


Empowering challenges of missional ecclesiology and leadership at the grassroots level

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This article examines the work of Nelus Niemandt within both the academy and the church, with a particular focus on his understanding of missionality as shaped by his perspectives on spirituality, ecclesiology and leadership. It also explores key elements of discernment and service leadership. To have a better understanding of service leadership, attention is given to the *diak-* word-group in the New Testament. While some critiques suggest that Niemandt's writings on ecclesiology and leadership lack practical application, this article highlights the tangible impact of his work at the grassroots level. Specifically, it considers outcomes within the Dutch Reformed Church, such as the adoption of a missional ecclesiology and the development of new ministerial pathways to equip and empower missional leaders. This article concludes with two examples from the development of the additional ministerial tracks. Two members who did the studies witness of how a missional ecclesiological understanding in the Dutch Reformed Church has made it possible for them to live their calling. It is also clear from these witnesses that in many congregations we still have a long walk in obedience and discernment to become more missional than institutional.

Intradisciplinary/interdisciplinary implications: The article represents a critical engagement with the model of missional leadership in the field of missiology, focusing on church ministry at the grassroots level.

Keywords: Nelus Niemandt; missional spirituality; missional ecclesiology; missional leadership; discernment; *diak-* word-group.

Introduction

This article seeks to engage with and appreciate Nelus Niemandt's contributions to missional ecclesiology and missional leadership. Special attention is given to his influence within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa, of which he is a member. While his leadership within the DRC and his impact on the denomination are significant, they should not overshadow his broader contributions as an academic in both national and international ecumenical church contexts. Instead, his role within the DRC serves as a case study of his wider influence. It is particularly through his engagement with ecumenical church documents such as *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes (TTL)* (ed. Keum 2013) that he has enriched both the DRC and the field of missiology. In my view, his understanding of the *missio Dei* (mission of God) has profoundly shaped his ecclesiology. This perspective aligns with the views of Bosch (1991) and Wright (2006), who assert that the church does not have a mission; instead, God's mission has a church.

Although this article focuses primarily on the ministerial influence of Niemandt within the DRC, rather than providing a deep theological analysis of his work on leadership, the following remarks remain highly relevant. Niemandt approached his writing on leadership from a specific missional theological understanding of spirituality and ecclesiology. Consequently, his comments on leadership must always be interpreted within the context of his theological and ecclesiological framework.

Spirituality

The academic study of spirituality is a field in its own right (Knoetze 2014). However, it is evident from discussions on spirituality that Niemandt does not adopt a purely academic or docetic approach, as described by Knoetze (2014:170). Instead, his approach to spirituality is theological, and more specifically, trinitarian. In his discussions, spirituality is narrowed down to biblical and specifically mission spirituality. This understanding aligns with Kritzing and Saayman (2011:189), who confirm the biblical interpretation of spirituality as the heart of mission praxis. This view is further supported by theologians such as Wright (2006) and others, who make

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compelling arguments for reading the Bible as a mission book. In *TTL*, Christian witness is understood not only in terms of the actions we take in mission but also in the way we embody and live out that mission (ed. Keum 2013):

Spirituality gives our lives their deepest meaning. It stimulates, motivates and gives dynamism to life's journey. It is energy for life in its fullness and calls for a commitment to resist all forces, powers and systems which deny, destroy and reduce life. (pp. 12–13)

Niemandt (2016) expands on his description of spirituality, making a clear distinction between *missional spirituality* and *missionary spirituality*:

The focus is on *missional* spirituality and not on *missionary* spirituality. Missionary spirituality has been defined ... as the spirituality of people emphasizing the need to cross frontiers to preach the gospel to those who do not yet know it. [...] places missional spirituality in a more holistic perspective and describes missional spirituality as '... a way of life, a relational attitude nourished by a Transformative spirituality and missional leadership theological worldview in a frame shaped by the famous triangle of faith, hope and love in 1 Corinthians 13'... (p. 2)

Following Ungerer et al. (2013:33), Niemandt (2016) identifies the following character traits of missional spirituality:

- *Transcendence*, which includes appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour and religiousness.
- *Humanity* that involves social competencies such as kindness, love and social intelligence.
- *Wisdom and knowledge*, which include cognitive competencies such as creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness and a love of learning.
- *Courage* that comprises personal and emotional competencies like bravery, persistence and zest.
- *Justice*, which is associated with fairness, leadership and teamwork.
- *Temperance* that includes competencies such as forgiveness, modesty, prudence and self-regulation.

