


# Journey of a Reformed scholar and emerging Pentecostal: Missional living in light of diversity

**Author:**Peter White<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Practical Theology and Missiology, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Peter White,  
pwhite@sun.ac.za

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This article explores the transformative journey of the author, a Pentecostal theologian, within the Reformed academic environment of the University of Pretoria. Central to this narrative is the mentorship and hospitality of Prof. Nelus Niemandt, who was then the Moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church. Despite our differing theological backgrounds, Prof. Niemandt exemplified ecumenical leadership by hosting me during my PhD studies, fostering an environment of mutual respect, humility and learning. This relationship highlights the practical application of missional living amid cultural, racial and theological diversity. Through personal reflections, this article delves into the profound impact of Prof. Niemandt's mentorship on the author's academic and personal life, illustrating a model of inclusive and transformative scholarship.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The article is underpinned by the missiological concept of 'Life in its fullness'. The World Council of Churches affirms that 'life in all its fullness is Jesus Christ's ultimate concern and mission'.

**Keywords:** Nelus Niemandt; Peter White; Reformed and Pentecostal Theologians; missional living; missional community; diversity.

## Introduction

The church operates within multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts, and advancements in communication technology are fostering a greater awareness of diverse identities and pursuits globally. Christians, both locally and internationally, engage with individuals from various religions and cultures to build societies founded on love, peace and justice. The plurality of these contexts presents a challenge to churches, necessitating a serious commitment to interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural communication (World Council of Churches 2013:6). Although this statement highlights the church's role in promoting tolerance and respect for different faiths, it also resonates with the concept of intra-faith or inter-church relations within an ecumenical framework.

From 2013 to 2014, I had the privilege of studying under Prof. Nelus Niemandt at the Faculty of Religion and Theology, at the University of Pretoria. During this period, I was the sole PhD student with a Pentecostal orientation, focusing on African Pentecostalism. This was also Prof. Niemandt's first experience supervising a Pentecostal student, making it a mutual learning journey and an opportunity for us to listen to each other.

Notably, Prof. Niemandt was the Moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church at that time. I resided with him and his family throughout my studies and continued to do so after my graduation when I was appointed as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria.

A few months after I arrived in Pretoria, Prof. Niemandt took me to a Fresh Expression conference at Molerital Park, Pretoria, where he presented a paper titled 'Artisanal cheeses or artisanal Jesus – loving your postal code enough to reflect it in the life and theology of the church'. This paper was later published by Missionalia (Niemandt 2014). The insights from this paper became clearer to me when I was asked to contribute to his *Festschrift*. In his paper, Niemandt argues that the incarnation, along with the theological imperatives of contextualisation and inculturation, forms the foundation for the future of missiology as a theological discipline (Niemandt 2014:38–39).

**Note:** The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Festschrift Nelus Niemandt' under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Johannes J. Knoetze and Dr Yolande Steenkamp.

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Niemandt's submission implies that Missiology excels in providing the framework, insights, knowledge and reflection necessary for contextualisation. This thought resonates with the views of scholars such as Bosch (1991), Shenk (2006), Van Engen (2006) and Netland (2006).

Bosch (1991:497) asserts that missiology's primary concern is the 'contextual elucidation of the relationship between God, God's world and God's church', navigating the dynamic interplay between text and context. Missiology is particularly adept at aiding the church and theology in this process, especially in the art of crossing cultural and contextual boundaries. The theological necessity of contextualisation implies that the church, theology and theological education cannot function effectively without missiology. This is pertinent to both aspects of the paradoxical 'glocal' or 'bifocal' context (Shenk 2006:11), as the 21st-century church is inherently glocal in its nature and theological approach (Van Engen 2006:163, 172). With the increasing momentum of globalisation, missiology will engage in a 'globalising theology' that acknowledges our heightened global awareness. It will leverage missiological insights and the understanding of mission as contextualisation to offer a diverse array of perspectives from Christian communities worldwide, aiming for greater holiness in living and faithfulness in fulfilling God's mission globally (Netland 2006:30). Concurrently, with the intensifying focus on the local, missiology will again draw on its contextualisation insights to create a truly artisanal experience, inviting local communities to partake in the 'bread of life'.

