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Missional leadership from an ethos of vulnerability and love

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This Festschrift article is dedicated to Professor Nelus Niemandt. The primary objective is to critically reflect, from the perspective of appreciative inquiry, on Niemandt's work on missional leadership and how his view of mission and theology of place could be brought into dialogue with vulnerability. This is performed by analytical reflection on the critical correlation of past and present experiences, and a critical discussion of Gijsbert Dingemans, Edward Schillebeeckx and Paul Tillich and the implied method used by Niemandt. Thereafter, a continental philosophical discussion on history, narrative and metaphor is conducted via Udo Schnelle's Theology of the New Testament and Niemandt's own focus on the role narrative and metaphors play to reimagine a restorative theology of place and mission. Finally, we engage with the latest insights by Kritzinger on mission is/as/through/with/in vulnerability, which reflects the latest shifts in missional theology is the direction of vulnerability.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article engages the latest discourses in missional leadership and vulnerability with insights from New Testament Theological methodological considerations to show that vulnerability belongs to the central message of the Gospel and that it challenges hegemony and oppressive structures by providing hope and power amid vulnerability. In the near future, as Kritzinger argues, 'mission is/as/through/with/in vulnerability promises new ways of reflecting on missional leadership and its ontological (the "is"), epistemological (the "as"), praxeological (the "through"), encounterology (the "with") and axiology (the "in")' dimensions.

Keywords: vulnerability; missional leadership; David Bosch; healing; reconciliation; restoration.

Introduction

This Festschrift article is dedicated to Professor Nelus Niemandt, who served as the author's *Doktorvater* during his second PhD. In his capacity as moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church (hereafter DRC) at the time, he played a significant role in shaping the author's thinking on the missional church and missional leadership. The aim of this article is to critically engage with Niemandt's work, from the vantage point of the author's current positionality in Western Europe, in dialogue with insights from continental philosophy and missiological perspectives in the Low Countries, sensitive to the theme of vulnerability (e.g. via Barentsen & Blok 2024 [missiological]; De Wachter 2012 [Belgian psychologist]; Leivinas & Nemo 1985, 2003; Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], [Philosophy]; Montero Orphanopoulos 2024).

The importance of vulnerability as a theme and framework has been brought into focus in South African missiological contexts most recently via Snyman (2015), Niemandt (2017a, 2017b, 2022) and Kritzinger (2024) as examples. However, the focus on Mission and Vulnerability is situated against global missiological reflection (see Niemandt 2022). As recent as 2019, in the *Missio Dei Journal*, Williams (2019) has written an article on *Toward a Worldwide Theology of Vulnerable Mission*. Williams heavily draws on the work of E. Hof (2016) before him. Her study was also directly related to 'reimagining mission in the postcolonial context' and 'a theology of vulnerability and vocation at the margins'.

The trend in the direction of vulnerability is also evident in a special collection in the journal of *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* on the topic *Mission and Vulnerability in the African Context*[1] of which

1.See https://aosis.co.za/news-mission-and-vulnerability-in-the-african-context-hts-theological-studies-2025-special-collection/.

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.

the call for articles was set for 2025. The importance of a posture of vulnerability is important, especially against the background of postcolonial and decolonial sensitivities and increasing critical awareness of problems associated with power and 'Whiteness'. It is beyond the scope of this article to explain the background of how critical race theory, decolonial and postcolonial insights challenge power in a postcolonial context such as South Africa. It is presupposed that informed scholars know these recent debates and shifts in paradigms (see e.g. Mignolo 2007). In this regard, see the important work of Snyman (2015, 2017). He not only takes his point of departure from the United Nations (Council of Europe 1950; European Commission, Article 8 [alo Guide on Art. 8]) but also on the work of Gilson (2014) on vulnerability. The definition of vulnerability would look different in different domains. In bio-social-psychological and medical contexts, such a definition would differ from political contexts of vulnerability and theological vantage points. However, a deeper philosophical base would be shared. Snyman's definition is i.a. influenced by the work of Gilson (2014) and Levinas & Nemo (1985) and particularised in theological contexts. Vulnerability would be defined by Snyman as a positive value of openness and susceptibility to people and world (persons and place or community and context) such that it makes one more attentive, ethically responsible and responsive to the Other, requiring a form of humility in an I-Thou posture.[2] For Nelus Niemandt, Christ-following identity and ethos, a kenotic (self-emptying) posture, would entail embodying a posture of humility based on prototypical mimesis of kenosis and deep incarnation expressed in texts such as Philippians 2:5–11, Jesus' parables and the restorative *missio Dei* rooted in the Trinity (Niemandt 2022, 2023).

