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On missional leadership: A critical engagement with Nelus Niemandt

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In my engagement with Nelus Niemandt, I will primarily focus on his most recent and major book *Missional Leadership* in which he seeks to develop an appropriate leadership model for missional churches. The core of his academically influential viewpoint on missiological leadership within the South African context will be briefly shared at first, followed by a discussion of only one specific aspect of his model for missiological leadership, namely the contours of the anthropological model that he works with or implicitly presumes with regard to theological reflection. Given the insights from contemporary philosophy of science and theology-science discourses, I will focus on and highlight the unavoidable danger of the total isolation of his theological reflection on missional leadership. Furthermore, it makes critical and meaningful dialogue with non-theological sciences impossible through the immunisation of theological reflection. And with regard to anthropology, one specific anthropological evolutionary implication (affectivity) will be presented lastly in a brief discussion of embodied personhood, coupled with the most important features that are already enriching and broadening in Nelus' viewpoint on missiological leadership.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article represents a critical engagement with the proposed model for missional leadership in the field of missiology from contemporary discourses on evolutionary epistemology (philosophy of science), science-theology on human distinctiveness and embodied personhood as well as from systematic theology.

Keywords: missional church; missional leadership; epistemology; theology-science discourses; anthropology; embodied personhood.

Introduction

As former colleagues at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria, and as neighbours for many years (from 2007 to 2019) across the hallway on level 2 of the theology building, I often – shouting across the hallway – greeted my Dutch Reformed missiological colleague Nelus on a Monday morning in a light-hearted manner with these words: 'Dear Nelus, good morning. I'm sorry but I could not find any place where the Lord has been working over the weekend'. These playful, but deeply serious words were critically directed to our often-discussed differences on his fundamental stance on mission and missiological leadership, determined at its core by the basic conviction that it entails through listening, contextual discernment of where God is already working. In the following discussion of his contribution on missiological leadership, it is with much academic pleasure that I, as systematic theologian, engage with his scholarship as token of my deep appreciation for his scholarly contribution within the field of missiology.

In my critical engagement with Nelus,[1] I firstly would like to briefly share the core of his academically influential, internationally acclaimed and appreciated viewpoint on missiological leadership within the South African context. Secondly, I deliberately choose to focus on only one specific aspect of his leadership model for missiological leadership, namely the explicit contours of the anthropological model that he works with or implicitly presumes with regard to theological reflection. I will critically argue in my engagement with Nelus' leadership model,

1.One of the most thorough and recent critical engagements of a South African theologian with the theological understanding of missional and the subsequent unfolding of missiological ecclesiologies is to be found in Jaco Kruger's '*Filosofies-teologiese uitgangspunte van "missionale" kerkwees: 'n Kritiese evaluering*' (2013). Kruger focusses in this article on the philosophical–theological underpinnings of these missional viewpoints, emphasising the ontological and epistemological developments that gave rise to the loss of a participatory worldview that radically change the historical understanding of the church.

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given the insights from contemporary philosophy of science and theology-science discourses (especially on evolutionary epistemology) that his model needs a fundamental paradigmatic anthropological revision and justification of its most basic tenets. Put differently: I will highlight the unavoidable danger of the total isolation of his theological reflection on missional leadership. Given its stand on an exclusive claim, it can no longer be integrated into the spectrum of non-theological sciences and furthermore, makes critical and meaningful dialogue with non-theological sciences impossible through the immunisation of theological reflection (Veldsman 2007:7). From the revision, I will furthermore highlight one specific anthropological implication, namely subjectivity (specifically affectivity), which I will briefly address by focussing respectively on embodied personhood, theological reflection and the justification of our beliefs. Lastly, I will discuss the features of missiological leadership from Nelus' viewpoint and emphasise the most important ones that are already enriching and broadening but are in (living) need of a wider and deeper anthropological reflection from current evolutionary discourses. Let us start with Nelus' viewpoint on missiological leadership.