After over a decade of my academic journey, I can confidently assert that Prof. Niemandt exemplified a 'glocal' and ecumenical perspective within his reformed theological orientation, allowing for learning from other church traditions. I am convinced that this approach has guided both our academic and ministerial journeys at the broader ecumenical level.

In this context, this article aims to reflect on our journey from a missiological perspective using the lens of 'living with the other' (Bosch 2011) and 'Life in its fullness' (World Council of Churches 2013:4; Jn 10:10). In doing so, I employ an autoethnographic research methodology to discuss my journey with Prof. Nelus Niemandt (Adams & Herrmann 2023).

To address the aim of this article, I will conceptualise the idea of 'living with the other' and then explore the theology of hospitality and mentorship within the context of diversity as a way of strengthening the missiological concept of 'Life in its fullness'. I will also discuss missional hospitality and academic mentorship, sharing spaces for daily life experience and lessons from natural things with a special focus on the role of Mrs. Marthenet Niemandt. I will then conclude the article by focusing on the implications of my journey with Prof. Nelus Niemandt for practice in missional living and

encouragement for continued ecumenical dialogue, collaboration and future research.

## 'Living with the other': A missiological perspective

The missiological concept of 'living with the other', as articulated by Bosch (2011) in his book *Transforming mission* underscores the significance of engaging with and understanding those who differ from ourselves. This notion is embedded within the broader framework of the mission as 'crossing frontiers', which is identified as a fundamental aspect of the Christian mission (Ma 2023).

Bosch (1980:18) posits that mission entails traversing not only geographical boundaries but also cultural, social and religious frontiers. This necessitates a willingness to engage with and comprehend the perspectives and experiences of others. Central to Bosch's thesis is the concept of mutual respect and dialogue, which involves recognising the inherent worth and dignity of every individual and being open to learning from them. This dialogical approach requires both parties to listen and learn from each other (Bosch 2011:38–39). In addition, Bosch (2011:173) emphasises the importance of incarnational ministry, wherein Christians live among those they seek to serve, sharing in their lives and struggles. This approach mirrors the example of Jesus, who lived among people and shared in their experiences. Bosch advocates for a holistic approach to mission that addresses not only spiritual needs but also social, economic and political issues, thereby working towards justice, peace and reconciliation in all areas of life (Bosch 2011:89).

Sagi (2018) explores the ethical dimensions of living with the other, highlighting the importance of creating space for the other to be fully present and understood. This aligns with Bosch's (2011:38–39) emphasis on mutual respect and dialogue. In a different context, Kim (2000) critiques Bosch's work for its insufficient engagement with contemporary issues but acknowledges the significance of his emphasis on crossing frontiers and engaging with diverse perspectives. Kim's concern is addressed in this article from a more practical perspective.

In my scholarly assessment, my journey with Prof. Nelus Niemandt exemplifies Bosch's concept of missional living in several significant ways. Embracing diversity, both traditions (Reformed and Classical Pentecostalism) contribute unique perspectives and strengths to our journey. Engaging with one another has made our understanding of mission and ministry more comprehensive. This engagement aligns with Bosch's emphasis on the enrichment that arises from diverse interactions. This dynamic also reflects Bosch's emphasis on mutual respect and dialogue, where both parties actively listen and learn from each other (Bosch 1991). Through these encounters, I began to understand and appreciate my limitations as an emerging Pentecostal scholar in a reformed environment, and interestingly, Prof. Nelus Niemandt also began to appreciate the Pneumatological phenomenon

among the Classical Pentecostal movement or churches. His writings began to integrate the role of the Holy Spirit, discernment and the spirituality of church leadership and ministers' lives in an intentional manner.

Our living and working together, from a student-supervisor relationship to colleagues in the same department at the University of Pretoria, even though he was the Head of the Department, embody the incarnational approach to ministry that Bosch advocates. According to Bosch (1991), this involves sharing in the lives and struggles of those they seek to serve. Analysing our journey, I assert that Bosch's concept of 'living with the other' provides a valuable framework for understanding and engaging with diversity in a missional context.

