


'In step' with the living God: Rhythms and habits for churches faithful to their calling

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Dates:

Received: 13 Apr. 2025

Accepted: 30 May 2025

Published: 15 July 2025

How to cite this article:

Smith, T.J., 2025, "'In step' with the living God: Rhythms and habits for churches faithful to their calling", *Verbum et Ecclesia* 46(4), a3514. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v46i4.3514>

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This article reflected on the development of a congregational prototype called *In pas met die lewende God* ['In step' with the Living God], that aids congregations in the process of missional transformation. Although this prototype was developed and implemented by a diverse team, the influence of Nelus Niemandt in shifting the denominational culture towards a participation in the *missio Dei* was significant and was a precursor to the development. My own journey with this process has been deeply shaped by Niemandt's theological imagination and mentorship, which continue to echo through the practices and movements described here.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The article outlined the origin of 'In step' and then described the structure of the instrument, with particular attention to its emphasis on cultivating rhythms and practices that embody the missional theology as well as the holding environment for 'In step'. Finally, the article reflected on lessons learned in partnering with local congregations as they engage with the habits and rhythms proposed in the In step process. These lessons can be used for further research for missional ecclesiology and transformation.

Keywords: missional ecclesiology; 'In Pas; 'In step'; missional transformation; *missio Dei*; congregational change; discipleship formation; rule of life.

Introduction

In 2013 the Dutch Reformed Church adopted a 'Framework document on the missional nature and calling of the Dutch Reformed Church' (Dutch Reformed Church 2013). The main authors that drafted this document were Nelus Niemandt and Piet Meiring (Niemandt & Meiring 2014). The theological insights of this framework have been helpful for the Dutch Reformed Church's journey towards becoming a missional denomination and developing a missional ecclesiology. However, like all frameworks, the challenge is to embody the framework in the practice(s) of churches through an iterative development of prototypes that are tested in congregations (Niemandt et al. 2021). In 2017, 4 years after the framework was approved, the Dutch Reformed Church's General Synod's leadership commissioned a research project to adapt 'existing and proven materials for missional transformation' (Bosman 2023:104). The General Synod leaders discerned the necessity of developing an instrument that will enable inculcating a missional theology within the practices, habits and rhythms of local congregations.

One of the major sources that formed the basis of this adaptation was the body of work that was developed during the South African Partnership for Missional Churches (SAPMC) – a major intervention in the denomination that was undertaken in partnership with Church Innovations in the United States of America, and has been the subject of academic articles and dissertations (Cordier 2014; Nel 2013; Niemandt 2010; Hendriks 2009; Smith 2021). Niemandt was himself deeply involved in the Highveld Synod's cluster of the SAPMC. As a young church planter, he invited me into the SAPMC as a community of practice, an act of hospitality that I am incredibly grateful for.

In this article, I describe: the process used to develop a specific prototype called *In pas met die lewende God* ['In step' with the living God],¹ the specific rhythms of the prototype, the holding environments used to facilitate communities of practice that implement 'In step' the keystone practices that we have discovered, the role of a missional rhythm of life in the process of cultivating

1. Most of the source material for this article is in Afrikaans and described in the prototype (eds. Cordier et al. 2020). Afrikaans phrases and words will be placed in italics and then translated to English in brackets the first time. In further cases, the English will be used. Therefore, *In pas met die Lewende God* will become 'In step' in the rest of the article.

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

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missional disciples and a reflection on current lessons learnt in the 'In step' community of practice.

Developing the 'In step' instrument

When the General Synod commissioned the development for a resource that would enable churches to move from maintenance to mission, the learnings from the SAPMC played a significant role as a basis for this development (Bosman 2023:103–104). The project team had consensus that missional transformation develops when congregations engage with specific practices, which form habits and rhythms that facilitate cultural change. The project team also had consensus that the change model can be described within the quartet of minimum knowledge, attitudes, skills and habits that can be passed on (Smith 2021:32–96). Facilitators and cluster leaders of the SAPMC were interviewed with the research question, 'What is the best that we have learned from the SAPMC process for cultural change in congregations? Which tools, processes, and practices have worked the best?' (eds. Cordier, Bosman & Van der Walt 2020:1). After conducting the interviews and assessing the results, the design team for 'In step' developed a first prototype using a framework that helped congregations to develop 5 rhythms that was formed by 15 habits and 45 practices. The intended goal for 'In step' was to 'create a product for local leaders in churches that is simple and user-friendly, and not dependent on high-level facilitators' (eds. Cordier et al. 2020:1).

