

# Living out a calling to teach: A practical theological engagement

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South African teachers are confronted with a plethora of stressors on a daily basis. Often their experience of having a calling to teach is silenced by the realities they have to face. Becoming more aware of the presence of God in their classrooms might turn them into practical theologians. This in itself does not eliminate the factors that cause stress, but it becomes the driving force that keeps them coping in times of duress. Through a constant migration between theory and praxis within the habitus of practical theology, the academic discourses about teachers and about calling are explored. This specific context creates a moment of praxis where they can explore their identity as Christian teachers and their endeavours to create schools driven by their calling. The realisation that they are practical theologians has a profound effect on the different relationship-spheres in which teachers function. Thus they become empowered to be the hands and feet of God in their classrooms and, in turn, serve as agents of hope for their learners and for one another.

## Introduction

The daily commitment and calling of Christian teachers are the forces that shape this research journey and also give life to new narratives and practical theological discourses surrounding the lives of South African teachers. This research journey is based on the metaphor of teachers as members of a large choir. Whether an individual feels that she or he is still singing in harmony with the other members of the choir or whether their voices have become silent will influence the teacher's experience of teaching. Very often, mass media and speculation only listens to the voice of the choir as a whole, focusing on the lamentation of those responsible for the false notes. An interdisciplinary merger between practical theology and education inspires researchers to rather spend a moment listening to individual voices, to listen for calling, to hear the heart of the individual person behind the red pen and piece of chalk.

It is however becoming more evident in these individual songs that the workload of teachers has become mysteriously heavier whilst support from the Department of Education have become less and less every year. If teachers are then still committed to singing in the choir, why do they feel like they are not succeeding? If they are strongly committed to their jobs, why does the effort leave many individuals feeling so drained and hopeless? Why do they feel that they have lost their ability or motivation to sing? Somewhere in the midst of all the frustrations teachers have to deal with, the individual teacher's voice was lost. It is here that what Evans (1993:20) calls the 'human face of reform' becomes visible. This research sets out to explore the academic discourses about teachers, factors causing stress in their lives and their personal relationship with God. This specific context creates a moment of praxis where teachers can feel empowered and in a position to facilitate social transformation through a critical reflection on the 'hermeneutics of lived religion' (Ganzevoort 2009:4) as it is understood in the specific context of a teacher.

## The human face of reform

Many researchers (Brown & Roloff 2011; Collie, Shapka & Perry 2012; Strydom *et al.* 2012; Vos *et al.* 2012) have described the occurrence of the loss of hope and the prevalence of stress and burnout in teachers. Bubb and Early (2004:8–13) identify the following as the main causes of stress amongst teachers: excessive administrative work, assessment, poor planning and communication within schools, excessive workload, low morale and lack of motivation, inadequate control and guidance from the Department of Education and concern about salaries. Olivier and Venter (2003:186) report similar results and also list a lack of discipline, unmotivated learners, larger teacher-learner ratios and the new curriculum as significant sources of stress.

Cox (in Travers & Cooper 1996:143) reports that educational change is a major source of stress amongst teachers and adds that it is 'not only change, but change on change beyond the control of most educators that is the cause of stress'. Throughout the term of three different Ministers of

Education, the story of Curriculum 2005 evolved from the manifestation of an ideology to, in the words of Minister Angie Motsheka, 'the signing of the death certificate of OBE' (Department of Education 2009:n.p.). The enduring legacy of OBE will be one of an overwhelming sense of frustration and massive administrative workloads on teachers. Every time that the reality of yet another change sets in, many more voices in the choir of teachers become still and silenced.

Regardless of all the challenges they face, many teachers stay optimistic. They hope that the changes proposed by the new CAPS system might offer them the opportunity to teach in the successful way that they have been doing for years. The songs they are singing are an antithesis to the speculation and the research that emphasise how burnt out South African teachers supposedly are.

