



# C.P.J. Niemandt: A theological pioneer in missional leadership and ecclesiology



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C.P.J. Niemandt, widely known as Nelus Niemandt, is a distinguished theologian in the fields of missional leadership and ecclesiology. His academic journey, leadership within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), and extensive scholarly contributions have positioned him as a key thought leader in missiology. This article explores his career, academic contributions and theological perspectives, particularly his emphasis on the missional church and leadership. The ultimate purpose of the article is to provide an overview of the impressive contribution of C.P.J. Niemandt to the fields of missiology and ecclesiology. While Niemandt's work is highly influential, some critiques highlight the need for stronger empirical grounding and practical applications of his theories. Nevertheless, his legacy continues to shape contemporary discussions on church identity, mission and leadership.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article is interdisciplinary, making use of resources from the following theological disciplines: missiology, practical theology and systematic theology. It also clearly relates to academic fields like sociology and leadership.

**Keywords:** C.P.J. Niemandt; leadership; ecclesiology; missional; Dutch Reformed Church.

## Introduction

C.P.J. Niemandt is a distinguished figure in missiology and theology, particularly in the South African church context. Born with a passion for leadership and theology, he studied at the University of Pretoria, where his academic journey began with a BA in 1978, followed by a BD in theology (Cum Laude) in 1981, a postgraduate diploma in theology (Cum Laude) in 1982 and a doctorate in theology (DD) in 1997. His doctoral dissertation focused on ethics and multiculturalism, laying the groundwork for his impactful career.

## Early career and pastoral ministry

Niemandt began his career as a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), serving congregations in Triomf and Weltevreden and working as a police chaplain. His dedication and leadership quickly propelled him into broader roles within the church, where he made significant contributions to the renewal of synodal structures, the improvement of interdenominational relations within the DRC family and ecumenical engagement, particularly in Africa.

## C.P.J. Niemandt: Leader in the Dutch Reformed Church

Niemandt served as the actuary, assessor and moderator of the General Synod of the DRC, demonstrating visionary leadership. Among his notable contributions were his role in the provisional acceptance of the Belhar Confession in 2011 and efforts to include it as an 'optional' confession in 2015, although this proposal ultimately failed. He also supported progressive decisions on social issues, notably the 2015 General Synod's positive stance on homosexual unions, and expressed disappointment when this decision was reversed in 2016.

## Academic contributions

Niemandt transitioned to academia with great distinction, serving for 13 years at the University of Pretoria, where he eventually became head of the department and professor in the faculty of theology and religion. As an emeritus professor and research associate of the faculty, his influence in theology and missiology endures.

**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.

He is a prolific scholar, with over 80 publications to his name, and has presented more than 100 papers at national and international conferences. His expertise has been sought worldwide, with visiting academic stints at institutions such as Princeton Theological Seminary, Edinburgh University and Radboud University in the Netherlands. His research and mentorship have guided more than 80 postgraduate students, including nearly 30 PhD candidates, contributing significantly to theological scholarship.

Niemandt's research and publications on missional leadership and ecclesiology are among his most influential contributions. As of 2022, Niemandt's National Research Foundation (NRF) rating is a C1. His monograph on 'Missional Leadership' (2019b) is regarded as a seminal work, illustrating his commitment to equipping the church for its mission in a constantly evolving world. The theme of missional leadership would dominate his publications for the coming years (Breedt & Niemandt 2013; Cordier & Niemandt 2014, 2015; Marais & Niemandt 2023; Niemandt 2015a, 2016, 2017, 2019b, 2022).

### Current role

Until recently, Niemandt served as the rector and chief executive officer of Huguenote Kollege, a private tertiary institution in South Africa. In this role, he continued to shape theological education and leadership development. He retired from this post in 2025.

## C.P.J. Niemandt: Transformative contributions

C.P.J. Niemandt's contributions to missional leadership and ecclesiology reflect a deep commitment to aligning the church's identity and mission with the transformative mission of God (*missio Dei*) in the world. Through his writings, teachings and leadership, Niemandt has championed a vision of the church as a dynamic, relational and contextually engaged community, embodying God's kingdom values of justice, reconciliation and holistic transformation (Niemandt 2019:213–219).