Missiological leadership

In his most recent book, *Missional Leadership,* Nelus develops what he calls an appropriate leadership model for missional churches. In this book, he academically builds on the topic of leadership for the missional church and based it on an earlier publication, which was published six years earlier in Afrikaans, entitled *Nuwe leiers vir nuwe werklikhede.* According to him, the earlier book was more praxis-orientated, whereas the later publication on missional leadership has a stronger academic approach, which placed the book within the broader theology of mission and in consensus to the contemporary theology of the *missio Dei*. In this article, I will focus on the stronger academic approach of his most recent book which is not only representative of his viewpoint, but also covers his scholarly contributions on missiology over many years.

As vantage point for his exploration of missiological leadership, Nelus Niemandt (cf. 2019:16;19ff) states that the church is privileged to participate in God's mission. According to him, that ecclesiological privilege fundamentally and explicitly acts as directive that brings about responsibilities with accompanying accountability. Against the background of a surge of interest in leadership studies for various positive and negative reasons (cf. Chapter 1) and subsequently in spiritual leadership and leadership within the Christian church, Niemandt (2019:5ff) says that we cannot imagine a missional church without the accompanying re-imagination of church leadership. Therefore, the leading question to his academic endeavour is to respond to the question: What kind of leadership (closely scrutinising ideas on power, authority and leadership models) can and will serve the life-giving mission of the church? According to Niemandt (2019:3ff), it will be a contextual re-imagination that is deeply challenged by a super-diverse and super-mobile world which is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (captured in the acronym VUCA).

In Chapter 2 on *Leadership in the organisation, life and essence of the missional church*, Niemandt (2019:11ff) seeks to answer four questions on his model for missional leadership, namely: What is the relationship between church leadership and ecclesiology? What is missional ecclesiology? What is a missional church?, and What are the contours of and the ecumenical consensus on missional ecclesiology? The answers to these four questions are given in reference to Jørgensen along the lines of 'the nature and identity of the church (who is the church?), the life of the church (what [*does*] the church [*do*]?), authority of the church (how does the church organise itself?) and leadership in the church' (Niemandt 2019:12). His answers on these questions can be briefly summarised as follow: The church does not only participate in the life of the Trinity from which its being is determined, but also in the *missio Dei* while it joins in with the Spirit. The church is therefore understood from a relational approach, deeply determined by its context in making sense of God's incarnation within the specific culture.

Based on his answer to the question, *Who is the church?*, Niemandt (2019:43ff) subsequently moves to the question, *What does the church do?* (see Chapter 3). He defines the church as a community of disciples, brought together and sent by the Spirit, to participate in the Triune God's mission of bringing about flourishing life (Niemandt 2019:51). What it does, then has to be organised (see Chapter 4). This calls for reflection on the way authority and power relate to leadership as an expression in which the church as a social construction is organised (Niemandt 2019:56ff). 'The church is a value-driven community, and values determine the structures, polity and character of the church. They also shape the church as a missionary community' (Niemandt 2019). For Niemandt (2019:67), authority and power ultimately function as gifts of the Spirit to support and energise the mission of the church. In Chapter 5, Niemandt (2019:69ff) turns to the main focus of his book, namely to present an appropriate leadership model for missional churches. From the foregoing exposition of the missional church, follows his description of missional leadership. He regards it as participating in God's mission to transform life to fullness (Niemandt 2019:71), that is, to discern what the Spirit is up to in an everchanging world of change (adaptive or technical) and to lead the congregation in joining in God's mission. For Niemandt, the 'leading' of the congregation can be achieved through an organic paradigm through which missional leadership can be best understood in terms of a relational imperative (Niemandt 2019:82). For him, it is a relationality that originates in the participation of the community in the life of the Trinity. In Chapters 6 and 7, Niemandt (2019:85ff, 111ff) proceeds and unfolds the characteristics of a missional spirituality (transformative, incarnational, kenotic, etc.) as well as the habits (prayer, hospitality, etc.) to cultivate a missional spirituality.

