exceptions to this rule: churches which grow numerically, but have a below-average quality index. Quantitative growth is apparently attainable by methods other than the development of the eight quality factors.*
- *There is one rule, however, for which we did not find a single exception among the 1000 churches surveyed. Every church in which a quality index of 65 or more was reached for each of the eight quality characteristics, is a growing church. This is perhaps the most spectacular discovery of our survey.*

(Schwarz 1996:38).

Minimum factor

Schwarz (1996:49–58, and again in 1998:26–28, 38) focuses on the strengths of the congregation, but at the same time makes much of what he calls the 'minimum factor' (1996:49). This is an expression that was also used in this field by Te Velde (1992:71–73; cf. Schwarz 1991; Nel 1994; 2005:12). While the focus is on 'strengths and weaknesses' (Schwarz 1998: subtitle of book), the minimum factor plays an important role in his approach. The minimum strategy assumes that the growth of a church is blocked by the quality characteristic that is least developed. If a church focuses its energy primarily on these minimum factors, this alone can lead to further growth (Schwarz 1996:50).

His image of the barrel to illustrate the importance of this concept in the approach is well known: 'The shortest stave determines the amount of water the barrel can hold' (Schwarz 1996:53).

Measuring instrument

Eventually a measuring instrument (questionnaire) was

developed. In using this instrument, a pastor (a separate one) and 30 members are asked to complete the questionnaire (Schwarz 1998:12–13). Trained consultants help with this process and names and addresses of such consultants are provided with the questionnaires. The completed questionnaires can be returned to the organisation, consultant or trainer. Congregations can also buy the software (CORE) when they attend a Natural Church Development Basic Training event (Schwarz 1998:13).

Part 5 of the 1996 book (Schwarz 1996:103–125) provides the reader with ‘ten action steps’ for introducing the four building blocks into the life of the congregation (1996:103). The buildings blocks of natural church development are: ‘Quality characteristics’, ‘minimum factor’, ‘biotic principles’, and ‘new paradigm’. They answer ‘the four basic questions of church growth – what, when, how, and why’.

Biotic principles

Schwarz (1996:65–81) describes ‘six biotic principles’ as part of a ‘natural’ approach. It stands, almost, over and against what he calls a ‘technocratic approach’ in which specific methods are employed to make churches grow (1996:64). He uses three terms throughout the book: the ‘technocratic’, ‘spiritualistic’ and ‘biotic paradigms’ (Schwarz 1996:14). He uses a diagram to explain what he means by each one:

- Technocratic paradigm: ‘the significance of institutions, programs, methods, etc. is *overestimated*’;
- Spiritualistic paradigm: ‘the significance of institutions, programs, methods, etc. is *underestimated*’;
- Biotic paradigm: ‘the theological approach underlying natural church development’.

What he means by each concept is described in greater detail in Part 4 (Schwarz 1996:83–102). He does so as part of what he calls the ‘new paradigm...a different theological paradigm altogether’ (Schwarz 1996:83). He works explicitly with what he calls the bipolarity in creation and in the Bible, stating that ‘the creative relationship between the poles is the secret of natural self-organization’ (Schwarz 1996:84).

Space does not allow me to describe the ‘six biotic principles’. They are: ‘Interdependence, Multiplication, Energy transformation, Multi-usage, Symbiosis, Functionality’.

He describes these biotic principles as the ‘release of the “all by itself principle”’ and connects them to the first part of each of the eight quality characteristics. For my purpose here I, in summarising it, use italics for the biotic principle (cf. the figure, Schwarz 1996:79):

- Empowering leadership;
- Gift-oriented ministry;
- Passionate spirituality;
- Functional structures;
- Inspiring worship service;
- Holistic small groups;
- Need-oriented evangelism;
- Loving relationships.

Schwarz believes firmly that healthy churches, those attaining the 65 average on the eight qualitative characteristics, will grow as surely as a healthy plant under healthy circumstances will.

Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce

In the three books (2002; 2004; 2008) published by these two authors, the focus is on what I have already referred to, namely a data-based or data-driven approach (Woolever & Bruce 2004:9; Schaller 2002:back cover). Woolever is the Director of the U.S. Congregational Life Survey, while Bruce is the Project Manager of the same Survey (cf. for the Survey and its methodology Woolever & Bruce 2002:79–80).