### Key areas of contribution

Niemandt's most influential contributions to church and academia revolve around the following areas:

#### Missional Church

Niemandt is well known for his advocacy and development of missional ecclesiology, emphasising the role of the church in God's mission (*missio Dei*). His work has helped shape the understanding and practice of the church as a community sent into the world to participate in God's redemptive mission.

#### Publications

Through numerous books, articles and presentations, Niemandt has significantly influenced theological discourse in South Africa and beyond. His works often explore themes like leadership, contextual theology and the intersection of church and society.

### Leadership and teaching

Niemandt has served in various leadership roles in theological institutions, such as the University of Pretoria and Huguenot College, and has mentored a generation of pastors, theologians and leaders. His teaching has been pivotal in equipping leaders for a changing and diverse world.

### Focus on contextual relevance

His emphasis on adapting theological approaches to specific cultural and societal contexts has made his contributions particularly relevant to the African and global church.

### Missional leadership and ecclesiology

Niemandt's framework for missional leadership emphasises adaptability, collaboration, and a forward-thinking approach to navigating the complexities of contemporary society. His work (2016) challenges traditional paradigms of institutional leadership, advocating for a participatory, spirit-led model that empowers communities to discern and join God's mission.

His ecclesiology is particularly relevant to the post-apartheid South African context (Masuku & Niemandt 2012:2–7) and the broader global challenges of secularisation, climate change and cultural diversity. Niemandt's (2017) insights offer a robust theological and practical foundation for leadership that is both contextually relevant and theologically grounded. His emphasis on relational leadership (Breedt 2013:16;45), ecological responsibility and holistic transformation continues to inspire faith communities to act as agents of change, embodying the hope and redemptive mission of God in a rapidly changing world.

### Impact in the Dutch Reformed Church

Niemandt has played a pivotal role in the DRC's journey towards embracing a missional identity, contributing to policy documents and guiding congregations in this transition. His research necessitates participatory action research, deeply influenced by his experience in denominational structures. He served as:

- Moderator of the Highveld Synod of the DRC (2003–2007).
- Member of the Executive of the General Synod of the DRC (2004).
- Chair of the Executive of the General Synod (2011).
- Moderator of two General Synods (2011 and 2013).

In 2007, the publication of *Nuwe Drome vir Nuwe Werlikhede* (Niemandt 2007) was described as 'the most important book on the South African church scene in recent years' (Gaum 2008). This publication received a nomination for the Andrew Murray Prize for theological literature.

In 2011, a policy document titled *Missional Ecclesiology* was tabled at the General Synod (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk [NGK] 2013). This document, the result of nearly nine

years of study, marked a significant development in DRC ecclesiology and polity, evolving into a fully fledged ecclesiology (Niemandt 2014:73). This long process laid the groundwork for a new policy document affirmed at the 2013 General Synod. The synod accepted the new policy, and since then, it has adjusted the course of the church concerning her missional leadership and ecclesiology.

On behalf of the DRC, Niemandt also fulfilled the following leadership roles:

- Patron of the South African Church Leaders Indaba (the broadest body of Christian Church leaders in South Africa) 2013/2014.
- Member of the South African National Religious Leaders Council: 2012–2015.
- Represent DRC on the National Religious Leaders Forum.

### Leadership beyond the church

Niemandt's influence extends beyond the church and academia. Through his theological insight, leadership, and dedication to fostering dialogue and understanding, Niemandt has left an indelible mark on theology, the church, and society in South Africa and beyond. His contributions continue to shape the discourse on missional leadership, inspiring faith communities to embrace their role in God's transformative work in the world.

The following serves as a testimony to the acknowledgement of C.P.J. Niemandt's vast contribution to church, academia and society. Membership is, in most instances, possible only by invitation.