The unfolding is deeply determined by discernment and listening, described as a laborious joyful journey (Niemandt 2019:109ff). On this journey, discernment is explored more closely and defined in terms of 'joining the Spirit in mission', vocation and sense-making in complexity. Listening is explored and defined in terms of dwelling in the Word and the world (Niemandt 2019:128ff) since leaders have to listen in order to develop missional language, which is then expressed in transforming stories (cf. Chapter 8) because, it is argued, we make sense of ultimate reality through narratives (Niemandt 2019:141). For Niemandt, leaders are storytellers (and story gatherers!), and in their (transformational) narratives, both they and we make use of metaphoric language. It is the very metaphoric, new missional language (as narraphors) that creatively ignites imagination and innovation (cf. Chapter 9). For imagination and innovation to flourish, Niemandt (2019:160ff) emphasises certain preconditions (flat open structures, intuition and creativity) and characteristics (embracing liminality, spontaneity, improvisation, playing and having fun, lively curiosity, etc.) for transformational leadership. In short, transformational leadership is labelled as implemental leadership (Niemandt 2019:151) that should finally and ultimately lead to experimentation and incarnations (Niemandt 2019:168). However, since life happens and we live in a world aptly characterised by VUCA, Niemandt (2019:169ff; 183ff; 199ff) discusses in the last three chapters (Chapters 10, 11 and 12) a response, working method and envisaged outcome for missional leaders under these circumstances. The response is descriptively indicated as 'disruptive leadership' (with prophetic posture as traders willing to take risks) from the margins (Niemandt 2019:169ff). As working method, Niemandt (2019:183ff) stresses the importance of networking and swarm intelligence. As final outcome, Niemandt (2019:199ff) discusses the organic process of leaders that should nurture and cultivate a (transformational) missional culture built on trust through covenantal relationships in the workplace.

Storytelling of *no-bodies* as (ecclesial) body of Christ and ultimately as missional leaders?

In Niemandt's (2019) unfolding of the space, place and role of missional leadership in which mission is understood as an extension and amplification of God's very being, of an initiative that flows from the heart of Triune God that defines the *missio Dei* as the essence and substance of the church, we ultimately participate in God's boundless love and the endless life of the Triune God. This is a very convincing and comforting (confessional) exposition of contemporary theological reflection on the *missio Dei*, the mission and missional leadership. It is also deeply and theologically well constructed as a new contemporary perspective on the *missio Dei* in a complex world. However, I do not share in this theological-methodological vantage point for the unfolding of Niemandt's model for missional leadership and base it on the following reasons: to eventually be persuaded and shared in this comforting theological (confessional) viewpoint enjoyed by others, first of all, one has to believe in Niemandt's theological story (viewpoint) and then, and only then, in his told story of God. After all, Niemandt (2019:111) states emphatically: 'The direction and initiative come from God. It is all about God. We are not the subject'. If then the direction and initiative is solely from God as subject, the critical question spontaneously presents itself: How do I know that Niemandt succeeded in his theological reflection (viewpoint) to take as vantage point the very being of the Triune and sending God, and from there unfold the essence and being of a missiological ecclesiology? Also: How must the anthropological claim that we are not the subject be understood? In posing these questions, I will simultaneously ask myself critically whether my criticism is valid and justified. Are there reasons to question his viewpoint, to cast doubt and uncertainty on his viewpoint? Yes, I believe so. I will present my criticism, deeply infused by what Niemandt (2019:163) calls a prophetic restlessness and holy dissatisfaction. I will, however, rephrase these terms as evolutionary–anthropological restlessness and holy epistemological dissatisfaction. Let me explain.