Broad empirical sample

In the 2002 publication, Woolever and Bruce focussed on:

‘Who attends religious services? Why do they go? What makes American congregations and parishes work? What is the role of our culture and society in shaping the nature of congregations?’ (Woolever & Bruce 2002:3). The research results were the outcome of cooperation

with research teams from Australia, New Zealand, and England... The study results ... were replicated in three other countries. This international effort recognized the hopes and dreams of 1.2 million worshippers in 12,000 congregations.

(Woolever & Bruce 2002:3)

‘Beyond the ordinary’

In the 2004 publication, 10 strengths of US congregations – strengths that take such congregations ‘beyond the ordinary’ – are discerned. Woolever and Bruce (2004:9, 123–124) explain the empirical approach they took and how they eventually worked with 122 043 attendee surveys (cf. also www.uscongregations.org).

The size of this scientific statistical sample far exceeds the size of most national surveys. Studies designed to provide a representative profile of adults living in the United States typically include about 1000 people.

(Woolever & Bruce 2004:124)

Everyone fifteen years of age and older in religious services in the participating congregations responded to the questions...

(Woolever & Bruce 2004:9)

Woolever and Bruce (2004:2–11) explain why they prefer to work with an approach that does not seek the ‘minimum factor’. They want to change ‘the mindset from “what’s wrong with us” to “what’s right with us”’ (Woolever & Bruce 2008:3). They acknowledge that every researcher has assumptions and agendas. They want to move beyond ‘that definitional Tower of Babel (referring to the many languages by which people describe ‘healthy congregations’ – author) toward a more comprehensive and useful language based on congregational strengths’ (Woolever & Bruce 2008:2). In trying to do so they grounded themselves in James Hopewell’s (1987) definition of a congregation – ‘a local organization in which people “regularly gather for what they feel to be religious purposes”’. The people in each of these groups have a local ‘story’. How they talk, their language, how they see the past, present and future is what comes into play. They are ‘part universal and part local or unique’ (Woolever & Bruce 2004:3).

Woolever and Bruce (2004:3) use five other ‘universals related to purpose and mission’ to help them define congregations:

Congregations

- create spaces and places for emotional bonding;
- universally seek to educate worshippers about the faith and behaviors expected of the faithful;
- wish to share with others the faith and beliefs that are most meaningful to them, ...also seek new people to join...;
- serve others, both within and outside their group;
- convey to worshippers and others that life has ultimate meaning.

Integrating qualities

Their research led Woolever and Bruce to the assumption (2004:6) that:

- for congregations to reach beyond the ordinary requires integration of three qualities – mind, heart, and courage. Beyond-the-ordinary congregations use
- their mind – suggesting intelligence and analysis;
- their heart or imagination suggesting beyond the obvious solutions;
- their courage – suggesting a responsive identity whose actions result from the integration of heart and mind.

Their explanation of what this means is insightful and important for analysing and planning.



- Regarding 'heart or imagination' they state that it is *seeing beyond the visible to envision something new – this is also a hallmark of congregational vitality. Congregations that draw upon the resources of their "heart" as well as their "mind" are more likely to focus on a bold vision for the future. What are some characteristics of congregations with a strong heart? They possess a clear, widely owned vision of the future, openness to new possibilities, and a consensus about their identity as future-directed.... They know Who is the real author of their story.* (Woolever & Bruce 2004:5)
- As to *seeking courage: Congregations need courage to face both the present and the future. Courage is the spirit to hold one's own in spite of doubt, uncertainty, fear, or extreme difficulties. Tenacity and determination mark the courageous congregation.... Facing the reality of their one-of-a-kind mission requires will and soul. The perception of risk is accurate.* (Woolever & Bruce 2004:5)

They continuously argue for the interwoven nature of the ten strengths. Arguing against what they call the 'all trump-card or one answer approaches' they say 'congregational strength is always a plural' (Woolever & Bruce 2004:8) and again 'a quick glance (at one of the figures) shows how interwoven the ten congregational strengths are' (Woolever & Bruce 2004:119). Another insight they gained is that beyond-the-ordinary congregations embrace three assumptions in order to 'reach a level of excellence in one or more areas of congregational life' (Woolever & Bruce 2004:15). The three assumptions are:

- *all congregations have strengths because in every congregation something works. The more congregations focus on what is working ... the stronger they become; much of whatever congregations need more of already exists internally. Congregations become stronger when they search for solutions that are based on their current strengths;*
- *all congregations have something of value from their past that can be used to carry them into a more positive future.* (Woolever & Bruce 2004:14–15)

Ten qualities

Based on very good empirical research (*cf.*, again, Woolever & Bruce 2004:123–139 for a detailed description of the method and scientific approach) they discerned ten congregational strengths. They built on the research published in 2002, in which they 'examined congregations and their worshippers in four interrelated areas – Spiritual Connections, Inside Connections, Outside Connections, and Identity Connections.' The ten strengths in the second book flow from those four areas and tap the essential strengths of congregations (Woolever & Bruce 2004:126). Early in the book already (p. 9), they state that, while the 2002 research focussed on the detailed and specific analysis of individual worshippers, the focus in 2004 was on the profiles of congregations. It had to be noted (Woolever & Bruce 2004:15) that '[e]xtraordinary congregations are not without weaknesses or problems because "excellence does not require perfection" (Galindo 2003:17). Through careful analysis of more than 2000 congregations of all sizes and faith groups we identified ten congregational strengths.' The strengths concerned are (Woolever & Bruce 2004:117):

1. Growing spiritually;
2. Meaningful worship;
3. Participation in the congregation;
4. Having a sense of belonging;
5. Caring for children and youth;
6. Focusing on the community;
7. Sharing faith;
8. Welcoming new people;
9. Empowering leadership;
10. Looking to the future.

What matters?

In the description of each strength Woolever and Bruce ask

questions concerning whether congregational size matters, whether congregational theology matters, and whether it would help growth in numbers. This is not the time and place to share the many detailed findings on how each strength relates to how many others and whether the different distinctions just mentioned impact or do not impact on the strength. In brief, they concluded that:

- Theology *'is a solid predictor of all ten congregational strengths; If you could know only one thing of a congregation, its denominational affiliation or faith group would help you most in predicting its strengths'.* (Woolever & Bruce 2004:116)
- Congregational size impacts on six of the strengths; age impacts on five of the strengths.

Studying the book itself is the only way to comprehend it all. What I, however, want to share (because of the importance of this approach to congregational analysis) are the following:

Woolever and Bruce found that

if a congregation scores in the top half of any one of the ten indices, they are "above average" in that area of their ministry. If a congregation scores in the top 20% of any one or more of the ten indices, they are "beyond-the-ordinary" in that area of ministry. (Woolever & Bruce 2004:15)

- Strength number 10, 'Looking to the Future', 'is the winner in terms of how frequently it pushes congregations into the extraordinary category in one or more of the other nine strengths' (Woolever & Bruce 2004:120). This strength helps to predict strength in five other areas, namely 3, 4, 5, 8, 9.
- 'Growing Spirituality, Having a Sense of Belonging, and Empowering Leadership are also key players in beyond-the-ordinary congregations by supporting four additional strengths each' (2004:120–121).
- Growing Spirituality supports 2, 3, 4, 5;
- Having a Sense of Belonging supports 1, 6, 7, 10;
- Empowering Leadership supports 2, 6, 7, 10.
- Welcoming New People fosters vitality in three other strengths namely 1, 7, 10.
- Meaningful Worship, Participating in the Congregation, and Sharing Faith lend support to two other strengths:
- Meaningful Worships supports 1, 9;
- Participating in the Congregation supports 1, 7;
- Sharing Faith supports 3, 8.
- Caring for Children and Youth and Focusing on the Community each supports only one other strength:
- Caring for Children and Youth supports number 8
- Focusing on the Community supports number 9.