His membership in national and international bodies includes the following:

- South African Missiological Society (SAMS) – full member. Organiser and chair of SAMS 2011 and SAMS 2016 congresses.
- International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS) – full member.
- Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns – full member.
- Member of the Finance Committee of the Uniting General Council of The World Communion of Reformed Churches (2010).
- Member of the Advisory Editorial Board of the journal *Verbum et Ecclesia*.
- Deputy editor of the journal *Missionalia*.
- Member of the editorial board of the international journal *Ecclesial Futures*.
- Member of the board of Fresh Expressions South Africa.
- Member of the Advisory Board of the Cinnamon Network in South Africa.
- Member of the Editorial Advisory Board of *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*.
- Member of Ecclesial Futures – international research consortium by invitation only.

He received the prestigious SA Akademie award for one of the six best overall academic articles in a peer-reviewed journal in Afrikaans in 2018 (Niemandt 2018).

Apart from this, the acknowledgement of Niemandt as a thought leader on the theme of missional leadership led to invitations to various academic institutions as a guest lecturer and supervisor of postgraduate students. The following can be mentioned:

- 2015: Participated in block lecturing course CL4540 'Transforming congregations for mission' at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, United States.
- 2015: Lecture at Baptist Theological College of Southern Africa.
- 2013–2015: Appointed as supervisor of doctoral students at Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.
- 2013–2014: Doctoral colloquium at Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Supervision of doctoral students.
- 2012: Guest lecturer at Leeds Trinity University College in March 2012 on 'Indigenous religions and local Christianities'.
- 2012: Guest lecture at York St. John University, Department Theology and Public Life, in March 2012 on 'Christian leadership in post-struggle South Africa'.
- 2011: Guest lecture at Károli Gáspár University in Budapest on 16 November 2011 on 'Mission in the Dutch Reformed Church in a post-apartheid South Africa'.
- 2011: Guest lecture at Debrecen Reformed Theological University on 15 November 2011 on 'Mission in the Dutch Reformed Church in a post-apartheid South Africa'.

### C.J.P. Niemandt's vision on missional leadership

Niemandt's concept of missional leadership is deeply rooted in the broader missional theology movement, and several theologians and thinkers have significantly influenced his approach. These include pioneers of the *missio Dei* framework and key contributors to missional ecclesiology. Theologians and their contributions that were likely to shape Niemandt's views are discussed briefly.

#### David Bosch – Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission (1991)

Bosch, a fellow South African theologian, is foundational to missional theology and the concept of *missio Dei*. His work emphasised the mission as a holistic, transformative engagement with the world, which aligns closely with Niemandt's focus on contextual and holistic missional leadership. The mission originates with God and is carried out through the church.

#### Lesslie Newbigin – The Gospel in a pluralist society (1989)

Centred on the missional church movement, focusing on contextual theology and the interplay between the church and culture in a rapidly changing world. Newbigin's emphasis on

the church as a 'missionary community' in the Western, post-Christendom context resonates with Niemandt's focus on the church's role in contemporary society. His critique of the separation of faith from public life likely informs Niemandt's advocacy for incarnational leadership.

### **Darrel Guder – Missional church: A vision for the sending of the Church in North America (1998)**

He introduced the idea of the 'missional church', focusing on the church's identity as being sent by God rather than being a static institution. This perspective aligns with Niemandt's emphasis on leadership that mobilises the church for participation in God's mission.

### **Alan Roxburgh – The missional leader (2006) and missional map-making (2010)**

Roxburgh focuses on the adaptive and contextual nature of leadership in a rapidly changing world. His emphasis on collaboration, discernment, and leading amidst uncertainty likely informs Niemandt's understanding of effective missional leadership. The church is a community of disciples on mission.

### **Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch – The shaping of things to come: Innovation and mission for the 21st-century Church (2003)**

Their focus on incarnational living, contextual mission, and the dismantling of institutional barriers to mission aligns with Niemandt's approach to leadership that prioritises community engagement and flexibility. Leadership must engage with specific social and cultural contexts.