Holy epistemological dissatisfaction

At the heart of Niemandt's (2019:16, 115; also see Kruger 2013:4, especially 6ff) missional model – that he appreciatively and explicitly acknowledges – lies the 20th century's influential and impressive Reformed theological design of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. It was Barth who developed the dogma of the Trinity and named it a dogma of the church and subsequently argued that the mission of God is the same as the mission of the church (Niemandt 2019:16). It is precisely on this point as vantage point for missional leadership as unfolded by Niemandt and many others where the fundamental problem lies. Here are a few remarks on this:

For Barth, theological reflection did not need to be justified by any other field other than theological reflection itself. According to him, the best theology would need no advocates because it would prove itself. He (1947:8) stated: 'Wenn die Theologie sich eine Wissenschaft nennen lässt oder selber nennt, so kann sie damit keinerlei Verpflictung übernehmen, sich an den für andere Wissenschaften gültigen Massstäbem messen zu lassen'. In my discussion, I will focus on only two other remarks by Barth that clearly reflect that all theological reflection is isolated from the most basic methodologies: 'Ausser dem Weg von oben nach unten gibt es hier überhaupt kein Weg' (Barth 1928:276); and, 'Offenbarungswahrheit ist der frei handelnde Gott selber und ganz allein' (Barth 1947:15). Athough these remarks sound theologically (and confessionally) comforting, they are regarded from an epistemological perspective that is highly questionable and problematic. In my criticism of Barth's model of rationality, I will limit myself to a few scholars. In this regard, Heinrich Scholz (1931:27) stated: '*Aber die Energie des Glaubens, so hoch sie auch gefasst werden mag, ist natürlich im geringsten noch nicht ein Beweis für seine Legitimität*' [But the energy of faith, however strongly defended, does not warrant its truth]. Jürgen Moltmann (1966:149) raised the same criticism more than 30 years later: *Wer bürgt für die Wahrheit der Verkündigung und*

die Wahrhaftigkeit der Verkünder? […] An welcher Wirklichkeit beweisen die Worte ihre Wahrheit oder welche Wirklichkeit beweist dieWahrheit dieser Worte?' [Who warrants the truth of the proclamation and the truthfulness of the proclaimer? {…} By which reality is the truth of the words proven, or which reality warrants the truth of these words?][2] I have similarly argued, following the Princeton theologian Wentzel van Huyssteen in his earlier criticism of Barth, as follows:

> Theology for Barth was thus only possible as a science – a science of God and his revelation – but then in a strictly qualified manner: God and his Word become[*s*] the only possible fount of theological thought. […] True theology is possible only from above, from God's revelation down to humans, who receive that revelation in concrete obedience. Barth did not see this direct origin of theology in God's revelation as a product, or *Setzung*, of the human mind, since that revelation impacts on our reality with such authority that it establishes itself as the great *Gegenüber*, or counterforce, to our minds. […] Barth sought to found his theology of revelation on an impressive choice for revelation rather than experience, theology rather than non-theological sciences, kerygmatic authority rather than rational argument. The scientific status of theological reflection was thus never a vital question for theology according to Barth, since theology is a function of the church which, in obedient faith, serves the gospel through critical guidance […]. (Veldsman 2007:6)

For Barth, the justification of his theological model was in no way a '*Lebensfrage*' for theological reflection, nor was he adamant that it was in no need whatsoever of any scientific justification [*wissenschaftstheoretische Begründung*]. For Barth (1928:269), God is '*in sich selbst begründeten Grund, der nun wirklich in keinem Sinn "Objekt", sondern unaufhebbares Subjekt ist*' [grounded within God Himself, that does not turn God into an object, but God remains a subject] (*author's own free translation*).

To acknowledge and respect Barth's influential and radical theological stance, it should be regarded within the specific historical context. His deep motivation for his approach and viewpoint during that specific time in history should also be taken into account. By acknowledging these, Barth's methodological stance becomes questionable. The words of the Scottish Protestant theologian Thomas Torrance (1990) more than 30 years ago are still relevant today:

> Whether or not contemporary theology agrees with Barth, it cannot escape the questions he has raised, or avoid dealing with the situation he has created. If theological advance is to be made, it will not be by passing him or going round him, but only by going through and beyond him [...]. (pp. x–xi)

I agree wholeheartedly with Torrance. What then is this historical context so that we can move through and beyond Barth?