On the other hand, in their call for 2025/2026 articles, Mangayi and Fohle (2025) as guest editors of the special collection at HTS on Mission and Vulnerability state that vulnerability is described as:

> …a human constant, shaping every human life. Yet vulnerability is also distributed differently across different human groups, part of ever present inequalities and differences in power in human experience. Self-critical practitioners of the Christian mission embrace their own vulnerabilities as they share the *missio Dei*. They also seek to mitigate the vulnerabilities that render so many human lives precarious. In addition, mission has exploited and increased vulnerabilities of people at times, often in situations of unequal distributions of power.

Mangayi and Fohle (2025) furthermore argue that such vulnerability relates to 'constant threat and uncertainty', 'coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic' … 'travelling restrictions', 'increased dire economic conditions', 'suffering', the 'deepened abyss between the rich and the poor' in 'desperate situations'. They argue that 'this made Africa the most vulnerable in terms of exploitation, further dependency and depletion of its minerals and resources' and that it also 'gave rise to political instability across the African continent'.

2.Confirmed by telephonic interview on 28 February 2025.

Unfortunately, a clear definition of what vulnerability entails is not defined precisely as Snyman would do in terms of how that could be viewed as a positive trajectory in the sense of mission 'as' and 'in' an embodied vulnerability and open posture to the Other from one's own vulnerability and humility. And neither does it seem to make use of insights from Snyman about how vulnerability can enhance mutual engagement. For that reason, a posture of humility and a sensitivity for the wounds of others and an openness to the Other should also be in focus in such definitions. An ethos that is encountered in the remembered[3] Jesus, as we see in his parables. And this is what Nelus Niemandt develops in his works, as we will argue next.

Most recently, Montero Orphanopoulos (2024) produced a significantly important article on the reframing of vulnerability by means of embodied theology. She correctly refers to the 'risk society' we live in, as well as the Global South's constant exposure to stress and anxiety because of trauma, inequality and poverty. This leaves people with a diminished sense of resilience and therefore fragile and vulnerable and broken in need of healing and restoration (Montero Orphanopoulos 2024:2). Orphanopoulos (2024) recognises that vulnerability is full of 'ubiquity and elasticity', but sees it positively, as Snyman also does, as:

> [*A*] fundamental state of openness inherent in the human existence, positioned between the finite and the transcendent… This condition, fraught with risks, delineates vulnerability as a transcendental phenomenon, simultaneously universal and individual … (p. 3)

She sees it also as the state of openness for being wounded. Drawing on Hoffmaster (2006) she argues that the inadequate theorisation on vulnerability is i.a. based upon the lack of focus on emotions in Western analytic philosophy; the fact that the body was ignored and because the self-standing autonomy of the Western individual did not allow for a philosophy and theology of vulnerability, which would *ipso facto* make the individual a dependent person and rob him from his self-efficacy, undermining the moral subject. Hoffmaster (2016:41) consequently postulates that it is our fear to lose power and control that makes us fear vulnerability. Our common human identity is most vividly seen not in our strength of independence and self-efficacy but in our authenticity, brokenness and our need for meaningful relationships. Montero Orphanopoulos (2024) says:

> We need to feel our vulnerability to affirm our humanity. Recognising the depth and breadth of our vulnerability reveals how much we need others, their protection and the openness and subjectivity that come from their vulnerability. (p. 4)

Authenticity requires being true to who you are and is ontological in nature: We can only express our vulnerability if we are authentic and also see the vulnerability of others if

3.Remembered Jesus is a technical term, which is used in New Testament Studies to focus on the way that Jesus' words and deeds are 'remembered' (e.g. post 70 AD) and used in a context removed from the historical context of the 30s AD, in which Jesus lived and functioned.

we are authentic ourselves. In that manner, someone else's vulnerability tends to bring out authentic aspects of us. But if we are not authentic, we cannot be vulnerable and, in other words, neither affirm our own humanity nor be open to affirm another person's humanity; hence fully participate in full humanity as a consequence. This of course, according to the moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2008; also see 1995), entails a moral conundrum because vulnerability plays a fundamental and foundational role in philosophy, politics, general ethics, bio-ethics and medical ethics (Montero Orphanopoulos 2024:4). The conundrum is that we are creatures of liminality, in the sense that we can bring both evil and good, we can restore a sense of humanity by healing and reconciliation and destroy a sense of humanity by destruction, violence and alienation, leaving all of us an open being fragile in the face of the other. Knowing this, we must recognise that we all are fragile and vulnerable – it is, therefore, pervasive and ontological in nature; we all share a common anthropological vulnerability and fragility in need of forms of resilience and mutual understanding. When one is confronted with the vulnerability of another person and its manifestation in wounds, it forces you to an ethical response and an 'Entscheidung' (a decision): Will you look the other way? Or do something? Whatever option was taken, represented a choice that has been made, and it carries ethical implications (Montero Orphanopoulos 2024:5).