Bosch (1979:4) asserts that being spiritual means being in Christ, whether we pray, walk or work. Following Bosch, Niemandt (2016:11) states, 'Missional spirituality does not differ from "normal" spirituality. A life in faith is a life of being a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth'. Accordingly, all disciples of Christ possess the gift of missional spirituality; it is not exclusive to specific individuals, such as leaders. While I will return to the topic of missional leadership later in this article, it is important to emphasise that the Spirit of God works in all people, including those outside the church, since the whole of creation belongs to God (Ps 24:1–2).

If we accept that all disciples inherently possess the gift of missional spirituality as part of their calling, then it follows that the church itself is a missional church, rooted in the trinitarian God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

To establish the connection between spirituality and ecclesiology, Niemandt refers to the clear relationship between the mission paradigms described by Bosch (1991) in *Transforming Mission* across different contexts, and the

spirituality of leaders during the transitions between these contexts, which also introduce new ecclesiologies (Niemandt 2013:179–180). This can be summarised as follows:

Attention to missional spirituality completes the circle: the church does what it is, the church organizes what it does, and the church needs leadership to structure and organize transformation, leadership that is anchored in a life of discipleship in the Trinity – a life characterized by a missional spirituality. The doing is dependent on the being. (Niemandt 2016:11)

What must be understood by the phrase 'the church does what it is'? The Reformed understanding is that the church is the body of Christ (1Cor 12; Rm 12), equipped by the gifts of the Spirit to participate in the *missio Dei*, with a clear focus on the Kingdom of God. The church, which is 'in Christ', can only function properly through obedient participation. Leadership rooted in discipleship is grounded in obedience.

Ecclesiology

There is an understanding among scholars following Newbigin, emphasising three activities that shape a church and confer its missional calling: 'analyses of culture and society; biblical and theological reflection; and vision for the church and its mission' (Akerlund 2016:3). Within the missional church, mission is about God and who God is, rather than about the church and what the church is doing. Mission then shifts from an ecclesiocentric approach to a theocentric approach. Niemandt's (2012:2) ecclesiology aligns with this understanding: 'Missional theology builds on the understanding that God is Trinity and missional'.

One of Niemandt's key contributions to the DRC is known as the *Framework Document* (Niemandt 2013). This document serves as a foundational guide for understanding and orienting the church towards a missional ecclesiology. Given its significance in capturing aspects of Niemandt's theological perspective, and considering the constraints of space, I will highlight only the document's headings to illustrate its holistic approach to various dimensions of ecclesiology:

- The Dutch Reformed Church's identity
- New thinking about God
- New thinking about the church
- New reflections on the kingdom of God
- New thoughts on incarnation
- New thinking about our context: the world
- New thinking about congregations
- New thinking about service to the community
- New thinking about faith formation in the church
- New thoughts on the offices
- New thoughts on church planting
- New reflections on the liturgy of a missional church
- New thoughts on the church as a missional society
- New thinking about the youth ministry and catechesis in a missional church
- New reflections on the public testimony of a missional church
- New thoughts on theological training

The word 'new' is striking in all of these headings. However, this does not suggest that we are engaging with these topics

from a blank slate. Rather, it reflects the Reformed principle that, in each new context, we read and interpret the Bible anew within that specific setting. Wright (2006) describes this approach as reading the Bible through a missional hermeneutic, stating:

So a missional reading ... is very definitely not a matter of (1) finding the 'real' meaning by objective exegesis, and only then (2) cranking up some 'missiological implications' as a homiletic supplement to the text itself. Rather, it is to see how a text often has its *origin* in some issue, need, controversy or threat that the people of God needed to address in the context of their mission. The text in itself is a product of mission in action. (p. 49)

In this article, I specifically focus on leadership, which aligns with *new thoughts on the offices* – a perspective that reflects on Reformation history while also looking towards the future. The Framework Document (Niemandt 2013) describes it as follows:

When we get serious about the missional heart of being a church, reformation and transformation become a reality. ... The rediscovery of the office of the believer during the Church Reformation as the most important office in the church should serve as a guideline. ... The primary ministry of the church is not the ministry of the offices to the members but the ministry of the ordinary believers to, and in, the world. The trinitarian foundation of the church and the recognition of the important role played by the Holy Spirit as the One who was sent by the Father and Son and who gathers the church of the Lord and sends it out anew, brings forward the responsibility of every believer anew ... (p. 11)

The 'new' thinking about the offices is described as (Niemandt 2013):

In the church there is always a need for full-time missionaries, professional community workers, tentmaker missionaries and short-term missionaries. But they are second in line. The general office of all believers stands first. Every member is called to be a witness. The focus must remain on the office of the believer – the other offices really only assist the believers and help them live out their calling. (p. 11)

From this understanding and the missional theology underpinning the entire Framework Document, the DRC developed new pathways for 'recognised' ministry by creating theological curricula to enhance the 'office of the believer'. It is important to note that no distinction is made in the documents between 'lay ministry' and the ministry of the 'offices'. Although it is an established Reformed principle that all offices are equal and that these offices exist not to 'serve' the believers and their needs but to equip them for their calling in the world (Eph 4:11–16), they are intended to 'serve' the needs of the world.

The five tracks for 'recognised' ministry, which are still being developed, are: *bedienaars* [deacons]; *standplaas leraars* [specified ministers]; *diensleraars* [servant ministers]; *tentmaker leraars* [tentmaking ministry] and *leraars* [ministers] (NG Kerk 2023). All these tracks are aligned, and from an academic perspective, believers can progress from one track to the next within the guidelines provided by the Department of Higher

Education. Although these tracks were initially developed for the DRC, other denominations are also beginning to utilise the 'qualification' of these tracks to equip their members and ministers for missional leadership. This development is having a significant impact on grassroots ministry, particularly in rural synods of the DRC, such as the Northern Cape, where small congregations can no longer afford a minister. By returning ministry to the members and equipping them for their calling and participation in the *missio Dei*, the church is transforming. I use the term 'transforming' in line with Bosch (1991), as it represents a multidirectional process: Presenters and leaders are transformed, the church is transformed, and the wider world or society is also impacted. At the end of this article, I will provide examples of how this transformation is unfolding among individuals and congregations in the Northern Cape.

With these five tracks in mind, we now turn to different understandings of missional leadership.

Perspectives on missional leadership

As early as 1959, Scottish missionary Stephen Neill warned the church that if everything is mission, then nothing is mission. We live in a time where 'every church', 'every ministry' and 'every leader' is described as 'missional' without attempting to clarify what this means. I agree with many other scholars and missionaries that 'missional' is currently the most misused term in the church and in theology in general. When the *missio Dei* defines a church, believers are challenged to transform a church with a mission into a missional church that participates in God's mission. The identity (being) of the church determines its ministry(ies), and leadership must arise from the core of this identity. Van Gelder (2007:18, italics in the original) expresses it as, 'The church *does* what it *is*. The church *organizes* what it does. The ministry of the church introduces strategies and processes that require the exercise of leadership'.

Different understandings

In short, a missional leader is a person called by God to guide a group or movement in participating in God's mission – both in plan and action (Ibengi & Starcher 2011:n.p.). Many scholars rely on Doornenbal's (2012) definition to articulate the concept of 'missional leadership':

Missional leadership refers to the conversational processes of envisioning, cultural and spiritual formation, and structuring within a Christian community that enable individual participants, groups, and the community as a whole to respond to challenging situations and engage in transformative changes that is necessary to become, or remain, orientated to God's mission in the local context. (p. 200)

I want to highlight the following concepts in Doornenbal's definition:

- **'Conversational processes of envisioning':** This is a clear indication of a participatory process in which the vision is discovered among participants, along with their views, experiences and acceptance or non-acceptance of

‘challenging situations’. These participants include those outside the church, as God is omnipresent.

- **‘Transformative changes’:** Missional leadership will always contribute to transformation. The transformation and liberation of both church and society require church ministry to introduce strategies and processes that necessitate leadership in exercising the transformation of the church (Van Gelder 2007:18). Conversely, I prefer the concept of ‘transforming’ rather than ‘transformative’ (Bosch 1991). Missional leadership will not only transform ‘challenging situations’, but it will also transform the missional leader and other individuals and institutions involved.
- **‘Orientated to God’s mission’:** I want to emphasise that the envisioning, as well as the transformative changes, are oriented to – I would prefer ‘determined’ instead of ‘orientated by’ – God’s mission or the *missio Dei*.