The most important historical challenges of the 19th century that Barth wanted to address were 'historical relativism and psychological subjectivism. By finding a new and rediscovered focal point in the absolute priority of God's revelation in Jesus Christ' (Veldsman 2007:5). Barth meant to overcome both these challenges in his impressive and convincing theological design, but at a price!

> The price he was prepared to pay for this attempt was the total severing of the kerygma on the fate of Christ (as *Geschichte*) from ordinary history (as *Historie*). The gospel orkerygma on Jesus Christ would become inaccessible to any form of positivistically structured attempts at historical reconstruction (contra historical relativism). A further implication was that a human, as a finite being, could never independently – bypassing God's revelation – and rationally conclude to the transcendence of God. (Veldsman 2007)

Humans, therefore, could not:

> [*O*]n their own gain access to God in his transcendence (contra psychological subjectivism). And the implication of such a stance? That there is no direct and lasting revelation of God in history – neither scriptural nor a general revelation (Veldsman 2007:5–6).

Perhaps even more devastating: our most basic lived existence as embodied personhood, that is as selves, as human beings, is ignored or politely bypassed in the twilight zone of abstraction.

The theological–structural similarities of Niemandt's model for missiological leadership, and therefore the critical problem of the isolation of theological reflection, are clearly visible. However, the many strong and meaningful dimensions, for example 'listening and discernment', should be radically revised from the best (interdisciplinary) insights from contemporary reflection on evolutionary epistemology. In such a paradigmatic revision, we, as embodied persons, will have to make methodological peace and find justification that our perspectives, our sensemaking of 'God' and 'revelation', are accessible to us solely through an interpretative act. It is not 'listening to God, to each other and to the context' (Niemandt 2019:123), but listening to each other, the context and to God.

> In the construction of a valid theological model of thought for our time, the full hermeneutical implications of this fact would have to be faced by looking the world (of sciences) in the eyes. (Van Huyssteen 1989:18; Veldsman 2007:8)

However, it would not only require looking the world of sciences in the eyes in all of our sense-making efforts. As embodied persons we would like to be in touch with our worlds in which we make sense of life before God.

Evolutionary anthropological restlessness

The story of the full hermeneutical implications starts with the acknowledgement within the contemporary theology–science discourses of the nature of our epistemic communities, our human distinctiveness and embodied personhood. Given the limited focus of my engagement with Nelus, here are a few general remarks in this regard.

2.An interesting theological mix of criticism and appreciation follows in the wake of Moltmann's remark on the Barthian model. Although Moltmann himself strongly criticised Barth for his lack of accountability, it is precisely Moltmann's own social Trinity model that is taken up within the new missional developments after Barth. The difference, however – although the problem is not avoided – in the new missional developments lies in the emphasis on relationality (cf. Kruger 2013:5).

Wentzel van Huyssteen (1997) posed more than 20 years ago the ongoing relevant and appropriate fundamental question that relates directly to the issue at hand in my critical engagement with Nelus when he asked:

> Can Christian theology, as a disciplined reflection on religious experience, ever really claim to join this postmodern conversation, and if it does, will it be able to maintain its identity in the conversation without retreating to an esoteric world of private, insular knowledge claims? […] How does theological reflection relate to other modes of intellectual inquiry, and especially to natural scientific knowledge, which very often is accepted unchallenged as the ultimate paradigm of human rationality in our times? (pp. 1–2)

In his pursuit to join the postmodern conversation (in comparison to Nelus who emphasised the 'joining in with the Spirit'), and relating theological reflection to other modes of intellectual inquiry, Van Huyssteen, (2017:143ff) with his postfoundational notion of rationality, presents us with three important 'eye-openers'. His presentation is, on the one hand, a quest for intelligibility. As quest, it finds expression in interdisciplinarity.