The Barcelona Declaration (1998) was signed less than 30 years ago by just over 20 European bioethicists (see Rendtorff and Kemp 2020 in Montero Orphanopoulos 2024), in which they have suggested the following four primary values or principles that should guide bio-ethics:

- dignity
- autonomy
- integrity
- vulnerability.

Once again, we can see that vulnerability is seen as 'ontologically prior to other principles', because what it expressed is an 'anthropological attribute that precedes any norm' (Montero Orphanopoulos 2024:5). In this regard, they followed Jurgen Habermas (2000; quoted by Montero Orphanopoulos) and argued that vulnerability must be seen as the very origin of moral dynamism. Vulnerability is foundational to respect, care and ethically concerned for fellow human beings (Montero Orphanopoulos 2024:5).

A sceptic might then perhaps argue that this posture of humility had influenced Christ-followers for more than 2000 years and that this posture of humility would be nothing new. The answer is that the way we approach this by means of post- and decolonial awareness in a post-apartheid context, is different (see Hof 2016).

Nelus Niemandt (2022; 2023) follows this trend explicitly in a chapter dealing with 'Powers', 'Inequalities', 'Vulnerababilities' and 'Mission' in a 'Wounded' world.[4] In this paper, he sets the scene for a Theology of Mission. He proposes that the mission of the Trinity and Incarnation needs to be reimagined through the lens of vulnerability such that it could help the church to reimagine its calling in a wounded world in need of a theology of disaster (Gregersen 2015, 2017:32; Niemandt 2022 building forth on Rohr 2016; Sweet 2021:2; Veldsman 2021:3). In his own approach to this, he is inspired by Moltmann's conception of the crucified God and Moltmann's view of the incarnation as God's self-giving expression of love, which his followers are called to embody in mimesis.

Entering a trialogue from a posture of vulnerability

In his inaugural lecture as full professor at the University of Pretoria, Niemandt (2012) called for missional leadership 'entering a trialogue'. This trialogue calls for a form of dialogicality (see Hermans 2022) between church, culture and scriptural narrative:

> The trialogue is the discerning interaction between church, culture, and biblical narrative – to seek, discover and understand, and share in what the Holy Spirit is up to in the close-to-the-ground particulars of engagement in, with, against and for the world. The trialogue, shaped by a hermeneutic of love, can be informed by the twin movements of dwelling in the Word and dwelling in the world. It is a kind of orthoparadoxy – the dialectic between theory and praxis, text and context, dwelling in the Word and dwelling in the world. Entering the trialogue raises the leadership challenge of creating new social imaginaries (Taylor 2004) through biblical imagination and storytelling, simultaneously cultivating a culture of transformation. (pp. 1–2)

Meylahn (2012) correctly states that the question could be asked whether we depart from Scripture and then move on to the context or whether we move from the context to Scripture. The answer of course is that we need both – as well as the church – and that it is a dialectical or dialogical spiral where the one interprets and influences the other.

According to Niemandt (2012), a significant shift has occurred in missional ecclesiological reflection in recent years. Already in 2008, Elaine Heath in her book *The Mystic Way of Evangelism* and Bosch (1961, 1992) before her, and more recently Frost (2023) suggested that the missional church is called to adopt a new way of seeing the world – through the heuristic lens of love, rather than a lens of power or control. Heath challenges the reader to imagine how our whole missional approach would change if we responded to the world not with judgement or fear, but through the hermeneutic and heuristic lens of empathy and love, recognising the deep wounds and unmet needs that led to a sinful life in the first

4.Niemandt was so kind as to provide me with the draft of the unpublished version of his presentation at the IAMS conference in Sydney, held 7–11 July 2022 and was his lecture held at the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS) which had its thematic focus on "Powers, Inequalities and Vulnerabilities: Mission in a Wounded World". And Nelus Niemandt's paper had as its main title the latter heading and the specific heading of his own paper was "The Trinity and incarnation: from vulnerability to resilience" which appeared in 2023 as chapter in the book "Facilitating God's preferred future" edited by Nel and Van der Walt (2023: pp. 90–101).