The prototype was released in March 2020, the month that coincided with the onset of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. As many churches transitioned to forms of online ministry, 'In step' also launched virtually, hosting several webinars and developing a website for the prototype.

The early feedback of the leaders was that the prototype was overwhelming, and training and facilitation was indeed needed. The intended purpose of developing a prototype that could be implemented without facilitation was, in the language of the SAPMC and Church Innovations, an excellent failure. Excellent failures are failures that we learn from and help with the process of iteration. Niemandt (2019b:177) describes the willingness to fail as 'The courage to lead and take risks'. The iterated prototype needed interpretation, and church leaders asked for guidance to engage with the 5 rhythms, 15 habits and 45 practices that would help their congregations to take the next step on the missional journey.

As COVID-19 restrictions were lifted in South Africa, the steering team decided to start learning communities with church leaders that included ministers and lay leaders. They were invited into learning ecologies that met for two and a half days to introduce leaders to the 'In step' prototype and to experience the prototype through an experiential pedagogy (Burns 2017). In 2022, two of these communities were launched (one for the Dutch Reformed

Church Synods in the north of South Africa and another in the south). These learning communities were expanded in 2023, and to date, eight learning communities have been formed involving 70 congregations. The learning communities embody some of the practices, give feedback on implementation of 'In step' in their communities as well as share new practices that were discovered that can be offered as best practices for the rest of the denomination. Each learning community develops a unique holding environment that allows participants to journey together.

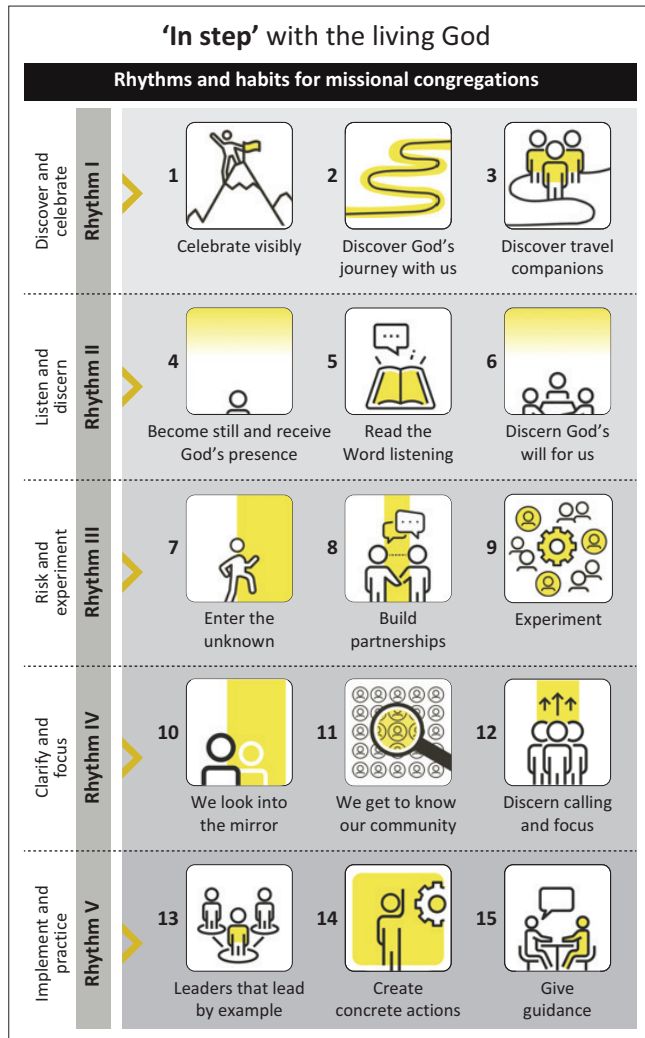
The steering team is working towards reaching 10% of the Dutch Reformed Church congregations. At the General Synod of 2023, the 'In step' task team was approved as a permanent team for the General Synod, and facilitators in all 10 regional synods will be trained to develop missional cultures (Niemandt 2007, 2013) and leaders (Niemandt 2019b), two impulses that have been life-long passions of Niemandt.