Building on the above-stated discourse, I will now expatiate on the missiological concept of 'life in its fullness' by linking it to inclusive and transformative theological education in Africa. The discussion argues for inclusive theological education in Africa and more especially in South Africa, that gives room for students from other Christian denominations to pursue theological education in predominantly reformed faculties of theology and Religion in South Africa without fear, intimidation and being ridiculed because of their background which differs.

## Model of inclusive and transformative theological scholarship: Life in its fullness

The concept of 'Life in its fullness', as articulated by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2013 and rooted in John 10:10, provides a profound framework for developing an inclusive and transformative model of theological scholarship. This model is particularly relevant in the context of African theological education and ministerial formation, where diversity and inclusivity are essential for addressing contemporary challenges and fostering holistic development.

The WCC's missiological concept of 'Life in its fullness' emphasises the interconnectedness of spiritual, social, economic and political dimensions of life. It advocates for a holistic approach to mission that seeks to promote justice, peace and reconciliation in all areas of life (WCC 2013). This comprehensive vision aligns with the biblical promise of abundant life in John 10:10, where Jesus declares, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full'. This promise underscores the transformative potential of the Christian mission to bring about the fullness of life for all people.

In the context of theological scholarship, this vision calls for an inclusive approach that embraces diversity in all its forms. African theological education, in particular, must address the historical and ongoing issues of racial, cultural and gender inequalities. As Naidoo (2016, 2024) argues, the legacy of apartheid and persistent racial inequalities continue to shape the landscape of South African theological education. Therefore, an inclusive model of theological scholarship must

actively engage with these issues, promoting a curriculum that reflects the diverse cultural backgrounds, personal histories and theological commitments of its students.

Transformative theological scholarship requires a commitment to social justice and the empowerment of marginalised communities. Liberation theology, as developed by scholars such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, provides a critical framework for this endeavour. Gutiérrez's emphasis on the preferential option for the poor and the importance of reading scripture through the lens of the oppressed challenges traditional interpretations and calls for a transformative approach that addresses systemic inequalities (Gutiérrez 1973). This perspective is particularly relevant in the African context, where issues of poverty, inequality and social injustice are pervasive.

Furthermore, the model of inclusive and transformative theological scholarship must incorporate the principles of mutual respect and dialogue, as emphasised by Bosch (2011). This involves creating spaces for diverse voices to be heard and valued, fostering an environment where students and scholars from different backgrounds can engage in meaningful dialogue and learn from one another. This dialogical approach not only enriches the academic experience but also prepares future church leaders to engage effectively with the diverse communities they will serve.

Theological education must also be responsive to contemporary issues and challenges. Balia and Kim (2010:163) critique traditional theological approaches for their insufficient engagement with contemporary issues and call for a more practical and contextually relevant approach. This involves integrating contemporary social, economic and political issues into the theological curriculum, ensuring that students are equipped to address the complex realities of the modern world (Womack, Duncan & Pillay 2020).

In linking this discourse to the diverse church traditions in Africa, and more specifically in South Africa, it is imperative that faculties of theology and religion appreciate and embrace theological diversity. This appreciation promotes the missiological idea of 'Life in its fullness' by fostering an environment where students from various Christian traditions and theological orientations can embark on a mutual journey of learning and formation. Such an environment not only enriches the academic experience but also prepares students to become change agents in their communities.

The life and theological praxis of Prof. Nelus Niemandt exemplifies this perspective. His engagement with students from different Christian traditions and his commitment to fostering mutual respect and dialogue reflect the principles of inclusive and transformative theological scholarship. His work in supervising students from diverse backgrounds and his writings on missional ecclesiology and leadership demonstrate a commitment to embracing theological diversity and promoting a holistic approach to ministry. In my

interaction with him in October 2024 on the issue of why he decided to accept me as his PhD student in 2013, he responded, 'students are gift from God ... if mission is from the margins, then you need to hear the voices from the margins'. He further noted that the opportunity he had to serve as the Moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church exposed him to the broader ecumenical environment and increased his theological thought in embracing people of other faiths and Christian denominations.

I submit that the model of inclusive and transformative theological scholarship, grounded in the WCCs' concept of 'Life in its fullness' and the biblical promise of abundant life in John 10:10, provides a valuable framework for the future of African theological education and ministerial formation. By embracing diversity, promoting social justice, fostering mutual respect and dialogue, and engaging with contemporary issues, this model can contribute to the development of a more inclusive, equitable and transformative theological education that prepares future church leaders to serve effectively in a diverse and complex world.