place (Niemandt 2012:11). In Belgium the well-known psychiatrist De Wachter (2012) in his book *Borderline Times* points out that our society is at a fragile point, deeply broken and vulnerable and showing signs of burnout. Similarly, from a different context, Han (2015) wrote the book *The Burnout Society*, a book about our society's pathological fear of pain and vulnerability (Han 2021). The hermeneutic of vulnerability calls us to shift our focus from controlling others towards deep compassion and understanding of the inherent brokenness of reality (De Wachter 2012; Gilson 2014; Snyman 2015, 2017). This calls for a posture where missional leadership calls for listening to the implied needs and brokenness, rather than coming too hastily with answers from the perspective of dominance and moral high ground (see Hendriks 2010). For Niemandt (2012:12), this calls for a reflection on the trialogue shaped by a heuristic of love that invites participation through the practice of immersing ourselves in Scripture, engaging with the world and seeing this dialectic as one between theory and praxis, text and context and deep dwelling in both World and Word. Such an approach can be compared to a dance, to creating a harmony and rhythm between the Word and the World. Invited time and again into God's journey to discern in deep engagement and collaboration, in co-creation together with, instead of 'over' others, a space of humility where the Lord is calling us into now. The important point here, as Bosch (1992) and others have already pointed out, is that missional leadership is in the first place about being called to participate in God's mission and slot into what God is already doing. It is not our mission, but God's mission. This awareness points to missional leadership as requiring discernment. The focus on dwelling in the Word and world and the call to discernment is something that Niemandt and others have deeply been influenced by Patrick Keifert (2006:69).

Niemandt (2012:13) finds special inspiration from the Dutch theologian Dingemans (2005:241) and his metaphor of the two riverbanks: On the one side of the river, one has the depth of the Bible and the tradition that interpreted the Bible over the centuries; and on the other side of the river, one has the depth of contemporary culture. The church is called to be the bridge between these two riverbanks and the instrument that is called to help people discern. The power of this metaphor lies *inter alia* in the idea that a bridge provides access to a new landscape, and in that sense, opens up new worlds. Note that the idea of critical correlation and the related metaphors are also found earlier in Schillebeeckx (1983) and Tillich (1952; 1973) (see Boeve 2010:15).

A critical reflection on the way we approach critical correlation

Schillebeeckx (in Schreiter 1984:55) observed: 'liberty creates a bridge toward a possible praxis which wishes to remove both the suffering and its causes'. Kok (2016) referring to Schillebeeckx's insights observes:

> [*T*]he contrast experience opens the possibility of a better and alternative future filled with hope and expectation, a passion for the possible. Without such a future, the contrast experience will dissolve into despair and meaninglessness. A contrast experience implicitly builds on the expectation of the opposite, an appeal to the *humanum*. There is a need for reconciliation in the context of conflict and alienation. In a sense one can argue that the gift that presents itself in suffering is that it creates the opportunity for growth. (27 fn. 34)

Niemandt (2012) is, therefore, correct when he observes that what is needed are missional leaders who can help the church find its way back into the world with the Word as a compass. When he uses Dingemans (2005:241), he wants to point out that missional leadership calls for deep listening and deep dwelling and do so as bridgebuilders who open up new worlds, new possibilities for Christ-followers who are moved in such a way that they are taken up in God's mission in and to the world. In his own words, Niemandt (2012) says:

> '*Missionale leiers is brugbouers wat nuwe wêrelde en nuwe geleenthede vir hulle gemeentes oopmaak. Hulle kry dit reg om gemeentes te help om grense te oorskrei en nader te kom aan die wêreld waarbinne die hele gemeente leef. So help hulle die proses van inkarnasie – hulle maak die evangelie leefbaar in alledaagse terme en taal*.' [Missional leaders are bridgebuilders who open up new worlds and new opportunities for their congregations. They manage to help congregations cross boundaries and get closer to the world in which the entire congregation lives. In this way, they help the process of incarnation – they make the Gospel liveable in everyday terms and language.]. (p. 13)

This mission is one of vulnerability, often from the margins and with a posture of humility and openness and not power and control. Niemandt (2012) observes that the relationship between Gospel and culture is not only complex, as we have argued here, but also calls for a constant awareness of aspects within culture that must be transformed by the Gospel. Such a process *ipso facto* involves a *form of awakening* and also a *form of disillusionment*. It propels one into an awareness of the nature of constant change and also of the brokenness that exists in the world, as Paul expressed in Romans that the world is groaning under the experience of pain. For Niemandt (2017a, 2017b) this awareness calls for the embodied response of love and compassion towards the context that we were called to missionally reach with the transformative power of the Gospel.