The rhythms, habits and practices that are used to empower cultural change

As previously noted, the SAPMC process played a significant role in the development of 'In step'. Because there have been extensive research on the SAPMC in South Africa (Bosman 2023; Cordier 2014; Hendriks 2009; Marais 2017a; Mouton 2017; Smith 2021), the rhythms, habits and practices for 'In step' were not designed from scratch and have been chosen as best practices of the SAPMC that spanned from 2006 to 2014 in the Dutch Reformed Church (Smith 2021:32–96). The SAPMC process was built on the work of Church Innovations (Keifert 2006, 2017), that focused on the development of four core capacities in four phases. Phase one focused on Discovery with the core capacity of listening. Phase two focused on Exploring with the core capacity of risk taking. Phase three focused on Embodiment for Vision and developed the core capacity of focus. Phase four focused on Learning and Growing with the intent of developing the core capacity of continued learning.

In the development of 'In step', some of these phases were used. However, in its iterated state, five phases were developed. Niemandt notes how important it is to develop a language house and social imagination in the process of creating a missional culture (Niemandt 2019b:145–147). To create a language house for 'In step', the phases were translated into the language house of rhythms and symbols were created for every habit (see Figure 1). The five rhythms of 'In step' are:

- discover and celebrate
- listen and discern
- risk and experiment
- clarify and focus
- implement and practice.



Source: Cordier, G.S., Bosman, L. & Van der Walt, P. (eds.), 2020, *In pas met die lewende God: Ritmes en gewoontes vir roepingsgetroue gemeentes*, p. 6, Communitas, Stellenbosch

FIGURE 1: 'In step' matrix of rhythms and habits.

Each rhythm also contains a cluster of habits that are formed by specific practices. Bosman (2023:110) summarises the different rhythms in the following matrix focusing on the level of rhythms and habits (see Figure 1):

- Discover and celebrate, with habits: celebrate publicly, discover God's journey with us and discover co-travellers.
- Listen and discern, with habits: be quiet and receive God's presence, read the Word with a listening posture and discern God's will for us.
- Take risks and experiment, with habits: venture into the unknown, build partnerships and experiment.
- Enlighten and focus, with habits: look into the mirror, get to know the community and discern God's call and focus.
- Implement and train, with habits: leaders who lead by example, create concrete actions and (iii) coaching (Bosman 2023:110).

The pedagogy of 'In step' with the living God invites leaders to participate in the *missio Trinitatis* so that missional disciples are formed. The practices, habits and rhythms become invitational journeys into Trinitarian gathering, forming and sending movements.

The design team expanded the SAPMC's original four phases to five, and added the Rhythm of Discovery and Celebration to the beginning of the journey with churches for several reasons:

- Because the denomination has been on a journey towards creating a missional culture since the early 2000s, it was important to celebrate the places where missional change already took place. Therefore, an appreciative lens was added so that local congregations would not begin from nothing. Leadership teams are encouraged to look for signs where the Spirit is already renewing the local congregation, instead of just focusing on the problems and challenges.
- Some congregations who were part of the original SAPMC process and defaulted to previous forms of being could recover their tracks and re-join the journey. One of the challenges within the 'In step' movement is to invite some churches who feel like they have already been on this journey and that 'In step' is basically the SAPMC in a different jacket. Some of these churches did not fully engage with the SAPMC process and they are invited to discover and celebrate anew.