Further to the preceding discourse, I will now focus on missional hospitality and academic mentorship. This discussion is closely connected to the missiological concept of 'Life in its fullness'.

## Missional hospitality and academic mentorship

Missional hospitality, deeply rooted in biblical teachings and missiological concepts, serves as a profound paradigm for understanding the dynamics of academic mentorship within theological education. Discourses under this subheading explore the intersection of hospitality and mentorship, particularly within the context of Prof. Nelus Niemandt's hosting me at his house with his family and his mentorship role during my PhD studies and postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Pretoria.

Hospitality in the biblical context is a recurring theme, emphasising the welcoming of strangers and the provision of care and support. The Old Testament presents numerous instances of hospitality, such as Abraham's reception of three visitors in Genesis 18, which is often cited as a model of divine hospitality (Lv 19:33–3; Gn 18; Fermer 1996:494). The New Testament continues this theme, with Jesus frequently engaging in acts of hospitality, such as dining with tax collectors and sinners (Mt 9:10–13) and washing the disciples' feet (Jn 13:1–17). These acts underscore the importance of hospitality as a reflection of God's inclusive love and grace (Freet 2014:63; Longkumer 2020:2, 9; Smither 2021:18).

Missiologically, hospitality is seen as an extension of the church's mission. It involves creating spaces where individuals feel welcomed, valued and supported. This concept is integral to the *missio Dei*, the mission of God, which calls for the church to embody God's hospitality in its outreach and engagement with the world (Smither 2021:18).

Hospitality, therefore, is not merely a social practice but a theological imperative that reflects the character of God and the mission of the church (Yong 2007:62, 64).

Academic mentorship, particularly in a theological environment, can be viewed through the lens of missional hospitality. Mentorship involves more than the transfer of knowledge; it encompasses the holistic development of the mentee, including their spiritual, emotional and professional growth. This holistic approach aligns with the principles of hospitality, which seeks to nurture and support the whole person (Brandner 2013:94).

Prof. Nelus Niemandt's personality and theological orientation exemplify this integration of hospitality and mentorship. During my PhD studies from 2013 to 2014 and my postdoctoral fellowship from 2015 to 2019, Prof. Niemandt provided not only academic guidance but also personal support and hospitality. This relationship extended beyond the confines of the university, as Prof. Niemandt hosted me, offering a space of welcome and care that facilitated both academic and personal growth.

Prof. Niemandt's mentorship style is characterised by relational and missional leadership. He emphasises the importance of building strong, supportive relationships with his mentees and fostering an environment of trust and mutual respect. This approach is reflective of his broader missional theology, which prioritises relationality and community.

The impact of Prof. Niemandt's mentorship on my academic and personal life is significant. Under Prof. Niemandt's guidance, I did not only advanced in my academic pursuits but also experienced personal growth and development. This holistic mentorship model, grounded in missional hospitality, offered me the support and encouragement needed to thrive both academically and personally. Furthermore, our relationship serves as a model of missional living. It demonstrates how academic mentorship, when infused with the principles of hospitality, can create transformative experiences for both mentor and mentee. This relationship reflects the missional call to embody God's hospitality in all aspects of life, including academia.

In my opinion, the lessons learned from this mentorship have broader implications for ecumenical practices. By prioritising hospitality and relationality, academic institutions can foster environments that support the holistic development of students and scholars. This approach can enhance the ecumenical movement by promoting inclusivity, mutual support and collaborative learning (Barret 2011). The integration of missional hospitality and academic mentorship offers a powerful framework for theological education. The exemplary life of Prof. Niemandt illustrates how this approach can lead to significant academic and personal growth, while also contributing to the broader goals of the *missio Dei* and ecumenical engagement. The ripple effect of



the experience I had with Prof. Nelus Niemandt made me see it as a duty to do the same for my students. Students I have supervised in the past 10 years would attest to this fact.