> On the other it entails a fall from epistemological innocence. The fall from epistemological innocence entails the acknowledgement that science cannot claim rationality at the expense of religious faith and theological reflection. (Van Huyssteen 1999:2; also see Veldsman 2020:104ff, especially 106ff)

They share rational resources and therefore we should rather be exploring the epistemological questions of the nature of explanations and explanatory claims, operative in different disciplines (Veldsman 2020:104ff, especially 106ff). And what about the 'eye-openers' that are mentioned in the foregoing? The eye-openers have to do with context, epistemology and interdisciplinarity. With regard to context, we have to deal with the contextual rootedness of both science and theology even though they belong to different domains of human culture. Regarding epistemology, we have to deal with:

> [*T*]he shaping role of interpreted experience and tradition. How and why and from where we say what we say about God, the world and our relationships shape […] the values – epistemic and non-epistemic – of our reflection. (Veldsman 2020)

With reference to interdisciplinarity, we have to deal with the crossing over or transgression of disciplinary boundaries to widen and deepen our reflection. Van Huyssteen (1999:8–9), following Calvin Schragg, branded it as 'transversal'. Transversality is characterised by the interpretative linking together and extension of various discourses, modes of thoughts and action. Transversality not only represents the convergence of our multiple beliefs and practices, our habits of thought and attitudes, our prejudices and assessments, but also reveals the shared resources of our respective reflective strategies and reasoning (cf. Van Huyssteen 1999:136; Veldsman 2020).

> For the post-foundationalist Van Huyssteen (1997:136), a new and promising understanding of interdisciplinary dialogue now emerges: In interdisciplinary conversation[,] the degree of transversality achieved will ultimately depend on the effectiveness of our dialogue across the boundaries of different domains, and on the understanding [-] [*we achieve in our interaction with one another*]. (Veldsman 2020)

In Van Huyssteen's book *Alone in the world? Human uniqueness in science and theology*, explores his evolved understanding of rationality in dealing with the ultimate evolutionary origins of human rationality itself. Given the criticism of Barth's trinitarian model and viewpoint on revelation, the following insight from evolutionary epistemology is crucial – for us as epistemic communities and as embodied persons. In the mentioned book, Van Huyssteen concretely unfolds his argument, which was already stated in one of his earlier books *Duet or duel*:

> Evolutionary epistemology […] reveals the biological roots of all human rationality and should therefore lead precisely to an interdisciplinary account of our epistemic activities. The basic assumption of evolutionary epistemology is that we humans, like all other beings, result from evolutionary processes and that, consequently, our mental capacities are constrained and shaped by the mechanism of biological evolution. (pp. xiii–iv)

From the above, two important implications need to be addressed. Firstly, given our biological rootedness, we have to deal with the fact that all knowledge is grounded in human evolution. Secondly, humans are unique and have distinctive traits, which include, among others, consciousness, self-awareness, imagination, sexuality, moral awareness, language and religious disposition. These traits present us with fascinating new contours for anthropological exploration. To be human is not defined by a single trait or characteristic; the definition will only be found across and over the boundaries of many respective disciplines. For Van Huyssteen, two very specific and ground-breaking epistemological liberations emerge from these two implications: epistemic narcissism and tribalism. Epistemic narcissism unmasks the conviction that only my or our way of coming to knowledge is valid. Tribalism, on the other hand, unmasks the conviction that my or our gathered knowledge in our specific domain captures all there is to acknowledge. The unmasking of these convictions has profound and radical implications, specifically with regard to human uniqueness and embodied personhood. One extremely important implication, and radically relevant for us as epistemic communities, is that:

> [*F*]rom the shared trajectory between theological and scientific interdisciplinary reflection on human uniqueness convincingly emerges – as the result of interactions between early humans and their lifeworlds – a human propensity for metaphysical and religious belief. (Veldsman 2020)