### **Craig Van Gelder – The ministry of the missional church: A community led by the spirit (2007)**

Van Gelder's work on understanding the church as a spirit-led organism rather than a rigid institution complements Niemandt's emphasis on adaptive, spirit-led leadership.

### **Jürgen Moltmann – The church in the power of the spirit (1975)**

Moltmann's pneumatological and eschatological perspectives on mission likely contribute to Niemandt's integration of spirit-led leadership and the future-orientated nature of the church's mission. Missional leadership is spirit-led. It emphasises discernment and adaptability in leadership.

Niemandt presents a model of leadership that integrates theology, leadership theory and practical application. Missional leaders are called to guide communities in discerning and participating in the *missio Dei*, fostering a culture of adaptability, participation and contextual relevance. This approach emphasises that effective leadership is not about control but about empowering communities to join in God's work in the world.

C.P.J. Niemandt's vision of missional leadership challenges the church to reimagine its role in the world. By embracing

the principles of contextual engagement, collaboration, innovation and holistic ministry, leaders can guide their communities to participate faithfully in God's mission. Ultimately, this vision fosters a church that is deeply rooted in Christ's teachings, responsive to the needs of the world, and committed to advancing the kingdom of God.

This document outlines Niemandt's view on missional leadership by researching it at the hands of theological foundations, core principles and practical implications of missional leadership.

## **Theological foundation**

Niemandt's concept of missional leadership is deeply rooted, as previously pointed out, in the theological understanding of *missio Dei*. This Latin term, meaning 'mission of God', underscores that God is the initiator of mission, and the church is called to participate in this divine activity. Key theological underpinnings of Niemandt's vision include the following:

### **Trinitarian perspective**

The missional activity of God is seen as a reflection of the relational nature of the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, the Son sends the Spirit, and the Spirit empowers the church to participate in the ongoing mission (Niemandt 2012:4-7).

### **Incarnational ministry**

Leadership involves embodying the presence of Christ in the world. This includes a commitment to live among and serve communities in ways that reflect Christ's compassion, humility and justice (Niemandt 2019:92).

### **Kingdom-orientated mission**

Niemandt (2015:5) envisions leadership that prioritises the values of God's kingdom – justice, peace, love and reconciliation – as central to the church's mission.

## **Core principles of missional leadership**

Niemandt identifies several principles that guide effective missional leadership:

### **Contextual engagement**

Leaders must understand and respond to the specific cultural, social and economic contexts of their communities. This includes listening to the needs, challenges and aspirations of the people they serve (Niemandt 2010:11).

### **Collaborative leadership**

Missional leadership is inherently relational. It involves empowering others, fostering teamwork, and creating a culture of shared responsibility for the mission (Breedt 2013:6).



## Innovative practices

In a rapidly changing world, missional leaders must embrace creativity and adaptability. This includes exploring new ways of being the church and leveraging technology to engage with diverse populations (Niemandt 2016:21 & 2019:76).

## Disciple-making

Central to Niemandt's vision is the formation of disciples who live out their faith in tangible ways. Leaders are called to nurture spiritual growth and equip others for active participation in God's mission (Niemandt & Niemandt 2021:4).

## Holistic ministry

Missional leadership addresses both spiritual and physical needs. This principle recognises that proclaiming the gospel involves acts of service, advocacy and community development (Niemandt & Niemandt 2021:5).

## Practical implications

Niemandt's vision of missional leadership translates into actionable strategies for church leaders and faith communities:

### Shifting from maintenance to mission

Churches should transition from merely sustaining institutional structures to actively engaging in mission (Niemandt 2015:5). Leaders play a pivotal role in fostering this paradigm shift.

### Community integration

Leaders are encouraged to build partnerships with local organisations, engage in interfaith dialogue, and contribute to societal well-being through practical initiatives. A missional church is a movement to others, outsiders and the world. It is a relational concept that values koinonia (Niemandt 2015:6).

### Formation of missional teams

Niemandt advocates for the development of teams within churches that are dedicated to discerning and implementing God's mission in their context (Niemandt 2019:57).