By its very essence, missional leadership revolves around transformation in participation of God's mission. In the New Testament we encounter the reality of God, which is given to Christ-followers who often experience a form of dislocation, suffering (1 Peter 4:16) or fear (Jn 20:19–23) and provides hope by means of the inspiration of imagination of what God is doing – which always has a restorative and reconciling dimension (Jn 3:16; Eph 1:10). Missional leaders are leaders who inspire restorative change and restorative imagination that calls for an embodied posture and practice (WCC: para. 11 in Niemandt 2012) built upon the foundation of *biblical imagination,* a creative communion with God's Spirit's movement in our world (Swart 2008). In Niemandt's view,

this kind of imagination also calls for a form of *poiesis* – which refers to restorative beauty and the reimagination of ourselves and our communities in the light of God's restorative future (see Bosch 1991:431). This encouraging form of leadership fosters also the ethos and habitus of people who are called to tell and live alternative narratives, witnessing to the manner in which God's Spirit is at work. Communal discernment and discerning Spirit-led leadership unlock this latent potential and aim at taking part in God's restorative recreation of his world (see Hirsch & Ferguson 2011:ad loc 1377–1380). This is the missional call to the artists, those who can see larger patterns and envision creativity (skeppende kreatiwiteit) in ways that shatter the contained view of reality and open our eyes to something new that God is doing (see Hirsch & Ferguson 2011:ad loc 1349–1353; Sweet 2004:145 in Niemandt 2012:15).

Missional leadership entails artistic and compelling stories within a community

The key to a new way of missional living, is a new way of looking through the eyes of God's restorative and reconciling view towards the world, telling compelling stories, and doing so within a community of faith. Niemandt (2012:15) makes the important point that 'Die trialoog floreer waar stories 'n kultuur van transformasie kweek' [The trialogue thrives where stories cultivate a culture of transformation].

Believers do not only need new metaphors and stories, but a community or place (also see Peterson 2010:3). In fact, a theology of restorative place or a restorative theology of place is needed, Niemandt (2012) would argue, also in his 'Teologie van Plek'.

Missional leadership is called especially to help believers navigate between all the narratives that want to lay claim to their lives (see De Wachter 2012; Han 2021). Hirsch and Ferguson (2011:ad loc 725 in Niemandt 2012:16) correctly observe that a missional church can only be moved missionally in its identity and vocation by means of the construction of alternative narratives that paint a picture of our participation in the larger story of God's mission, which he links to Moltmann's conception of the 'crucified God', which *ipso facto* entails his followers to express vulnerability as followers of this vulnerable God visible in the deep incarnation of his son (see Niemandt 2016, 2019). Green and Robinson (2008:111 in Niemandt 2012:17) perhaps say it the best when they express it as follows: 'We are invited into the story not because the drama depends on us but because God chose to celebrate the story of his triune life with us and amongst us' (Green & Robinson 2008:111).

The calling of the missional leader is one of using the symbols and metaphors of Scripture to shape collective identity, especially in the face of vulnerability – for it is there, in the 'great transcendencies' of life (Schnelle 2009:35 fn. 38, 39) (e.g. crisis, death, sickness) that symbols mediate and carry or bear the world above to the world below. Missional leaders mediate universes of meaning or what Berger and Luckmann (1966) referred to as symbolic universes, which function as socially constructed interpretive models to be used in meaning formation. Said differently, missional leaders are those who have the ability to construct symbolic universes by means of symbols, signs and metaphors, which as such are symbolic universes objectified (Schnelle 2016:35). Missional leaders partake in the construction of symbolic universes with the purpose of integrating social structures and roles into a meaningful whole in which Christ-followers can be (identity) and act (ethos). A missional leader's claim to reality is that it transcends any other ideology, law or philosophy and lays claim on its representation of the One, 'all-encompassing reality that transcends all other realities' (Schnelle 2016:36). We lay claim to this all-encompassing reality within which all creatures live and Christ's role as the centre point of *everything* (Eph 1:9–10 – '… ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ …'). Christ-following identity is in other words deeply embedded in the reality of participation *in Christ*. In the Pauline theology, his followers are called to imitate his self-giving identity and ethos, as we see in Philippians 2:5–10, which forms an incarnational V structure from orientation (birth), disorientation (death) to reorientation (resurrection).