Niemandt describes missional leadership as ‘meaningful relationships’ transformed by the Spirit to participate in God’s mission (Niemandt 2013:57). In this sense, missional leadership is transformational; however, I prefer the term ‘transforming’, as it begins with the transformation of the leader (or the self), who then participates in the transformation of the church and the society in which the church finds itself. Missional leadership encompasses not only the spiritual transformation of individuals but also the transformation of institutions and society. It involves what Paul would call ‘living in Christ’, recognising and acknowledging God’s presence in both the church and the world, and obediently participating in what He is doing. There are clear points of contact among the different understandings of missional leadership. Since missional leadership is about obedient participation, discernment is one of its essential presuppositions.

Discernment – A presupposition

Missional leadership is shaped by discernment, engaging in a dialogue that explores the interaction between church, culture and the biblical narrative. Hendriks (2004) describes this process as follows:

The solution to faith communities’ questions about how to participate in God’s missional praxis is a critical, constructive dialogue or correlation between their interpretations of the realities of the global and local context and the faith resources at their disposal. On the one hand, the discernment process is rational and on the other, it is a mystery. How does one describe the work of the Spirit, of faith seeking understanding? The perspective of this method may thus be called ‘correlational hermeneutics’. (p. 18)

Based on the presuppositions of discernment that Hendriks (2004:18–19) outlines, it is evident that discernment is an integral part of missional spirituality, ecclesiology and leadership. The following presuppositions of discernment are fundamental to the transformative process of missional leadership:

- *The triune God is the one who takes the initiative* in creation, redemption and sustaining creation. Discernment is a process in which the faith community depends on the Holy Spirit’s initiative to lead the community to discover God’s will to participate in God’s missional praxis.
- In this process, *Scripture has an integral place* because it bears testimony to the confessional responses of a people who have experienced God’s fellowship within a covenantal relationship.
- *Only those whose lives are drawn into the orbit of God’s praxis can truly understand this ...* Discernment therefore takes place incarnationally; truth is practised, missional in its very being ... since it is always based on the initiative taking God’s praxis.
- *Discernment takes place in a faith community* where personal faith is actually integrated faith, integrated in relationships, in an obedient, missionary community ... Everyone within such a community has a direct or indirect role or place in the process of discernment ...
- Faith communities link with, and are influenced by, *past and present* faith communities, which leads to *diversity and unity* ... This is the ecumenical dimension of discernment.
- The discernment needed for a faith community’s participation in God’s missional praxis is *integrally linked with worship*. In their worship and participation in the sacraments, a faith community directs its focus to God from whom all goodness flows.
- Discernment can take place only *if penultimate* or secondary concerns are not placed before God’s praxis (Th 1 2:1–12). ... Political ideologies are typically penultimate concerns. Anything that receives a primary focus and attention and, as such, obstructs God’s missional praxis, becomes an idol.
- In addition to the previous point, you can test your focus by *examining the ultimate human purpose that is to praise, worship and glorify God* in your personal life, communities and institutions. ... The very moment when ‘fear of death’ sets in, when our own agendas are threatened, we normally focus upon ourselves, not upon God (Hendriks 2004:18–19, *original emphasis*).

As will be demonstrated later in this article, it is almost impossible to talk about missional leadership without a faith community that participates in this process. It may not always involve the entire congregation, but we need a faith community – even if it is only two or three – to discern and carry out God’s will (Mt 18:18–20).

Missional leadership is not a position or an office in the church; it might be, but it is rather a calling within the faith community. Since this is crucial to understand, allow me to make a few related remarks. Osmer (2012:49), mentioning God’s election of his people, states that election is nothing less than a ‘calling to service and witness, not primarily the reception of special blessings, benefits, and privileges’. This

contrasts sharply with my experiences in the South African church context, where the rise of movements such as the prosperity gospel often results in an autocratic leader dictating how God will serve the people with 'special blessings' and material prosperity. In addition, some mainline Christians abandon the church in response to political shifts or natural disasters, such as droughts or floods, when they feel they have lost the 'benefits and privileges' they once believed they were guaranteed.