### Emphasis on storytelling

Sharing stories (2019:4) of transformation and hope serves as a powerful tool for inspiring action and demonstrating the impact of missional efforts. In various works on missional leadership and church transformation, Niemandt (2012) emphasises the importance of community engagement and contextual communication, which often involve sharing stories of change and hope to inspire action within church communities.

## Sustainable leadership practices

Self-care, spiritual disciplines, and ongoing education are essential for leaders to remain effective and resilient in their missional calling. Niemandt emphasises the importance of holistic development for leaders, encompassing personal well-being, spiritual growth and continuous learning (Niemandt 2019:57).

## The reception of C.J.P. Niemandt's view on missional leadership and ecclesiology

While direct criticisms of C.P.J. Niemandt's work are not readily available, Truls Åkerlund, in *Missional Leadership: A Critical Review of Research Literature* (2016), engages with his contributions and their limitations. Niemandt's work is significant in fostering a theological understanding of leadership within a missional context. However, Åkerlund's critique highlights areas and makes suggestions regarding where greater clarity, stronger empirical grounding and increased practical applicability could enhance its impact.

Åkerlund's response serves to advance the conversation on missional leadership by balancing theological depth with actionable insights. Additionally, the critiques of other theologians who share Åkerlund's perspectives will also be considered. To examine the reception of Niemandt's approach within the field of missional leadership and ecclesiology, this discussion will assess its strengths and weaknesses, as identified by Åkerlund.

The next section presents critique on Niemandt's approach.

### Mission as *missio Dei*

Niemandt firmly roots missional leadership in the concept of *missio Dei*, emphasising that mission originates from God rather than the church. This perspective aligns well with Åkerlund's (2016) view of mission as God-centred, ensuring theological robustness. By highlighting the participatory role of leaders in God's mission, Niemandt fosters a model of leadership characterised by humility and service. However, the reliance on *missio Dei* as a central concept risks being overly abstract. Åkerlund cautions that practitioners may struggle to translate this theological idea into actionable leadership strategies. Moreover, according to him, Niemandt's approach offers limited guidance on how leaders can practically navigate the tension between institutional structures and the fluid nature of missional engagement.

### Participatory leadership and empowerment

Niemandt (2010:13) emphasises empowering others, aligning with Åkerlund's perspective on leadership as facilitating participation and equipping individuals for mission. This approach resonates with modern leadership theories prioritising collaboration and community

engagement, offering a contemporary application. Similarly, Niemandt (2019) highlights the importance of participatory leadership, advocating for shared leadership and moving away from traditional hierarchical models towards a more inclusive framework. This emphasis parallels the insights of Blanchard and Barrett (2011:58–60), who argue that effective leaders foster trust and enable others by developing shared purpose and values. However, while Niemandt presents a broad vision of empowerment, Åkerlund's framework underscores the need for concrete strategies to make this vision actionable – an area where Niemandt's work remains at a high level.

### Contextual sensitivity and adaptive leadership in mission

Niemandt (2019:9) stresses the importance of cultural and contextual sensitivity, a principle that Åkerlund identifies as essential for an effective mission. This emphasis reinforces the relevance of missional leadership in diverse settings. Niemandt's focus on adaptive leadership aligns with Åkerlund's perspective on responsiveness to change and innovation.

Bevans (2002), a prominent scholar in contextual theology, contributes to this discussion with his work *Models of Contextual Theology*, where he critiques and analyses different approaches to contextual theology. His insights provide a critical framework for understanding how theology adapts to various contexts, aligning with Niemandt's ideas.

Åkerlund advocates for a more integrated approach to addressing systemic issues, highlighting the need for leaders to have structured tools to assess and respond to complex contextual challenges.

### The role of the Holy Spirit

Niemandt (2012 & 2013:16) underscores the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding missional leadership, emphasising the importance of spiritual discernment, as also highlighted by Åkerlund. This theological focus ensures that leadership remains grounded in spiritual authority rather than mere human effort. However, a potential risk arises when the mystical aspects of the spirit's role are overemphasised without providing leaders with practical ways to discern and act upon spiritual guidance. Åkerlund addresses this concern by advocating for a balance between spiritual reliance and strategic action, a dimension he finds less developed in Niemandt's work.