The historical Christ-event, the birth, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus is not meaningful unless it is appropriated by means of identity and meaning construction. An event only has the potential for meaning once a set of events are transferred to *narration* (Ricoeur 1986:14). Said differently, narrative arranges events into a plausible structure (Schnelle 2016:37). It is by means of the act of narration that we place or cast events into a temporal framework that provides a stable meaning structure that we can then transmit and as such make into tradition and carried by rituals. Naturally, the radical historical event of the cross and the resurrection compelled the earliest Christ-followers to construct meaning by means of narrative and symbols and ritual. We could argue that one of the most important functions of narrative is to 'constitute reality' by ordering reality in a causal and temporal fashion. Narrative is the means by which we transmit important knowledge and by means of which we construct a worldview. It is also the mechanism that we use to break down oppositions and construct new relationships – for instance, the world above and the world below, life and death (Schnelle 2016:37). Narrative also has the function to stabilise identity over time. Forget Christianity's (disruptive) stories and symbols, and you forget your identity. Remember these, and you stand in continuity with the past.

Mission and vulnerability

In a South African context, missional leadership most recently (2024) has been expressed as 'mission as vulnerability' (Kritzinger 2024). Kritzinger (2024) remarks that 'Mission and Vulnerability have always belonged together'. This ontology and ethos expressed in metaphor, has always been

there (e.g. Meylahn 2012; Moltmann 2001), but *ipso facto* comes to us anew in retrospect, for the event of the past always is experienced once – or to the extent that – it is appropriated in the present so that it provides meaning related to identity in a new context. While we might not have treated mission as vulnerability explicitly in the past, it was certainly implied and ever-present within the very DNA of the Christ-following narrative (Kritzinger 2024). However, this renewed focus is projected retrospectively and with the distance of posteriority so that it creates room for innovative and transformative ways to reappropriate our missional identity in a new way. It is the gift of such posteriority that it provides us the opportunity to develop the metaphorical potential that has been inherent within the Christ-event itself and provides us with contextually relevant meaning formation with new possibilities. In this regard, the words of the World Council of Churches Commission on Mission and Evangelism could be appreciated in new ways:

> Mission provokes in us a renewed awareness that the Holy Spirit meets us and challenges us at all levels of life, and brings newness and change to the places and times of our personal and collective journeys. (WCC, 2012:para 39 as quoted by Niemandt 2012)

Missional leadership, when viewed through the lens of vulnerability, offers a fresh and transformative perspective on our comprehension of leadership. It could therefore be agreed with Niemandt (2012) that this:

> [*H*]elps us to enter into the trialogue, where the Holy Spirit leads the church into the narratives of God and invites us to participate in the Trinity, understood as perichoresis, so that the church can dwell together in a flow of love, mutuality, intimacy and submission to and in the culture. (p. 17)

Many years before the International Association for Mission Studies - Africa Assembly in Stellenbosch in 2024 had its focus on mission as Vulnerability, Niemandt (2012) expressed a deep theological framework of missional leadership that is not predicated on control or power, but rather in humble and relational ways of guiding the communities that we serve. The trialogue between God, culture and church represents a spirit of openness, compassion, love and vulnerability. From this perspective, missional leadership is called to mirror the divine relationship of the Trinity (perichoresis), or the eternal dance of mutual love, intimacy and submission within the Godhead. Niemandt's approach to missional leadership in Moltmann's sense of the 'crucified God' and 'deep incarnation' inherently embraces vulnerability, and as a form of missional leadership *ipso facto* participates in God's unfolding narrative in the world, fostering relationships on the basis of mutual reciprocal love as opposed to domination and hierarchy. Missional leadership is a participatory act of being taken up in the ongoing work that God is already doing in the world, and the discernment needed to see this. This asks leaders to embody a posture of listening, and of openness to the world, engaging with culture not from a place of fear or power, but with a deep sense of connection and humility – being ultimately concerned with and believing in the restorative and reconciling mission of God as a mission of and within vulnerability. David Bosch (1992) stated that the Gospel's:

> [… *D*]istinctiveness is to be looked for in its weakness, in its inability to prove itself or to force its way. [T]he cross must be seen for what it is: not as sign of strength, but as proof of weakness and vulnerability. (4–5 ad loc)