## Sharing spaces for daily life experience and lessons from natural things: The role of Mrs. Marthenet Niemandt and the children

In reflecting on the concept of sharing spaces for daily life experiences and lessons from natural things, it is essential to highlight the significant role played by Mrs. Marthenet Niemandt, the wife of Prof. Nelus Niemandt, and their children. In this reflection, I will integrate the concepts of missional living and community of hospitality, as I have experienced in the Niemandt household.

Missional living is a lifestyle that embodies the mission of God in everyday life. It involves integrating faith into all aspects of life and actively participating in God's redemptive work in the world. This concept is deeply rooted in biblical principles, such as the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20, which calls believers to make disciples of all nations (Briggs 2024). Missional living is not just about what we say but what we do, and it has a profound impact on the lives of those around us. The Niemandt household exemplified a community of hospitality, where everyone, regardless of their background, was welcomed and treated as part of the family. Hospitality, in this context, goes beyond mere social niceties; it is about creating a space where people feel valued and loved. This aligns with the idea that hospitality is a cardinal virtue in building community and fostering relational power (Bennett 2003:51–61; Lugosi 2010:31–38).

In the Niemandt household, we lived as a big family. Despite our diverse backgrounds in terms of race, culture, nationality and denominational orientation, there was not a single day I felt like a stranger. This sense of belonging extended to my relationship with the family dogs, Jackson and Juliet, who would enter my room every morning to spend time with me. This daily interaction with the dogs was a small but significant part of the inclusive and loving environment that characterised the household.

Sharing meals together was another important aspect of our communal life. We always had the opportunity to share meals at the same table, and I was frequently invited to join their visitors for meals. This practice of sharing food is a powerful expression of hospitality and community, reinforcing the bonds between us.

Mrs. Marthenet Niemandt, whom I affectionately called 'Mummy', played a pivotal role in my life during my stay with the family. She would often call me for discussions on life, family and my academic journey. One of the most memorable moments with her was when she taught me a lesson on how God cares for his creation. She had a special place in her garden where she placed food for birds. One

afternoon, while I was reflecting on a challenging chapter of my PhD research, she called me to the garden to observe the birds eating. Mrs. Niemandt (2014) said:

Peter, see how these birds are eating. They come here every day because they know there will be food for them. Similarly, when you trust in God's providence, He will always make provision available to you in the most difficult seasons of your life. (personal communication)

This simple yet profound message has stayed with me ever since.

My stay with the Niemandt family was not just about sharing space; it was about experiencing sincere love from all their children, family, friends and in-laws. This experience highlighted that missional living goes beyond words; it is about actions that positively impact the lives of those around us. The Niemandt household demonstrated that living missionally and practising hospitality can create a transformative community where everyone feels valued and loved.

The role of Mrs. Marthenet Niemandt and the children in creating a space for daily life experiences and lessons from natural things cannot be overstated. Their embodiment of missional living and community of hospitality provided a powerful example of how to live out one's faith in everyday life, impacting those around them in meaningful ways.

## Implications for practice in missional living and encouragement for continued ecumenical dialogue, collaboration and future research

The practical implications of missional living are vast and varied. One key aspect is the intentional creation of inclusive and welcoming communities. Practitioners of missional living should strive to create environments where individuals from diverse backgrounds feel valued and included. This involves not only welcoming people into physical spaces but also fostering a culture of acceptance and mutual respect (Ladouceur 2020). Another practical implication is the emphasis on actions over words. Missional living is about embodying one's faith through tangible actions that positively impact others. This could involve community service, acts of kindness and creating opportunities for meaningful interactions. Practitioners should focus on living out their values in ways that are visible and impactful to those around them (World Council of Churches 2000).

Using my context of experience, I would like to encourage continued ecumenical dialogue and collaboration in the faculties of theology and religion. I included religion because 'the biggest threat to the world is not poverty, health, or economic challenges but religious intolerance, the fear of compromising our faith, bias, and prejudice about other faiths' (White 2023a:43). Bosch (2011:488) argues that 'the two major unsolved problems for the Christian church are its relation to the worldviews that offer this-worldly salvation, and its relation to other faiths'. Furthermore, White (2023b) states:

[T]he reality of the interfaith phenomenon in a religiously diverse world is unquestionable. As the world becomes more globalised, people of different religious backgrounds are increasingly coming into contact with each other. (p. 2)

The concept of a 'journey' is employed in this article to underscore the notion that we are all traversing a path in this world. Throughout this journey, numerous encounters and opportunities for learning will arise. The term 'journey' serves as a reflexive reference to the WCC document, 'Together towards life' (WCC 2013). My interpretation is influenced by Kim's (2014) exploration of the phrase 'together towards life' and Hörschele's (2013:107) examination of John Mackay's definition of ecumenics (White 2023a).