Many scholars, not only in theology but also in politics and business, discuss servant and/or service leadership without clearly defining what is meant by 'servant leadership'. As is well known, the Greek word for service is *diakonia*, and for servant, it is *diakon*. Since service is widely recognised as an integral aspect of missional leadership, I take this opportunity to offer insights from research on the *diak-* word-group. These perspectives will deepen our understanding of service and affirm its missional implications.

Diak- word-group

The names of various tracks developed within the missional ecclesiology of the Dutch Reformed Church, such as *bedienaars* [deacons] and *diensleraars* [servant ministers], demonstrate a clear connection to the *diak-* word-group, which conveys the concept of 'service'. However, the key question remains: what kind of service does this entail? Over the past three decades, new scholarly research has uncovered its rich theological and missional implications (Van der Watt 2024:191).

Many faith communities and ministers continue to assume that the office of the deacon is established in Scripture in Acts 6, with a primary focus on helping the poor. However, it is noteworthy that the seven elected men were never explicitly called *diakonoi*. Latvus (2017:26, 36–40) raises several exegetical concerns regarding this passage. He argues that this pericope (Ac 6:1; 6:4) is not solely about serving the poor; rather, the use of the word *diakonia* in this context suggests general ministry tasks. He further highlights references in the book of Acts indicating that some of these seven men were actively engaged in preaching and evangelism, rather than being set apart exclusively for the ministry of caring for the poor (Ac 7; 21:8). This suggests that their calling was to serve within the broader mission of the kingdom of God rather than being confined to a single function of charitable service.

Studying the *diak-* word-group, Nordstokke (2011:223) observes that terms from this group appear nearly 100 times in the New Testament. However, the Bible does not offer a specific definition of the role or responsibilities of a deacon. Similar to the noun *diakonia* and the verb *diakoneo*, the term *diakonos* is associated with various forms of service, namely, A servant of God (2 Cor 6:4), a servant of Christ (2 Cor 11:23), or a servant of the church (Col 1:25):

- Someone who performs a specific office in the church (Phlp 1:1; Tm 1 3:8–13)
- The state is called a servant of God (Rm 13:4)

- Christ is called a servant of the circumcised (Rm 15:8) and a servant of sin (Gl 2:17).

This short and limited overview serves to indicate the shift from the *praxis* of *diakonia* to the theology of *diakonia*, leading to a transforming ecclesiology that aligns with missional ecclesiology. It also indicates a shift in the understanding of a deacon, who is not only a servant of the needs of the people but rather an 'ambassador' or servant of the One who calls us. When *diakonia* is grounded in the *missio Trinitatis Dei*, it is characterised by the *passio Dei* as confessed in the recurring 'mercy motto' founded in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, we find that the *passio Dei* is foundational to Christ's *diakonia*: 'Christ embodying/incarnating God's compassion in his ministry of sharing and table fellowship' (Van der Watt 2024:192).

Van der Watt (2024:204) highlights several practical implications for *diakonia* and the call to be a diaconal church, with a particular emphasis on sharing a meal in table fellowship. God's compassion is embodied in Christ's *kenotic* ministry (Phlp 2:7), which is fundamentally centred around table fellowship. This, in turn, has 'implications for the debate of inclusivity and equality, for instance, "waiting for each other" so that all may eat together (1 Cor 11:33)' (Van der Watt 2024:204). This inherent prophetic element has serious transforming implications for missional leadership as a form of 'liturgy after liturgy' within the South African context. Van der Watt (2024) explains:

Diakonia therefore has implications for the debate about concrete access to food, care for the environment, the sharing of life itself. It is the sharing of gifts that belong to all of us, rather than serving other with our gifts. (p. 204)

Such an understanding implies a close link between *diakonia* and *koinonia*. *Diakonia* without *koinonia* loses all credibility. The whole concept of serving through sharing implies a mission from below and from the margins, which immediately places us within the radical contextual understanding of the local congregation. Within this context, the priesthood of all believers does not suggest a lack of leadership or that the office of the deacon becomes redundant; on the contrary, we need to rethink and reconsider this *praxis*. 'Missional church formation should specifically also include, as key element, diaconal church formation' (emphasis in the original, Van der Watt 2024:205).