Most of the research that attempts to explain the prevalence and treatment of stress amongst South African teachers do not fully resonate with a postmodern, postfoundationalist, narrative and participatory approach to practical theology (Müller 2005:72–88; Van Huyssteen 1998, 1999, 2006). In this article, a constant migration between praxis and theory within a conceptual framework embedded in practical theology, postfoundationalism, social constructionism and academic and professional discourses about teachers and stress in the South African Educational system forms the conceptual basis. In this way, participants were allowed to share their own stories of teaching and to listen to other teachers joining them in their song.

'The job of teaching is made far more difficult by failure of others to understand the complexity, responsibility and stresses that are inherent in a teacher.' This statement by Friedman and Farber (1992:28) encompasses the dominant story of teaching and emphasises the importance of the need for opportunities where teachers can have their voices heard to create an alternative.

In an academic research journey based on such participatory action research, the participants guide the journey, and there is no attempt to prove or disprove a set hypothesis. It thus creates an atmosphere where individual voices in the choir can sing to their heart's content. They can compose the song as they go along as there is no set sheet music to which they have to adhere.

## Listening for other voices

After reading the work of Van Huyssteen (2006), Müller (2009) and Van den Berg (2010), we came to the realisation that we could not attempt this journey of understanding the choir of teachers without offering a primary voice to the postfoundationalist discourse. The father of this paradigm, Van Huyssteen (1999), explains it in the following way:

A postfoundationalist theology wants to make two moves. First, it fully acknowledges contextuality, the epistemically crucial role of interpreted experience, and the way that tradition shapes the epistemic and non-epistemic values that inform our reflection

about God and what some of us believe to be God's presence in this world. At the same time, however, a postfoundationalist notion of rationality in theological reflection claims to point creatively beyond the confines of the local community, group, or culture towards a plausible form of interdisciplinary conversation. (p. 4)

Postfoundationalist practical theology centres its actions on a reflection of praxis. The postfoundationalist approach recognises knowledge and this reflection on praxis as an understanding that can only develop from a local context. 'This way of thinking is always local and contextual, but at the same time it reaches beyond local contexts to transdisciplinary concerns' (Demasure & Muller 2006:417).

McLachlan (2007:46) wonders whether teachers who did not study theology can be considered as contributing to practical theology and, by association, to postfoundationalist and practical theological research. Müller (2005:73) gives a possible answer to this question when he states that practical theology occurs 'whenever and wherever there is a reflection on practice, from the perspective of the experience of the presence of God'. Practical theology is therefore an evaluation and critique of the praxis in society.

Forrester (2000:7) defines praxis as the 'integral interaction between theory and practice'. It is therefore a constant investigation into the ways in which we encounter God in our everyday lives. Browning also proposes such a view that alternates between praxis and theory and back to practice again (Browning 1991:34). He argues that the once common understanding of practical theology as mere theory-to-practice, with a platonic understanding of practice, is faulty. Instead he interprets practical theology as a holistic discipline that binds together theory and practice as a practical hermeneutic (Browning 1991:7).

It is worthy to note that Browning suggests that praxis, rather than theory, should be the starting point for this process (Browning 1991:10). This notion of praxis recognises that we have pre-existing theories embedded within our actions. Praxis is theory-laden action, and practical theology advocates critical, theological analysis of our theory-laden practices in the context of daily living. Müller (2005) shares this notion of the development within practical theology when he argues as follows:

Practical theology happens whenever and wherever there is a reflection on praxis, for the perspective of the experience of the presence of God. This kind of practical theology is sometimes formal and sometimes informal and spontaneous. (p. 72)

Ganzevoort (2007:1) concurs when he explains that practical theology matters because it has the ability to 'communicate beyond the theological department and beyond the church'. That makes practical theology much more than an academic discipline; it is a practical expression of experience, wisdom and caring. Bosch (1991:430) agrees in his definition of the habitus of practical theology as a place 'where people are experiencing and working for justice, freedom, community, reconciliation, unity and truth in a spirit of love and selflessness, we may dare to see God at work'. In this way,

theology moves into the realm of praxis when teachers go about their daily business at school (Forrester 2000:7; Müller 2004:293; Osmer 2008:241).