This means for Bosch that the church is also often a sign of weakness and of vulnerability. The Gospel message is not that believers win a spiritual beauty contest, says Bosch. He states that 'God does not necessarily save us *from* suffering, but *in* and *through* it' (Bosch 1992:6 ad loc [italics original]). Missional leadership is, therefore, illustrating a kenotic form of leadership, which Bosch finds i. a. in Colossians 1:24, i.e., the life of Christ and his followers is a life with scars (also Jn 20:20; Mt 16.24). Bosch (1992:6 ad loc) says that Jesus' ministry was kenotic and self-emptying (Phlp 2:5–11) and 'a manifestation of the complete weakness and helplessness of unarmed truth'. Such missional leadership takes courage, as Horst Baum (1977) articulated so well in his published doctoral dissertation *Mut zum Schwachsein* (Courage to be weak). In his book he studies the missionary spirituality of Paul (e.g. 2 Cor 12:9–10) and points out that missional leaders are called as witness to God's grace and his power in our weakness and our vulnerability and not our power or strength – never pointing to ourselves but always pointing to Christ-*crucified*; the one that died in weakness but was raised in power. He points out that it is only false leaders who would avoid the scandalous weakness of the cross, for it is only 'in and through weakness and vulnerability' that God's glory was able to take possession of Paul (see also Hassing 1980).

In an age of 'The End of Leadership', as Barbara Kellerman (2012) calls it, this missional leadership approach is contrasted with older models of leadership that rely on control and authority but rather calls for a generation of missional leaders as co-participants in God's mission, marked by our shared journey of vulnerability and mutual submission. In its essence, mission as vulnerability aims to transform missional leadership into collective and compassionate engagement with the world in ways that deeply resonate (see Rosa 2019) with love and humility, which promises to yield fresh fruits and new ways of being Church.

In his latest book *Mission is the Shape of Water*, Frost (2023) does not so much use the word vulnerability, but does speak of 'God's awesome weakness' (Frost 2023:ad loc 206 of 351), and that missional leadership should 'hear the groans of creation to discern the damage done to it by the structures and practices of Empire' and to 'Expose, subvert and transform those patterns'. It also demands missional leaders to 'hear the cries of the oppressed, exploited and excluded to discern the harm caused…by Empire', attending to those who have been 'bruised' by systems of domination, those who grieve and are unwell. This calls, he says, for the building of a community that 'decolonise our (un)consciousness and commit to an alternative solidarity that has room for all'. He articulates this again when he says that missional leaders are asked to 'Witness to this alternative solidarity in the stories we tell, believing in

the good news of the Empire's subversion at the hands of God's awesome weakness' (Frost 2023:ad loc 206 of 351).

The church is called to be present in the space of fragility and vulnerability – a church 'in the breadline', a church that emerges from the cracks. Johann Meylahn (2012) in his appropriately titled book *Church emerging from the cracks* says it best and is worth quoting here at length:

> The church is a space in this world where heaven and earth reach out to each other. It is a space in the world, but not of the world, as it is touched by heaven. Christ is in the breadline, yet one can recognise Him as He stands out in the breadline. One can recognize him, because of the halo that surrounds him. He is the incarnation within reality and through the incarnation the place within reality, becomes holy, not sacred as in separated, but sanctified as differentiated, offering an alternative within reality. (p. 78)

No wonder that one of Nelus Niemandt's latest publications (e.g., Niemandt 2019) revolves around a 'Theology of Place', building i.a. on Moltmann's (2015) insights of the crucified God and the implication of deep incarnation. This research highlights the crucial need for a theology of place amid the increasing experiences of rootlessness, dislocation and displacement globally (Niemandt 2019). It addresses a gap in Missiological Studies by focusing attention on mission theology, with its focus on 'incarnation, contextualisation and inculturation', which can significantly contribute to a theology of place. Additionally, reflections on 'faithful presence' and the 'restoration of the commons', of communal spaces we live in, enrich this perspective within missional ecclesiology.

In the heart of Europe, others have also recently turned their attention to a theology of place. Jack Barentsen (ed. 2019) and his colleagues published the book *Zoektocht naar hoop voor de Stad* [Searching for hope for the city]. In an interview in Tertio nr. 1012-14[5] he states:

> 'De grimmigheid van de stad moet niet leiden tot vermijding, maar tot verzoening … In plaats van zich in zichzelf op te sluiten, moeten kerken ernaar streven een open kerk te zijn. Dat betekent de gebrokenheid van de stad erkennen en onder ogen zien …' ['The grimness of the city should not lead to avoidance, but to reconciliation … Instead of shutting themselves in on themselves, churches should strive to be an open church. That means acknowledging and facing the brokenness of the city …'].