With these brief remarks on the *diak-* word-group, it is evident that these perspectives not only align with many characteristics of missional leadership but also serve to enhance them. The next section of this article shifts to the grassroots level, illustrating how mission theology has inspired church members to 'discover' their calling. Through obedient participation in the *missio Dei*, they begin to live missionally and take on roles as missional leaders. The examples presented here are drawn from students who completed the *Bedienaars* (deacons) course at Huguenot College under my supervision, and they have given permission for their stories to be shared.

Grassroots – Missional leaders

The following two examples come from the deep rural areas of the Northern Cape Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, where more than 20 *bedienaars* have already completed their studies. These specific cases are drawn from small congregations with fewer than 150 members within farming communities. In these towns, economic activity is limited, with the main businesses consisting of an agricultural co-operative, a general dealer and a liquor store. One town has a police station, but neither has essential infrastructure such as financial institutions or municipal offices. The Afrikaans children from these communities attend schools in other towns and are therefore absent during the week. In addition, these congregations can no longer afford full-time ministers. Two farmers from these congregations, both in their late fifties and leaders in the farming community, attended the *bedienaars* course. Nominated by their church councils and presbyteries, they, like many other students in these new tracks of ministry, have long felt called to 'official' or 'recognised' ministry. However, because of various circumstances, they were unable to pursue their calling until now. With the introduction of these new ministry tracks, new opportunities for leadership and service have finally become available to them.

Next, their testimonies, reflecting their struggles with God and the church, are shared.

Student 1, a male farmer from the 50+ years age group, shared his calling:

'For some people, the death of the carnal shell, the earthly ego, takes longer than for others, sorry to have to confess it. Some of us are just more clinging to earthly achievement and honour than others. Mine was therefore the longer, lonelier, bumpy dirt road with the underlying assignment: articulate the dying process theologically. It was the narrow, oppressive path of the imprisoned spirit, some days I wanted to give up on the faith. Some texts, like ... the one after, however, made me cling, irrationally: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20).

Unfortunately, my story is not a dramatic one. I cannot tell how my father was an alcoholic, or how he beat my mother. Or that I was molested or addicted to drugs. It is precisely the middle-class ordinariness and the compromise with the cultural world order that made my struggle so much more intense and deeper and powerless. Am I doing everything right then? Minister's son, conscientious in my schoolwork, my studies, my work; but it didn't work. The self-doubt and the failure within myself grew fiercer and more destructive over time. I felt like I was failing my beautiful, precious family.

The more miserable it was with my business, the more intensively I studied Theology. I eagerly searched for this understanding, the Kingdom of God. Two people were sent to guide me in this time of wandering and doubt, to assist me, to keep encouraging me: keep going, you have a calling. During this time, I also began to experience the inner voice of the Holy Spirit. In September 2017, I had a dream about something that would happen to me in a city that I didn't even know at that point. In my misery at that stage, I considered the prediction to be wishful thinking, hallucinations of the self-delusion,

too far-fetched to ever come true. In October 2024, the prediction of this – and other dreams – would inexplicably come true. God has a task for me, He just wanted me to lose my own self, so that I would find my true self in Him. In Him I now walk, surrendered, an executor of what He has destined for me from all time. What a privilege! What a strength, a wealth, a salvation to know that I now work within the fullness of the Great All.'

This student began his training as a *bedienaar*, then transitioned to a *diensleraar*, and is now pursuing a PhD in missiology.

Student 2, a male farmer from the 50+ years age group, shared his experience in his local congregation:

'I had the privilege of doing the *bedienaars* course in 2019. With this course I learn about missional theology. It was a strange concept to me at first, but as we worked through the modules, I came to understand what it was all about, and I came to the realization that this is the only theology we can practice for the understanding of the kingdom of God.

During the course, I learned two significant concepts: "context" and "discernment of faith". Understanding context allows one to grasp their identity, origin, and direction. Discernment of faith encourages a deeper examination of theological issues. These concepts are likely the reasons for my pursuing further studies in theology at Huguenot College.

When I start thinking about missional theology there is so much that I have learned, and that I am still learning new every day. The fact that missionary theology is worked and driven in us by the Holy Spirit is probably the biggest reason why I enjoy it so much, because on my own I would not have been able to know what I know today. Missional theology put my life in a different direction.