McLachlan (2007:46) was thus right in assuming that a degree in theology is not a prerequisite for being a practical theologian. By being aware of the presence of God in their work, through creating communities of faith in their schools and by being critical towards societal influences outside of the church, teachers act as practical theologians. This empowers them and declares them competent and able to be leading voices in the research in this field.

When one considers teachers as the doing of public theology in classrooms every day, we open up space for teachers to use their unique qualities to promote social transformation and to make a difference in the lives of their learners. If the song that teachers end up singing has an intrinsic theological message of hope and salvation, the way in which they sing it will also be affected. Then, one cannot look at theology as something universal (De Gruchy 2004:45) that pastors and clergy do, but it becomes localised and contextual. The teachers singing in the choir thus becomes the composers of the song.

We believe that the time has come to formally question the parallels between the disciplines of practical theology and education. What is distinctive about Christian teachers and what might they have to contribute to the understanding and conceptualisation of practical theology? Could the presence of God in individuals' life cause teachers to have different experiences of stress than those who do not invite God into their workplace? Is a strong sense of having a vocation or calling a possible prediction that this teacher might not so easily get caught up in the labyrinth of burnout? Is having a sense of God's presence in their world of work a guarantee that teachers will still be leading voices in the choir? Are they aware of the fact that they are practicing practical theologians, or do they simply feel that they are 'doing their job' or 'living out their calling?'

## A place for calling at the blackboard

The traditional view of a calling is that it is not only a job or a career but a vocation. It is not what you do to earn a living; the expectation is set for it to encapsulate your whole life. The protestant theologian Frederick Buechner (1992:189) summarises the enormity of having a calling when he reminds us that 'the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet'.

Dik and Steger (2008) conceptualises calling as consisting of three overlapping dimensions:

- A transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self ...
- ... to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness ...
- .. that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation. (p. 226)

Calling is thus also an issue of voice. In our choir metaphor, teachers need to feel an urge or desire to sing along with the choir. They need the motivation to join in, and they have to be in agreement with the lyrics that are sung by the choir. Our vocal expression and contribution to the choir is therefore melodious when we sing in response to the call or the vocation.

Palmer (2000) agrees with the above when he argues as follows:

... vocation does not come from a voice 'out there' calling me to be something I'm not. It comes from a voice 'in here' calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God. (p. 10)

Although it sometimes happens that an individual's calling is recognised and confirmed by other people, ultimately it is something very personal and concerned with that individual's intimate relationship with God.

Walck (2000:157) writes, 'I have been thinking about teaching, not as a task or a job or even a vocation, but as a life, a way of being and doing that constructs who I am.' In *The courage to teach*, Palmer (1998:2) reminds readers that there is more to good teaching than technique: 'As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together.'

If teaching is thus regarded as a religious vocation where people feel called by God to make a difference in the lives of the children with whom they work, it must also become the socially constructed exegesis of their lives. A theological interpretation of our choir metaphor, when applied to vocation, will therefore involve a sense of the transcendent, of purpose and of community. What individuals do in response to that call provides them with purpose. What they do in their classrooms have meaning and gives a sense of determination to the song they sing.

It is however important to understand that such a commitment to live out a purpose does not necessarily need to be a feeling or an urgency with which a person grows; it can be a practical decision that one makes every single day. Having a calling creates the potential for the release of energy, work forces and resources that can promote the individual teacher's effort to endorse the love and grace of God in the classroom. For Christian teachers, their work has been and will forever be bounded by transcendent horizons and will make a contribution towards eternity and the Kingdom of God.

## A retreat as platform for the choir to sing

The teachers from Rob Ferreira High School in White River, Mpumalanga, attended a retreat to explore the influence that the awareness of having a calling could have on their lives. The retreat would provide a safe space where teachers could have conversations that would remind them why they were still teaching, and that would foster the hope and

passion for teaching that they might have lost as a result of all the stressors that plays into their lives. It would also create a platform for sharing hope and healing as members of the same choir, encouraging each other to grow in their relationship with themselves, with their colleagues and with God. Through the discourses that would be held over the weekend, the role that God plays in their classrooms could be defined and the identity that they embraced as Christian teachers could also be deconstructed.