The pedagogy of the 'In step' journey invites leaders to pass on habits through the embodiment of specific practices. These practices form habits that become rhythms in the community. Initially, 'In step' had 45 practices. As the learning communities formed, new practices are discovered and placed within the matrix of the five rhythms. Some of the practices that were added since the prototype's start are: evangelism, hidden treasures (that help communities to network), and a diaconal tool for networking based on the work of Venter (2023). The community of practice also gives feedback on the existing practices and these practices are re-worked on the website.

Because the initial matrix with its rhythms, habits and practices are overwhelming for most churches and their leadership, each learning community starts out with some keystone practices.

These keystone practices help to 'transform the entire local church system toward participation in God's mission in the world' (Duhigg 2012:109; Keifert & Rooms 2014:21). The keystone practices provide the entry point for the implementation of 'In step' in congregations. Figure 2 depicts these practices with the corresponding practice number found in the index of the 'In step' manual (eds. Cordier et al. 2020:3–5).

As we discover new practices and reflect on embodied practices, we link with Niemandt's (2019b) insight that:

Missional transformation represents adaptive change. This necessitates an approach that attempts to find answers through discovery via discerning reflection, experimentation, and practice. It demands a change of heart from leaders. If you want to manage change, you must change. (p. 77)

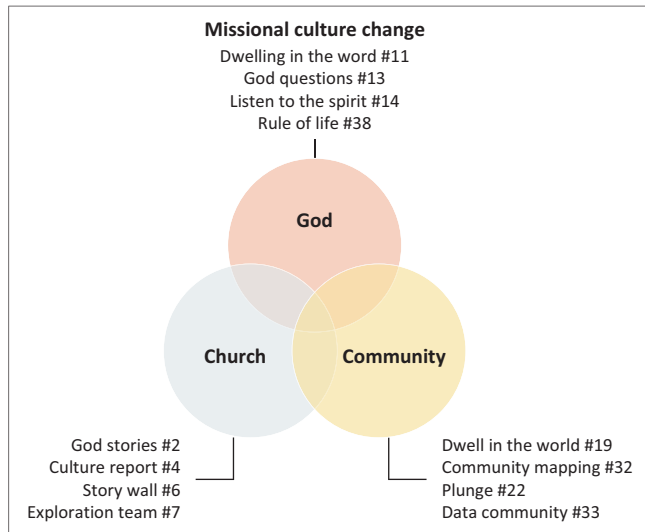


FIGURE 2: Keystone habits of 'In step'.

'In step' learning communities are formed as holding environments. Within these environments, specific practices are engaged as training and become pedagogies for joining God in mission. In the learning communities, exploration teams are formed that discern the practices that could be implemented as next steps in local communities.

The role of holding environments to implement the pedagogy of 'In step'

The concept of holding environments, sometimes called containers (Marais 2017b), links with the work of the psychologist David Winnicott (Smith 2021:260–262). The idea of a holding environment is that it provides a space wherein formation can take place. Therefore, a holding environment creates a safe space on the one hand, but also a space for growth and challenge on the other part of the environment. To create a holding environment is an essential part of the process of 'In step'. Bolsinger (2015) notes that:

When we think of structures, we tend to think institutionally, but what Heifetz and his colleagues refer to often as a 'holding environment' or 'containing vessel' is far more an expression of relationships than a formal configuration of policies, procedures, and rules. 'A holding environment consists of all those ties that bind people together and enable them to maintain their collective focus on what they are trying to do. All the human sources of cohesion'. (p. 65)

Holding environments are used in several missional models of creating cultural change. Within the holding environment, specific practices are introduced, and through time these practices are reified. Wenger (1999:58) notes that communities of practice develop a repertoire of practices as well as reified materials. He discusses reification in the context of communities of practice as the process of turning collective knowledge and experiences into tangible objects or representations. Reification involves making abstract concepts or practices more concrete and accessible for members of the community. As a community of practice, 'In step' makes their resources available on Canva design software for easy adaptation



FIGURE 3: Reified practice of 'how we gather matters'.

contextualisation in local contexts. See Figure 3 – 'how we gather matters' – as an example.