Knowledge alone does not do it

One last important insight from this research is the discussion on why knowledge of the situation (their vital understanding of mind) alone does not achieve much. They call it the 'knowing-doing gap' (Woolever & Bruce 2004:110). 'We assert that if you don't understand the simple knowledge of strengths, you're a traveller who left the map at home'. The discussion on what Woolever and Bruce call 'courageous discussion' (pp. 110–113) is important here. Stating boldly that they are positive thinkers and work from a standpoint of appreciative inquiry (Woolever & Bruce 2004:109), they agree that 'courageous discussion' is challenging. It is the challenge to move from fact to feeling and to imagining, one could say. To them, it is the 'Lion's Share' in bridging the knowing-doing gap:

A difficult congregational conversation is needed...The first part draws on the congregation's mind, their rational and analytical skills...The second part...acute feelings about the situation at hand should also take place...The third part of difficult congregational conversations, which deals with our identity, takes effort to give it voice...Congregational conversations that include all aspects of a difficult conversation - reality, feelings, and identity - lead to action. A congregational identity grounded in reality and feelings

moves a congregation to an authentic and enduring response.... Congregations that regularly engage in courageous conversations are more likely to find themselves in the right place: "The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet".

(Woolever & Bruce 2004:110;
cf. also Buechner 1983:120)

Location

A brief remark about this research on the impact that a congregation's location has on being and becoming 'beyond-the-ordinary' is necessary. Woolever and Bruce admit that their research in this case was complex (2008:2). Some factors relating to location proved to have no impact and others do impact strengths. This, in being a fascinating piece of research and worth studying, will hopefully encourage similar research in South Africa. Until then we have to learn from what these researchers discovered and accept that there are some similarities and probably also dissimilarities.

According to them (Woolever & Bruce 2008:4-8), 'location' can be described in five ways. Location can be defined

- *geographically based on region;*
- *geographically based on political stance;*
- *geographically based on the role religion plays in your area;*
- *religiously based on the mix of religions and denominations in the area;*
- *demographically - how [we can] describe the people living in the community around your congregation.*

(Woolever & Bruce 2008:6-7)

Their findings are both revealing and profound. Three chapters are devoted to describing what location (in its fivefold notion) has to do with the ten strengths that have been discerned. I will only summarise one of these issues briefly as it relates to location - demographics, age, and faith traditions (Woolever & Bruce 2008:66-72):

- All types of churches attract more people [of] 65 and older, but mainline Protestant churches do so more than other [churches];
- Conservative Protestant churches attract more 18 to 44 year-olds;
- All types of churches attract more traditional families, but conservative Protestant churches do so the most;
- All types of congregations attract more high school graduates (without any college education), but conservative Protestant churches do so the most;
- All types of congregations attract more worshippers with college or more advanced degrees; this is particularly true for mainline Protestant churches.

From these findings, they deduce that:

Congregational strength results when congregations match the community's percentage on adults aged 18-44....Matching the community on adults aged 18-44 creates the biggest yield for conservative Protestant churches.

(Woolever & Bruce 2008:69, 71)

In 1972, Kelley wrote a book on *Why conservative churches are growing*, claiming that conservative churches grow because they make 'strict' demands of their members while liberal churches do not have similar demands. According to James Lewis (quoted by Woolever & Bruce from the website: www.resourcingchristianity.org), almost everybody will agree that no single factor can be the one reason for strength or growth.

Congregations are complex organizations. However, congregations that match their community on an important demographic group - residents 18 to 44 years of age - grasp a powerful facet for successful ministry. Attracting worshippers in this age says that their mission, programs, and leadership are in tune with the community's future - and the congregation's future.

(Woolever & Bruce 2008:72)

They discovered that congregations can be strong anywhere. Twice they say (Woolever & Bruce 2008:77,81): 'By and large, congregational location plays a minimal role in the strength that congregations can claim'....'By and large, congregational location plays a minimal role in the numerical growth that congregations experience'. They (Woolever & Bruce 2008:85) go on to quote Bill Easum as saying that the day of cloning is over. Everybody has to find God's model for his or her own environment and get to their own niche. Tim Keel, leader of Kansas City's Jacob's Well and one of the founders of the emergent church movement, echoes this advice by urging churches 'to be "environmentalists" - to take the temperature of their particular place and serve it accordingly' (as quoted by Byassee 2006:20-24).