In one of their latest books, Jack Barentsen and Oeds Blok (2024) write that theology is an invitation to 'wake up' to what God is doing and to become 'bewuster' (more attentive – paying attention) and even to become 'kunstwerken in een gehavende wereld' (Works of art in a battered world). In this book, they too, call for the necessity of a restorative (Mt 9:36) missional (Jn 20) theology of place (Ps 19:2; 24:1) amid a context in need (Is 58:3–4). Similarly, to Niemandt and Meylahn, they tell stories of people, like the story of a lady called Julia that witness to the truth that 'Haar werkelijkheid in de marge werd haar "vindtplaats van God's liefde en genade"'. [Her reality on the margins became her 'place of discovery of God's love and grace.'] (Barentsen & Blok 2024):

> 'Julia is wakker voor wat God in haar wereld aan het doen is, voor het onrecht en die gebrokenheid die ze daar aantreft, en voor de mogelijkheden voor heil die ze daarin ontdekt' [Julia is awake to what God is doing in her world, to the injustice and brokenness she finds there, and to the possibilities for salvation she discovers in it]. (p. 14)

What all these authors, be it Meylahn (2012), Niemandt (2012, 2019), Barentsen (ed. 2019) and Blok (2024), Branson and Roxburgh (2020:71), clearly see is that restorative missional leadership calls us to become aware of our and other's vulnerability in our time, and that it calls us to become 'wakker' (awake) and 'bewust' (aware) to see God at work and provide hope:

> 'Wakkere kerke zijn hoopvol gestemd over Gods aanwezigheid en werk in de wereld waarin ze zich bevinden, maar altijd met open ogen en oren om aandachtig mogelijke sporen van God te ontwaren in de complexe en verwarrende werkelijkheid'. ['Awake-churches are hopeful about God's presence and work in the world in which they find themselves, but always with open eyes and ears to attentively discern possible traces of God in a complex and confusing reality.']. (Barentsen & Blok 2024:15)

As Kritzinger (2024) has indicated, it will in future be necessary to carefully reflect on mission in/as/from vulnerability as central aspect of the Jesus movement. What would be needed is a framework for doing missiology that could provide a shared platform for scholars to fit vulnerability in a theological and missiological framework. Mission *as* vulnerability is also different from mission *in* vulnerability. Kritzinger (2024) differentiates between five aspects of mission in relation to vulnerability:

- 'Mission *is* vulnerability' – Ontology (the nature of being).
- 'Mission *as* vulnerability' – Epistemology (the study of knowledge).
- 'Mission *through* vulnerability' – Missional praxis, or Praxeology (the study of practical action).
- 'Mission *with* vulnerability' – Encounterology (the dynamics of interactions in mission).
- 'Mission *in* vulnerability' – Axiology (ethos and values of mission).

Conclusion and summary

'Mission and vulnerability' is a significant topic of discussion globally and especially in the African context. Nelus Niemandt's work contributed to this discussion in significant ways. An explicit salient element of Professor Nelus Niemandt's (2012, 2017a, 2017b, 2022, 2023) approach to missional leadership is a posture of vulnerability. Theologically, he is i.a. inspired by Moltmann's theology of the Crucified God which calls for a posture of Christ-following vulnerability and restorative beauty and joy towards human flourishing amid brokenness or woundedness in what could be called deep-missional-incarnational-ethos (see Niemandt 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019, 2022, 2023). Hence, as we venture

5.See https://www.otheo.be/nieuws/jack-barentsen-hoop-zelfs-grimmige-stad

onward in our reflection on Niemandt's (2018) approach to a theology of place (*'n teologie van plek – Hartsplek*) that is both restorative and reconciling, we are called upon to remain or become 'awake' (as per Barentsen & Blok 2024) – attentive to the interplay between Scripture and our present context's needs. This reflection must be driven by the renewed calling to missional (deep-) incarnational leadership, one that emerges from, addresses and embody vulnerability (e.g. Kritzinger 2024). In this mission, we are drawn into God's greater mission (*missio Dei*), a mission of restorative grace, mercy and the challenge of healing, restoration and reconciliation (Kok 2017). Here, Christ stands as the true *dativus locativus* (in Christ), and *dativus intrumentalis* (through Christ) – the ultimate point of convergence and integration, as revealed in Ephesians 1:10, where all things are gathered up in Him. Let our pursuit, then, be one that is alive with the hope of Christ's incarnational, restorative and unifying work. There where the Gospel breathes peace, life, light, love, joy and hope into both the church and the world it is called to serve with good news (see Jn 20:21–22 Εἰρήνη ὑμῖν … καθὼς ἀπέσταλκέν με ὁ πατήρ, κἀγὼ πέμπω ὑμᾶς … ἐνεφύσησεν …); with a posture of openness and vulnerability to the face of the Other, stemming from an abiding in the Word (see Gorman 2018:32–33).

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