To help the community of practice, 'In step' developed a resource for holding environments called *Saamwees Maniere* [How we gather matters]. The principles for our holding environments are reified on a printed card that helps with the ways we covenant to be together.

In every group, a keeper of the space is assigned to help participants to keep the holding environment in shape so that we can continue to focus on the task at hand.

This creates a space where a non-anxious mode can be achieved to cultivate energy in a way that the container does not break or leak. In all group work, this is essential. Because leadership is convening, these simple agreed upon principles help groups in the norming and later storming phases of their work together. The principles of how we gather also matter, helping participants to reflect on the logic of other practices within the 'In step' process. In the learning communities, we start with the following basics:

- Be present, serving the group by not being distracted by technology.
- Listen deeply with empathy and in a way that frees other into free speech.
- Use 'I' language, and guard against generalisations and hiding behind the collective.
- Do not give unwarranted advice.
- Honour the group by participating and allowing others to participate.

- Build trust through confidentiality.
- Be brave.

As groups embark as a learning community, this baseline commitment is discussed, adapted and sometimes expanded to ensure that the holding environment stays intact. By rotating the role of keeper of the space, participants learn how to safeguard the holding environment, and this becomes a habit that can be passed on to other congregation leaders who are convening groups.

Another important part of the holding environment is the physical space used to convene the meeting in. As a community of practice, we are learning the importance of embodiment and how it plays out in the physical spaces where we convene:

Every room we occupy serves as a metaphor for the larger community that we want to create. This is true socially and physically. The room is the visible expression of today's version of the future. The room we are in, and how we choose to occupy it, is what we must work with in the present moment. If the future we desire does not exist in this room, today, then it will never occur tomorrow. This is what is meant by 'Change the room, change the culture. (Block 2009:loc.1674)

Another part of developing a holding environment is choosing the practices of 'In step' for the learning communities and helping congregational leaders to form holding environments in their local congregations. The learning communities are designed with specific practices in the container.

These practices are chosen from different rhythms and habits (Figure 1) for every learning adventure, and its embodied practice allows participants and facilitators to experience the pedagogy together. Developing facilitators for the environments is crucial for the denominational change we are busy with.

These facilitators need a healthy engagement with spiritual practices to have a non-anxious presence within the holding environments. Rooms and Keifert (2019) note that:

[U]ndertaking regular spiritual practices out of a rule of life is the most powerful and practical action they can take. Such a rule of life grounds the spiritual leader in a God-centred self-definition so that they can provide that crucial, appropriate, non-anxious presence as they lead the Christian community. Such presence creates the emotional and spiritual field which holds the disciples of Christ as they discern and act to form Christian community within God's mission in God's beloved world. (p. 26)

A missional rule or rhythm of life

The development of a rule of life – or in a more African metaphor, a rhythm of life – is one of the keystone habits within the 'In step' learning community. The development of the missional rhythm of life took place in different iterations (Smith 2021:276–284). Developing a missional rhythm of life forms the foundational missional spirituality (Niemandt 2019a) that allows for an attunement to the

processes of discernment, 'A rhythm of life consists of practices that are repeated so that habit formation take place that align individuals and communities with the Trinitarian community of practice' (Smith & Niemandt 2022:13). Leaders who are responsible for leading missional change and facilitating a holding environment are invited to develop their own set of practices. These 'communal and personal practices ... can counter the secular formation by attending to the rhythm in terms of regularity and dispersion of the practices in the ecology of the church' (Smith 2021:260).

Without an engagement with a repertoire of practices, discernment can easily devolve into technical changes derived from the habitus of business models. The rhythm of life we are using in the 'In step' community of practice consists of seven invitations centred around the Trinitarian reality and invitations of the *missio Dei* (Smith & Niemandt 2022) – see Figure 4, the visual rhythm of life tool (Fontainebleau Gemeenskapskerk 2024).