### I teach ... therefore I am

The participants at the retreat spent some time pondering the difference in meaning of the answer of two individuals to the same question: 'What do you do for a living?' The first replied, 'I teach', whilst the second answered, 'I am a teacher.' Whilst the first answer merely implies an impersonal action that is initiated and then completed, the second implies something inherent and continuing. It refers to something which is not only a job description but is encompassing of a calling. To be a teacher is to embrace a certain identity, to let your whole being voluntarily be labelled with the connotation and discourses attached to being an educator.

Rather than just setting test papers or preparing great lessons, caring Christian teachers try to look through their student's eyes, to struggle with them as subjects in search of their own destinies, their own way of making sense of the world. Such a mind-set could be considered as 'connected teaching' where care is administered not from an expert, hierarchal position but from a position of being alongside a child. In this connected teaching, teachers guide learners towards discovering the gifts and talents that God has bestowed upon them. That in itself becomes the doing of practical theology and offers a substantial amount of personal satisfaction to the teacher. It often comprises many verses of the song that the choir of effective teachers sings.

Unfortunately, as significant as such moments of gratification are, they are often few and far between compared to the times of stress and frustration that teachers have to endure. Having a personal relationship with God does not protect teachers against also experiencing times of severe hardship and even burnout. Therefore, even Christian teachers can all be considered to be soloists in the choir. It seems that there might be three definite groups of teachers making up the choir.

Thousands of teachers will report that they have come to find themselves simply mumbling along with the mass choir of protest and concern about the state of education in South Africa. As a result of all the negative feedback they receive, their collective song has turned from a joyous event into a sad lamentation (Colangelo 2004; Engelbrecht & Eloff 2001; Travers & Cooper 1996). These teachers have lost their voices, and they find themselves feeling silenced, stressed and often burnt out.

The second group of teachers goes through the motions of teaching, but they have lost the satisfaction of interacting

with children, and the rewards intrinsic to educating learners elude them (Friedman & Farber 1992; Van der Linde, Van der Westhuizen & Wissing 1999; Van Zyl & Pietersen 1999). They do what is expected of them, and to the untrained eye, it might look as if they are still actively singing in the choir, but these teachers will report that the moments of pleasure and satisfaction that they experience are become far less frequent than they would want them to be.

Yet, regardless of these two large groups, there are still a third group who does their best to have their voices heard, who attempts to sing a tune that is in harmony with the larger choir but who also includes solo parts that endorse their own beliefs and passions (Giles 2007; Hackett & Lavery 2010; Wrzesniewski *et al.* 1997). Teachers in this group echo the words of Professor Jonathan Jansen, an outspoken critic of the South African education system, who believes that 'just because we live in a third world country does not mean that we should settle for a third world education' (Jansen 2004:163).

### Placement on a dynamic continuum

After a critical discussion about these three groups of teachers, the participants at the retreat constructed a continuum on which they felt that teachers could be placed as far as their experiences and perceptions of their career are concerned. Teachers' placement on this continuum would be an indication of their job satisfaction at a specific moment in time. They made it very clear that no person would be on the same place on that continuum for very long, placement could even change within minutes, depending on external and internal factors playing into the life of that specific individual.

Teachers that fit into the left side of the continuum experience severe levels of stress and even burnout, and they would find themselves in either of the first two groups of the choir. They will struggle to notice the presence of God in their daily activities and will find it difficult to list any positive aspects of their chosen career path. The second group refers to teachers who are doing what are expected of them, but who do not necessarily find much joy in their daily endeavours. They obtain the academic results, and they have good organisational and administrative skills in their classroom, but they would not necessarily walk the extra mile that goes beyond the basics for which they are paid.