It is this very trait, a human propensity for religious belief and our ability for symbolic behaviour, that calls for anthropological revision, for new understandings of being human. For Christians, the biblical concept of *Imago Dei* represents the most influential anthropological concept on being human – and that is the point where we will need to start. Creative rethinking of this concept must be undertaken in deep conversation with scientific reflection on emerged human uniqueness. This interdisciplinary endeavour provides, on the one hand, 'an argument for the

plausibility and comprehensive nature of religious and theological explanations for a phenomenon as complex as *homo sapiens*' (cf. Van Huyssteen 2006:113ff.) (also see Veldsman 2020). On the other hand, scientific notions of human uniqueness help us to ground theological notions of human distinctiveness in the reality of flesh-and-blood, real-life, embodied experiences. Then, and only then, it is no longer the (confessional) storytelling of *no-bodies*, but the storytelling of the body of Christ that is represented by a (epistemic) community of embodied persons; flesh-and-blood disciples that, in the words of the Belgian Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, are the stories of God in this complex world. As we engage with this complex world, we as Christians – whether Roman Catholic, Reformed, charismatic, or others – seek to solve specific empirical and conceptual problems, be accountable to experience, and give the very best reasons for what we think, feel and believe (cf. Van Huyssteen 2017:144). Van Huyssteen's insightful formulation of his understanding of rationality, namely that 'rationality is a deeply social practice, embedded in the experiences and narratives of our daily lives as these are contextuali[*s*]ed by the radically interpretative nature of all our experiences' (Van Huyssteen 2017:144; also seeVeldsman 2020) should be taken as the basis for re-imaging missional leadership, where it arises from holy epistemological dissatisfaction and evolutionary-anthropological restlessness in telling God's stories.

At the heart of re-imaging embodied missional leadership

Missional leadership is revised and re-imagined when we are 'Listening to God, to each other and to the context' (Niemandt 2019:128), when we, as flesh-and-blood embodied persons, are 'listening to each other (as interdisciplinarity), to the context (as accountable discernment and justification) and to God (as community of disciples)'. To our 'sense-making efforts of our complex worlds', I would like to add one more qualification. I have not emphasised it up to this point, but I find it in Niemandt's (see 2019:119–120ff) exploration of missional leadership. That qualification I would like to broadly describe as to 'take heart' of our concrete flesh-and-blood existence in real life from an even broader understanding of rationality.

In this regard, I will focus on a selection of remarks from his exposition that are deeply representative of affectivity, namely moods, feelings and emotions, of embodied persons. Niemandt (2019:87) remarks on missional ecclesiology that '[*t*]his mission and the spiritual disciplines associated with it are carried out in the human body and in real places. In a certain sense, there is no difference between missional spirituality and "normal" spirituality'. Niemandt (2019:92) delves deeper, stating that '[*m*] issional spirituality, on the other hand, builds on the concept of incarnation – it makes disciples present in the everyday and aware of the importance of proximity. It is to carry the gospel in our bodies […]'. In reference to Smith, Niemandt (2019:87) says three times that he reminds us that the, 'way to the heart is through the body […]'. Niemandt (2019) is critical of what he calls an excarnational approach since it:

> [*R*]esults in disengagement with our bodies and the totality of life. A grounded incarnational spirituality is deeply aware that God embraces our ordinary life. It is to be fully present in our bodies and to be at home in the world where God called and placed us. (p. 93)

Referring to Smith again, Niemandt (2019:51) elaborates on discipleship, stating that it entails 'to be very intentional about what you love and how you "curate your heart"'. He reminds us that every approach to the life of the church, discipleship and Christian spirituality assumes an implicit model of what human beings are. Discipleship, and therefore being faithfully present as church, 'is more a matter of hungering and thirsting than of knowing and believing'. Niemandt (2019:51) proceeds by referring to Smith even more, '[*W*]e are defined not by what we know, or even what we believe, but by what we desire' and 'our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behaviour flow'. He continues, 'Human nature is dynamic and is to be on the move, pursuing something – to be teleological creatures […] He argues that the "heart is the existential chamber of our love […]"'. Finally, on a very sincere note, Niemandt (2019) quotes from Smith:

> We must calibrate our hearts. 'Love is a habit, our hearts are calibrated' by following examples and repeating certain practices, and therefore we must index our hearts to a certain end […]. (pp. 51–52)

Given the limited scope and focus of my engagement with Nelus, it is not possible to give an extensive exposition of my chosen emphasis on affectivity. However, I would like to emphasise that the very act of interpretation is deeply embedded and contextually 'moved' in our making (affectively) sense of life, and all of our judgements, and therefore, in the context of my engagement with Nelus, also of our ecclesiological models and, by implication, our viewpoints on missional leadership.