### Balancing communal leadership and practical application in missional leadership

Niemandt's (2012) model prioritises community and collective discernment, emphasising relational leadership to strengthen communal bonds and foster inclusivity. This aligns with Åkerlund's perspective, which identifies communal leadership as crucial for sustainable mission. However, Åkerlund also critiques communal approaches,

warning that decision-making can become overly slow or diluted – a challenge, according to him, that Niemandt does not fully address. The tension between communal leadership and the need for decisive action in moments of crisis or ambiguity remains underexplored.

A related critique is that Niemandt's approach is rich in theoretical frameworks but lacks clear, actionable steps for church leaders operating in diverse contexts. This concern is echoed by Bevans (2018), a prominent theologian in missiology, who critiques various approaches to missional leadership by emphasising the need for practical applications alongside theological reflections. These critiques often emerge in discussions on contextual theology and missional church practices.

At the heart of Niemandt's relational leadership model is the theological concept of the Trinity, where God exists in perfect relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This model de-emphasises hierarchy in favour of relationships, mirroring the Trinity's relational structure (Niemandt 2008:20). Maluleke (1994) had already debated the paradigm shift towards relational leadership long before the discussion in Breedts and Niemandt (2013). He critiques relational leadership models inspired by the Trinity, arguing that they may be overly idealised and disconnected from the realities of power dynamics and socio-political complexities, particularly in South Africa.

These critiques collectively highlight a key challenge in Niemandt's model: the need to balance communal discernment with decisive action while ensuring that relational leadership does not become detached from practical realities. Without addressing these tensions, the effectiveness of missional leadership in dynamic and complex contexts may be limited.

### Lack of specificity and empirical grounding

One of the key critiques endorsed by Åkerlund is that Niemandt's framework can lack specificity, as it tends to be broad and descriptive, making it less actionable for practitioners seeking clear guidance. Additionally, while Niemandt's work is rich in theological reflection, it has been criticised for not being sufficiently grounded in empirical research, which limits its applicability in diverse real-world contexts.

## Conclusion

C.J.P. Niemandt's impact on missional leadership and ecclesiology is profound, providing a theologically rich framework that emphasises the church's participation in God's mission (*missio Dei*), relational leadership and contextual engagement. His contributions to theological scholarship, leadership within the DRC, and the broader discourse on missional leadership have significantly shaped contemporary understandings of church identity and mission in a rapidly changing world.

Despite his influence, some critics argue that while Niemandt's work is theologically robust, it sometimes lacks the practical strategies needed for direct application in diverse and complex church contexts. Scholars such as Åkerlund and Bevans highlight the need for a stronger empirical foundation and more concrete leadership models to balance theological depth with actionable guidance. However, it is essential to recognise that theological research operates on a spectrum – while some works prioritise empirical validation, others focus on developing theoretical foundations that inspire further study.

Fair critique acknowledges that not all theological contributions require empirical validation, depending on their intended purpose. Theoretical frameworks are crucial in shaping discourse, even if they do not always provide immediate practical application. Unfair criticism would dismiss such contributions outright, overlooking their potential to inform and inspire empirical research.

Ultimately, whether the critique of Niemandt's work for lacking empirical grounding is justified depends on the expectations of its scope and purpose. If he aimed to develop theoretical frameworks rather than prescriptive models for praxis, the critique may reflect a misunderstanding of his intent. Conversely, if his work is presented as a guide for direct application without empirical support, the criticism holds more weight. Nevertheless, Niemandt's emphasis on adaptive, participatory and spirit-led leadership continues to inspire church leaders and faith communities, urging the church to move beyond institutional maintenance towards a dynamic, mission-orientated identity – one that embodies justice, reconciliation and holistic transformation in an ever-evolving global landscape.

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## Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

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