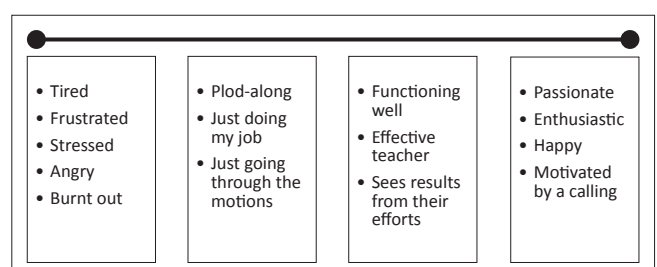


FIGURE 1: The continuum of job satisfaction in teachers.

The third group of teachers is functioning well. For the greater part, they find joy in what they do. They are effective in the completion of their daily tasks and will sometimes find fulfilment in their experiences at school. They experience some work engagement and have positive experiences at work.

The last group of teachers often find themselves on the far right-hand side of the continuum and consider themselves happy in their chosen vocation. They are passionate, enthusiastic and fulfilled. They consider themselves to work for Jesus Christ rather than for human employers. Such teachers do not need to be reminded why they are still in teaching; they live that passion every single day. They consider it a privilege, and they often find the energy to walk the extra mile for colleagues and children with whom they work.

As mentioned before, an individual's placement on this continuum is never static and permanent. It would unfortunately not be possible for individuals always to find themselves on the far right-hand side. If that was possible, all teachers would be happy and contented in their careers. Because the relationships between people are dynamic and physical circumstances change, it is imperative that people continually assess their placement and question the situations that prompts movement on this scale.

Both internal and external factors influence an individual's placement on the continuum. Internal factors, like being tired, overwrought, stressed and frustrated, could cause a person to move more towards the left-hand side whilst a successful encounter with a child, positive feedback and emotional support could cause a person to shift more towards the right-hand side of the continuum. A person might not have much influence on the external factors, but the onus rests on the teachers to play an active part in how internal factors influence their placement on the continuum.

An awareness of having a purpose and calling will automatically position a teacher more firmly on the right-hand side of the spectrum. Having a clear vision will empower a teacher to feel fulfilled and motivated. Prayer and spending time with the Lord will also assist teachers in working towards staying on the right-hand side rather than allowing external factors and causes of stress to compel them towards the left-hand side of this job-satisfaction continuum.

As the teachers attending the retreat was talking about the events and anecdotes that forced them towards either side of the continuum, the conversation seemed to drift more towards positive and humorous stories they had to tell. Many teachers shared stories of how their actions and caring had changed the lives of the children they have taught over all the years. We could feel how the mood in the room lightened. We could hear more laughter, see an emerging light in eyes that just a day before were tired and burnt-out. In that instant, the meaning of practical theology became real to us. What we were doing in that room was practical theology at work.

Being a facilitator in reminding teachers why they were still in teaching opened up space for our choir to reach a crescendo. Some of the participants rediscovered or heard their own voices for the first time in years. The false notes that stress, burn-out, the Department of Education, difficult parents and other factors played in their lives were fading. Only the beautiful melody of having a purpose and a calling could be heard.

We were in awe of the symphony that was playing out in front of us. We were also convinced that the realisations to which the teachers around that table were coming were going to sustain them for many months to come. The safety and security that they found in each other in that moment turned them into agents of hope; it became the quintessence of a practical theological engagement.

### **Having an identity that is true to God's calling**

Another outcome of the retreat was that the teachers who attended spent time conceptualising a very definite and specific identity of a Christian teacher. The recognition that they were proud to assume this identity came as a surprise to some whilst others simply saw it as merely a confirmation of their daily commitment to God.

Living with the awareness of a calling continually strengthens the identity of a Christian teacher. The participants investigated ways in which having such a strong sense of identity, which is layered upon calling and stewardship, could impact on their relationships with different entities that they encountered in their experiences as teachers.

### **The relationship-spheres of teachers**

No teacher functions independently from a number of institutions and people that have a direct influence on their levels of stress or job satisfaction. These relationship-spheres in which teachers find themselves are often overlapping, and frustration in one area could thus lead to stress in other areas as well. The responsibilities and expectations of teachers differ in these spheres, and it is therefore imperative to investigate the influence of each individual sphere on the calling of a person.