My plea for an evolutionary-anthropological restlessness and holy epistemological dissatisfaction argues for a broader and life-affirming understanding of a model of rationality, shaped and constrained by our evolutionary biological makeup and our cognitive-affective ways in relating to, experiencing and engaging with our realities. It is a strongly rational effort for a deeper and broader multidisciplinary pursuit of the understanding of the manners in which being human as personhood find clues in our linguistic traditions in the context of theology-science discourses for (heartedly) making sense of reality, the contextual capturing of the meaningfulness of life and pursuing the clues for transcendence. There is then, for us as epistemic communities in the world before God, a deep ethical dimension in our 'listening' to each other, to the context and to God. It methodologically and practically entails that we have intentionally 'to (re)-move' ourselves to the realm of intersubjectivity – there, and only there, we will be (emphatically) touched by the other, and otherness. There and only there our affective discernments can be judged,

substantiated as genuine and authentic or unmasked as inappropriate, unjust and unfair, exploitive, oppressive or violent (Veldsman 2023). 'Listening', deeply determined and guided by intersubjectivity, will become and be a concrete contextual skill with which we can explore (in an interdisciplinary manner) and respect (Latin: *respicere*, to look again) differences or celebrate otherness or relativise ourselves or invest in humility for the enriching sake of togetherness and cooperation – the latter being the best quality of our survival of the fittest: not power, but cooperation and wisdom.[3]

Conclusion

In summary, it is my suggestion that ecclesiology, mission and missional leadership are revised from contemporary discourses on the nature of our epistemic communities and evolutionary epistemology, from anthropological models of human distinctiveness and embodied personhood. At the heart of our exploration of missional leadership should lie a broader understanding of rationality and an interdisciplinary model of anthropology: *Imago Dei* and *Homo sapiens* in which our stories of being human are deeply:

> [C]haracterised by complexity, relationality and connectedness, sociality and community, feeling and emotions, friendship, intimacy, liberation, empathy and self-sacrifice, pursuits of beauty, of ethical values, of responsibility and justice, celebrating their multi-dimensional expressions of our deepest, highest and broadest imaginary actions through culture, art and music. (Veldsman 2020)

And if Nelus would still have been my neighbour across the hallway in our theology building, I would have greeted him – given the foregoing exposition – on the Monday morning with these words:

> Dear Nelus, good morning: It was so awesome to experience over the weekend in so many different ways and contexts the presence of God (as Father in care, as Son in example and as comforting Spirit) in the lives and vulnerable storytelling of so many people – believers and unbelievers – and even from many different religious orientations.

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3.The recent movie *Conclave* (released October 2024) on the electoral process of selecting a new pope is, in my opinion, a very good practical example of my plea to move in all of our engagements with reality through subjectivity to intersubjectivity to find 'authenticity' in our listening and discernment in a context of power and authority. For one – there are a few! – good discussion of the movie, see the Los Angeles-based journalist Brett McCracken's review and especially his qualified criticism on leadership. He states that the movie is correct to assert the fallibility of the church's human leadership; but he adds that too often a healthy scepticism about human authority sets the stage for a doubt of all authority and eventually a deconstruction of faith (McCracken 2024). What is especially important for me, is his remarks on the role and portrayal of 'uncertainty and doubt' in the conversations. He states that 'uncertainty can be weaponi[s]ed as a destroyer of whatever tradition we don't like. Appealing to examples of corrupt church leaders becomes an excuse to throw all church leadership – and their interpretation of Scripture –into question' (McCracken 2024:np). For him, sober realism about church leadership is one thing, but a 'doubting church' free-for-all is more progressive wish-fulfilment than a realistic course (McCracken 2024).

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