Kim (2014:7) elucidates the term 'together' by asserting that 'because Life is for all and because the whole *oikoumene* is interconnected in God's web of life', our engagement in the *missio Dei* should be approached from a perspective of unity, diversity, uniqueness and tolerance. Furthermore, Hörschele's (2013:107) analysis of John Mackay's definition of ecumenics as 'the Science of the Church Universal, conceived as a World Missionary Community, focusing on its nature, functions, relations, and strategy', highlights that church relationships extend beyond inter-church interactions. It encompasses the church's relationship with non-Christian religions, implying that to be a Christian, one must also learn to journey alongside individuals of other faiths.

Given the foregoing, ecumenical dialogue and collaboration are essential for fostering unity and understanding among different Christian denominations and other faiths. The experiences shared in Niemandt's household underscore the importance of creating spaces where individuals from various denominational backgrounds can come together and share their lives. This type of interaction promotes mutual understanding and respect, which are crucial for ecumenical efforts (Pratt 2010). Encouraging continued ecumenical dialogue involves creating opportunities for meaningful interactions between different Christian communities. This could include joint worship services, collaborative community projects and interdenominational study groups. By fostering a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect, ecumenical dialogue can contribute to a more unified and effective Christian witness in the world.

The experiences and reflections shared precedingly highlight several key areas for future research in missional living. Firstly, there is a need to explore the practical applications of missional living in diverse cultural and social contexts. This includes examining how missional principles can be adapted to different environments while maintaining their core values. Research could focus on case studies of communities that have successfully integrated missional living into their daily practices, providing valuable insights and models for others to follow (Muswubi 2024).

Secondly, the role of hospitality in missional living warrants further investigation. Hospitality, as demonstrated by the

Niemandt household, is a powerful tool for building community and fostering relationships. Future research could examine the impact of hospitality on community cohesion, individual well-being and spiritual growth. This could involve both qualitative and quantitative studies to measure the tangible and intangible benefits of hospitable practices.

In addition, the integration of natural elements and lessons from nature, as exemplified by Mrs. Marthenet Niemandt's interactions with birds, offers a unique perspective on missional living. Future research could explore how engaging with nature and observing natural processes can enhance spiritual practices and provide comfort and inspiration during challenging times.

## Conclusion

The journey of a Reformed scholar and an emerging Pentecostal, as exemplified in this article, underscores the profound impact of missional living within the context of diversity. Through the lens of personal experiences and scholarly reflections, this journey highlights the importance of embracing diversity, fostering inclusive communities and engaging in meaningful ecumenical dialogue.

The article posits that the concept of 'Life in its fullness', rooted in the WCC's vision and the biblical promise of abundant life, provides a robust framework for inclusive and transformative theological scholarship. This model necessitates addressing racial, cultural and gender inequalities, promoting social justice and empowering marginalised communities. Furthermore, it emphasises the need for mutual respect and dialogue, creating spaces where diverse voices are heard and valued.

It was revealed that the practical implications of missional living are extensive, involving the intentional creation of welcoming environments and the embodiment of faith through tangible actions. The experiences shared in the Niemandt household illustrate the power of hospitality and community in fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect. These principles are essential for building cohesive and transformative communities.

Moreover, the article advocates for continued ecumenical dialogue and collaboration as crucial for fostering unity and understanding among different Christian denominations and other faiths. This dialogue promotes mutual respect and cooperation, contributing to a more unified and effective Christian witness in the world.

Finally, the article argues that by embracing diversity, promoting social justice, fostering dialogue and addressing contemporary issues, this journey offers a valuable model for theological education and ministerial formation. This model prepares future church leaders to serve effectively in a diverse and complex world.

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### Disclaimer

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