Spheres include the administrative systems in which they have to function, their relationship with colleagues, their interaction with the children they teach, as well as their expectations of themselves.

### **Their relationship with the system**

Despite the frustrations induced by being employed by the Department of Education, many teachers consciously decide to rather see themselves as standing in the service of God. Therefore they are not only accountable to a Government, the Department of Education or the Governing Body of the school where they teach. They are ultimately accountable to God for all the actions and decisions that they take. Whatever such teachers do, they do it firstly for God and then only to

satisfy requirements set by these authority structures. The realisation that they are working for God leads these teachers to consider their duties in a different light. When they work for God, they cannot but give their all and more. They cannot but take ownership of their tasks. Then they do not merely work for a salary anymore but for God.

This realisation does unfortunately not make them immune to the stressors brought about by their contact with the Department of Education. It is crucial that should teachers wish to remain on the right-hand side of the continuum, they need to find a way of coping with the Department of Education and the endless stream of changes and frustration that it brings about. It is not possible for teachers to remove themselves from these systems that cause them to move towards the unmotivated, frustrated side of the continuum. They need to structure their relationships with these systems, like the Department of Education or often with the senior management team and administrative aspects of their own schools, in a way that strengthens their identity as Christian teachers rather than diminish that chosen identity.

Teachers committed to God often struggle to submit to and identify with requirements and requests from the Government or the Department of Education that are not aligned with their personal values, standards and ethics. During the retreat, the question was raised whether, as stewards of God, teachers could be validated in their decisions to act against orders from the Department? Christians believe that God is the ultimate source of authority and power. Should teachers thus find themselves in a position where they have to choose between a worldly, secular authority and that of their God, the choice is seemingly clear. Yet, in practice, it remains difficult to uphold the values that we as Christians live by in a system where different religions are offered a voice and where secular education is promoted.

The participants also pointed out the following ways in which a senior management team, principal and governing body could empower and support teachers in order to promote an identity of calling and stewardship:

- Treat teachers as an investment rather than an expendable asset by creating opportunities for further professional development and personal empowerment.
- Provide clear expectations and give subsequent feedback on all areas of curricular and extra-curricular responsibilities (Conley & Woosesly 2000; Olivier & Venter 2003).
- Give constructive criticism. Whilst classroom observations tend to inspire a sense of dread in many teachers who equate them with judgment rather than support, it can be a source of constructive feedback if executed within the safety of a relationship of mutual trust.
- Establish support systems for teachers by keeping two-way lines of communication open between teachers and those in positions of authority at school.
- Create a safe space in the staff room where teachers can feel free to share their emotions or just be encouraged and motivated for the rest of the day. Ground rules for such a space would include no negative talk about school, learners or colleagues. In that safe space, only

the emotional and spiritual welfare of teachers are to be promoted.

The identity of teachers is not reinforced or diminished by the actions of the senior management team and the governing body only but also by the relationships that colleagues have with each other.

### **Their relationship with colleagues**

The calling and task that Christian teachers face are too large to carry alone, and just as individuals cannot consider themselves to be a choir, this task needs to be carried out by a group of people living according to the same values and rules. Such values include integrity, honesty, diligence and caring for one another. The diverse personalities and talents of a group of teachers bring to the table an array of positive facets that could make the choir of teachers a harmonious one. They can then share the joy in good times and support each other during trying times. It is crucial that they act as guardians of each other's hope rather than contributing to colleagues finding themselves on the left-hand side of the continuum.

### **Their relationship with the children**

Teachers should be held responsible for their academic input into children's lives, but as Christians, they should also be accountable for the input they have in children's souls. In doing so, schools become communities of learning about more than what will help them to pass an exam. It becomes a centre for learning about life and about God. Furthermore, teachers should not only be role models through what they say but even more so through their own behaviour (Edlin 1999:131). That is the physical manifestation of stewardship.