I grew up in a very conservative home and live in a very conservative area. Sorry to have to say it, but apartheid is still a big reality in this part of our country. No one talks about it, but it can be observed in everyday life. Racism is not seen as a sin, it is the way it is, because it is the way it has always been.

Missional theology makes me look at my fellow human beings with different eyes, as well as my fellow believers. The kingdom of God has gained new meaning in my life, and therefore I cannot help but give all the glory to Him, and that I only realize more that I am just an instrument through which He wants to achieve his goal.

During the course, one of our assignments was to explain missionary theology to a catechism class. I decided to do the presentation on missional theology in a ward meeting in our congregation. At that time, we did not have a pastor in the congregation, and I had the courage to lead the ward meetings once a month. It went very well, and the monthly attendance was very good.

The evening meeting with the presentation on missional theology changed the picture completely. The people listened to me until I explained to them that the focus of the missional church is on the community in which we live.

I explained to them that the church does not have missionary work, but that the church is God's missionary in the world. The church is God's people who offer a foretaste of God's healing reign. Those who sit here are called by God to share something of God's grace with the people they deal with every day.

There was a gloomy silence, and no one batted an eye or moved a finger. Everyone looked at me as if I had carried a ghost into the hall. One person later asked me if this is really the theology that is also taught to all students at university. The rest of the ward meeting fell into silence, I just finished with a prayer, and we enjoyed dinner in a very tight atmosphere.

A month later at the next ward meeting, the older people of seventy plus simply stayed away. The younger group of around 50 years arrived again with many questions, and even accusations. The biggest issue was that according to them I said that all the coloured people who live on [town] are now welcome in our congregation.

But this is not what missional theology is about, I tried to explain, that the same attitude of courtesy, human dignity, hospitality and love that exists between us as members of the Reformed Church should also be lived out towards the rest of the community. It does not matter what colour one's skin is, we are all still human and we must treat all people with the same respect, because we are all created in the image of God. I also explained that God's grace is not limited within the church's borders. God is also the God of the total community.

We again enjoyed dinner in a tight atmosphere and ended with prayer. It was the last ward meeting ... Later that evening when I got home two members called me and told me that if I ever become the pastor of this congregation, they will never set foot in the church again. I reassured them that I could not be a minister, and that they could calm down and still attend the worship services.

In the meantime, we had two emeritus pastors who came and keep the status quo in the congregation. I had a conversation with the first pastor about missional theology, and he told me that if I want to do that, I must excuse him, that's not what he's here for. He is here to bring about peace and friendship between parishioners, he is not out to cause any discomfort.

We got another emeritus pastor on November 2024, I would like to have the same conversation with him and hear what he has to say. But I think I will get the same answer ...

I am not angry with the church council or the congregation, I am just concerned about the congregation's spiritual well-being. I am also grateful that a teacher is available again. The congregation has a connection to church structures. For the congregation, church structures are synonymous with the essence of the church.

We only have a worship service in [town] one Sunday a month, and that is enough for the congregation. They are satisfied because it is enough to go to church once a month. The rest of the month we farm, and we are too busy to be church.

[The] congregation is stuck in a maintenance model and/or culture. Our money gets less every year, our members also get less every year. No new members are added. The drought conditions also have a great influence on the finances of the church, but the congregation clings to the church structures. Meanwhile, we ignore the community's needs and pretend they don't really exist. As long as they stay where they are and we can keep the status quo, the congregation is happy.

Prof Willie Jonker's book which deals with the Relevance of the church, says that the NG Church must understand its identity as a kingdom church, in order to be able to perform its task as a church in a meaningful way. I believe and experience that there are already many congregations in the NG Church that understand its identity as a kingdom church, but when I look at [...] NG Church, I think we get it wrong.

I don't want to be judgmental towards the congregation, I'm just very concerned about the way we understand being a church. It can change; I am convinced of that in my heart. However, it is going to take the right leadership and a lot of time and a lot of patience.'

Conclusion

This article pays tribute to Nelus Niemandt for his profound influence as both an academician and a leader within his denomination and the broader ecumenical church. Nelus has not only served the church with his gifts but also shared them generously with all of us.

As the testimonies in this article reveal, we are 'not there yet' – and perhaps we never will be. Yet, we press on, sustained by faith and prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil (Mt 6:9–13).

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Data availability

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