Dan R. Dick

The research

Dan Dick is Research Coordinator and Project Manager for the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church in Nashville (Dick 2007:back page). Introducing his approach is important to the research question in these articles. My thesis is that faithfulness to the gospel and the missional identity and integrity of the congregation as a contextual faith community plays a major role in congregational analysis. Dick (2007:8) states his departure point as: 'bigger says nothing about faithful, and active says nothing about effective'. His use of effective is almost similar to Callahan's (1987:12), in meaning to bring help and hope to communities. His research, in a sense, was a personal journey to discover just this. He visited, surveyed, consulted and analysed 'over 700 congregations across North America to better understand effective structures, processes, leadership, and systems for spiritual formation and development' (Dick 2007:9) over a period of about six years. He initially tried to divide his sample and the masses of data based on the criterion of growth, working at the time with healthy (growing) and unhealthy (declining) churches.

I found that many congregations defy a simple labeling of healthy and unhealthy. One church of over 7,000 members struggles to get 800 people [to attend] on a Sunday morning. A church of 300 members, down in four years from almost 700 members, boasts over 400 in worship each week, with less than 2% of their membership inactive....These are some of the anomalies that make categorization difficult'.

(Dick 2007:9)

Sustainability

From the reports, notes and surveys, Dick extracts a second set of criteria and labels it 'sustainability'. Among the 16 measures of sustainability are (Dick 2007:10):

- levels of active participation;
- accountability for spiritual development;
- standards for membership;
- communal identity.

When he integrated the two sets of criteria, namely growth and sustainability, four church 'types' emerged. He names these types (Dick 2007:10-14) and describes them, allotting one chapter to each. The criterion of faithfulness, which plays a determining role in his research, links up with previous research he had undertaken and which was published in 1999. In this 'book of hope' he

lifts up the kind of church where people can come to know God and where they can move forth to live transformed and transforming lives...grounded on the premise that contemporary cultural reality calls us to be a different kind of church.

(Dick & Burry 1999:9 & back page)

Faithfulness is indeed a quest for the quality of our discipleship - something Armstrong (1979:38) had already pointed out in his quest for service evangelism.

Vital congregations

Vital congregations are those congregations that are highly stable and growing. These churches are rare in the United Methodist

Church – of the 717 congregations included in this study, 69 fell into the vital church category (9.6%). These churches are seldom heard of:

occasionally their story is told, but for the most part, the members and leaders of these churches are too busy doing the work of the body of Christ to teach workshops, write books, and host seminars.

(Dick 2007:11)

Dystrophic congregations

About one third (234 or 32.6%) of congregations

are experiencing growth, but their sustainability is low. In a living organism, a condition of growth that weakens or diseases rather than strengthens is referred to as “dystrophy”. Dystrophic congregations are those where there is growth for growth’s sake that ultimately makes it harder for the organism to survive.

(Dick 2007:11)

Dick describes them as congregations that do a lot of good, touch many lives and reach many people, ‘but they are very hard to sustain for long periods of time, and they experience an enormous amount of waste and burnout’ (Dick 2007:11).

Retrogressive congregations

A third type is called retrogressive congregations:

occasionally a church goes through a period of numeric decline that enables it to become more active and effective, rather than less...those who made hard decisions that lead to fewer programs, fewer services, a narrower focus, or more specialized ministry that results in some people leaving the congregation.

(Dick 2007:11)

In his study, 51 congregations (7.1%) found themselves in a highly stable, but declining position.

Decaying congregations

The last type he identified included

unstable and declining, or decaying churches. Many people are troubled by the term “decaying” as applied to congregations, but I use the term intentionally for the emotional impact it yields Most of the congregations in this category (363 or 50.6%) are at the threshold of crisis Make no mistake this term is not intended as a value judgment, but as a value-neutral descriptor ... where decline and lack of stability make the organism unsustainable. We have a significant number of congregations in steep decline, deep denial, and dysfunctional stagnation. Pretending it isn’t real and it isn’t serious is no longer an option.

(Dick 2007:12)

He clearly states that his purpose is not to insult or condemn,

but to illuminate and challenge. The sample used in this research is not significant; therefore, what I hope to do is raise questions, invite people to test for themselves the propositions put forth, and see how these ideas might help them visualize a future for the church. This is a journalistic rather than scientific report. The validity of the sustainability criteria can only be tested in the laboratory of the congregation.

(Dick 2007:12)

He included the Congregational Vitality Survey that he used and suggests for use in Appendix 1 of his book (Dick 2007:127–135). His findings led him to summarise as in Table 1 (Dick 2007:12).