### **Their relationship with themselves**

It is imperative that teachers should take care of their own emotional and spiritual well-being through implementing skills like good organisation and time management, concentrating on one task at a time, having a sense of humour and perspective as well as having realistic self-expectations. Such actions may enable them to move towards the right-hand side of the continuum where they will be able to be productive and content with their situations.

Whilst drawing a clear demarcating line between work and personal time is difficult for most teachers, setting aside some personal time is crucial (Troman 2000). It is impossible for teachers to be there to meet the vast needs of children or to be an emotional support system for their colleagues if they do not take adequate care of themselves.

## **Envisioning a school driven by a calling**

The teachers who attended the retreat emphasised the need for the song that they are singing as individuals to become the shared song that all the teachers at their school sing. A school that is based on and managed from the epistemology of Christian values can be referred to as a school driven by a calling. 'School driven by a calling' was conceptualised by the

participants at the retreat. Because they were all outspoken Christians, the assumption was made that calling, in the context of this research, was seen as an experience of Christian people. The perception of the origin of calling in believers of other religions definitely merit more investigation. Such a school would be a dynamic entity rather than just a passive set of buildings. It would strive towards growth and development rather than just reproducing clones that obtains the same academic qualification. It would consider practical theology as a definite part of its epistemology. Just like the teachers themselves, such a school would evolve and grow through constant movement in the cycle of theory and practice.

The followings aspects can be considered as some of the core characteristics of such an establishment:

- Diligence: Teachers acknowledge their responsibility to give children their best on curricular and extra-curricular activities.
- Being grateful: Christian teachers are thankful for the blessings in their lives.
- Loyalty: Teachers at a school that is dedicated to God are loyal to their colleagues and will also display a sense of loyalty to the school.
- Act in truth: Values like honesty, sincerity and integrity are crucial components of a school built upon their Christian convictions.
- Unselfish service: Such a school will also focus on the needs of other people and schools in their community.
- Focused on reconciliation: Not all children grow up in homes where diversity is acknowledged and reconciliation is promoted. The onus for teaching an attitude of tolerance, forgiveness and equal opportunities thus lies upon the school.
- Accepts responsibility: Teachers need to accept responsibility for learners, colleagues and facilities but also for the choices they make.
- Be a community of hope: Many children are often given the message at home that there is no hope or future for them or for this country in which they are growing up. The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers us hope for eternal salvation. A school that is focused on its calling will become a beacon of hope for such learners and create in them hope and a vision for the future.

## Thriving ... not just surviving

By looking at the situation of teachers in South Africa through the eyes of God, a different picture emerges. A scenario that is more encompassing than frustrations about learner behaviour, impatience with employees of the Department and stress about internal functioning of schools comes into view. The focus is rather on the potential for transformation, the opportunities that are created to win souls for the Kingdom of God.

A new commitment to a seemingly old calling reminded many of the participants why they still stand in front of classes every day. This realisation does not cause the negative factors and frustrations to simply disappear. It does not

guarantee that a person might not experience stress or even be at risk of feeling burnt out. It does not guarantee that they will always find themselves on the right-hand side of the continuum. They do however now know that God is writing the melody line that this choir of his followers, his stewards, will be singing. Teachers who see themselves as practical theologians will not only hear their own voices in the choir but also become part of the process of helping others to find their voice, inviting them to join the choir. It will motivate them to work towards staying on the right-hand side of the continuum

The motto for Princeton University in the United States of America is the Latin phrase, 'Dei Sub Numine Viget', which can loosely be translated as 'Under the Spirit of God she flourishes' (Princeton University 2013). That is my wish for every teacher who gives their voices and themselves in full service of their Lord. I hope that, regardless of the realities and challenges of teaching in South Africa, they may act as agents of each other's hope and commit themselves every day to living out their calling. May they always feel inspired to sing to best of their ability, to finding their rewards in assisting others to find their own voices, some even for the very first time.

May the teachers in this country always keep on singing.

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### Authors' contributions

C.B. (University of the Free State) is a doctoral student in the Department of Practical Theology. The article is sprouting from research under the supervision and guidance of her supervisor, J.A.v.d.B. (University of the Free State).

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