Criteria used in the research

Dick (2007:13–14) describes each ‘type of church’ by using fifteen criteria which were derived from his survey and widespread qualitative interviews with leaders and members of the 717 congregations investigated in the study (United Methodist Church). The criteria are important and it is worth reading his report to see how these churches differ, for instance with regard to understanding identity, which I will use as an example below.

TABLE 1
Dick’s categorisation of congregations

STABLE	
DECLINING	GROWING
Retrogressive (7%)	Vital (10%)
Decaying (50%)	Dystrophic (33%)
UNSTABLE	

The criteria are:

- Sense of identity;
- Shared clarity of purpose;
- Focus of the congregation;
- Awareness and understanding of God’s vision for the church;
- Governing and guiding values;
- Impact awareness;
- Leadership;
- The role of the appointed pastor(s);
- Programmatic design;
- Organisational structure;
- Money;
- The role of worship in the life of the congregation;
- The role of education in the life of the congregation;
- The congregation’s relationship to the community;
- The congregation’s relationship to the connectional system.

Identity

Dick (2007:17) calls the criterion of ‘a strong sense of identity – who we are as a congregation of God’s people – perhaps the most important’ of all the criteria. ‘Who are we?’ rests at the heart of our entire walk of faith. Individually, we wrestle with this question on a regular basis, but it is every bit as important that we wrestle with it corporately’. How do the four kinds of churches compare when it comes to identity?

- **Decaying** (as explained above) churches tend *not to have a strong sense of identity; or they hold a sense of their identity from a bygone day – who they used to be... In some cases they confuse who they should be with who they are. Outside the congregation, the church has limited or no reputation. Where there is a community identity, it tends not to be around mission or ministry, but a church supper, bazaar, craft fair, or fellowship event.* (Dick 2007:17)
- **In dystrophic** congregations *leaders have a strong, clear sense of identity. Ask anyone in the leadership. And you will get a good answer. Move outside of the inner circle, however, and things begin to get fuzzy...it is the vision, drive, and ambition of the senior pastor that defines the identity of the congregation... Dystrophic congregations are unique in one significant way: they are often referred to not by their name, but by the pastor’s. Pastors of both dystrophic and decaying congregations freely refer to the congregation they serve as “my church”, or “my ministry”; something virtually no pastor of a vital or retrogressive congregation ever does. (They refer to the church in plural: “our church” or “our ministry”).* (Dick 2007:44–45)
- **In retrogressive** congregations, *participants have an incredibly strong sense of identity. The simplest explanation for this is that they focus on just one or two areas of ministry. They know who they are because they are grounded in a very small set of values that define what they do and why they do it. The sense of community, connectedness, and commonality is deep in retrogressive churches.* (Dick 2007:69)

- 'We'
"We" is the word spoken most frequently in vital congregations. The community of faith comes first. It is striking to be in a large group of people where agendas are set aside for the common good, but that is the norm in vital churches. Unity, connection, oneness, and communion are defining terms for these congregations. That is not to say there is not disagreement or conflict in these churches, but where disagreement exists, there is a healthy, respectful way to address it. ...Vital congregations are striking for the absence of 'toxic influencers'. Bad behavior is confronted, challenged, and either fixed or removed. Such is the importance of modeling Christian unity and grace.

(Dick 2007:92)

Vital congregations are not perfect. There is no such church. But their 'standards take them away from a "growth as more" mentality to a "growth as depth" mentality' (Dick 2007:119).

CONCLUSION

The empirical research reflected upon in the above descriptions is indeed about a search for the vital signs of God's presence and the church's preparedness to be his plan for the coming of his Kingdom. My intention is to introduce and inform leaders to what well-known researchers have found. This is important in Practical Theology. There is a context, a reality out there, which we need to read. Many have done that and shared their 'interpretation' of the text in their writings.

There is also another text – for Christian churches an authoritative one, the Bible. The follow-up research referred to above deals mainly with this text. I try to bring the two texts together and to suggest a way forward; a way for reading the congregation as a text in context. It is a suggestion on how to do a 'ministry-analysis' in this vital text, the congregation, in the coming of God to them and, through the congregation, to the world.

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