Each image creates a social imaginary that links with everyday life. The rhythms are also invitations to specific practices that open space for the Spirit's formational work. The representation of the rhythm is circular, depicting the non-linear fashion which represents the ongoing nature of discipleship. Each symbol depicts a specific invitation centred around the central symbol of the Trinity:

- Plug: Connection with God in daily life.
- Bread: Community with others.
- Puzzle: Serving with our unique giftedness.
- Tree: Seeking the kingdom of God in the neighbourhood we are planted.
- Clock: Serving with time, money and resources.



Source: Fontainebleau Gemeenskapskerk, 2024, *Missional rhythm of life* [figure], viewed 10 April 2025, from <https://www.fgk.co.za>

FIGURE 4: Missional rhythm of life.

- Bridge: Reconciliation and justice in a divided society.
- Healing: Our broken lives become whole as we are weaved into a community of care (See Smith & Niemandt 2022:14–19 for a longer description of the rhythms; also, Smith 2014).

As leaders engage with the rhythm of life in a personal and communal mode, spaces of transformation open, and fertile ground for further discernment is tilled.

The communities that embody the missional rhythm of life introduce the rule of life to congregants in an introductory journey (10 weeks) and then adapt it in steps of iteration to fit local contexts. This allows for the rhythm of life to penetrate the imagination of participants through image, language and practice. The different practices of 'In step' can be described under each of the rhythms (See Smith 2021:357–359 for possibilities to explain the phases of the SAPMC using the rhythm of life).

The rule of life is reified in cards, magnets, stickers and T-shirts, so that it becomes part of the language house of missional discipleship in a local congregation. Within the community of practice, the images are adapted to suit the different language (and image) houses of local communities. An example would be that the plug (connection with God) might be changed to a Wi-Fi signal.

Lessons learnt as a community of practice

At the General Synod of 2023, the 'In step' team reflected on the lessons that the community of practice are learning. The following reflections are based on the report that was submitted to the synod. Some of the points have been expanded (Dutch Reformed Church 2023:217–218):

- It is becoming clear that congregations and leaders are inspired by the stories of congregations that embody 'In step'. This confirms, again, that churches learn best from other churches and not necessarily just from experts.
- The community of practice has come to see that the 'In step' manual can be overwhelming. The keystone habits (Figure 2) are a helpful iteration to help leadership teams to engage with 'In step' without being overwhelmed.
- 'In step' is a journey that takes colleagues, church councils and church members on a journey to be faithful congregations. It is not about selling a product, it is about dwelling. We do not pitch 'In step'; we invite congregations to interact with the living God to discern together.
- It has become evident that the learning community consists not only of ministers but also of members who want to make a difference in their congregations and communities. When leaders that are not paid ministry staff join the learning communities, our learning coefficient is raised. These members also help ministers when we talk in ways that are not understandable. In our communities of practice, these members can lift a red card at any time in conversations wherein ministers use theological terms in such a way that they get lost in translation. At this point,

a leader will stop the conversation by lifting a red card and say, 'You have lost me – you are speaking minister insider language'. Some of our most powerful learning has taken place in these situations. Translating the missional theology of 'In step' in a language house that connects with congregational leaders is an ongoing process. Developing a dictionary of missional terms that connects with the parlance of congregational members is of utmost importance (See Smith 2021:221–227 for a discussion of the language house in the Dutch Reformed Church; and NGK 2019:190) that helps congregants to understand difficult theological words and phrases. In 2023, the 'In step' team consulted with lay leaders to develop a missional bookmark that is a first iteration in creating a language house that is more helpful in local churches. Talking about God in the voices of formal theology is easy for pastors, whereas the espoused and normative theologies of members do not always correlate with the formal theology (Bhatti et al. 2010:loc.963).

- One of the challenges with the 'In step' representation of the rhythms, habits and steps is the linear depiction and numbering of the rhythms and habits in the book and figures (see Figure 1) that can be mistaken as a process that is sequential. This is also seen in the different metaphors used for 'In step'. It is sometimes called a journey, a tool, an instrument, a manual, a product, a learning community, a workshop, a movement and a prototype or pedagogy. What would the best descriptor be? Do we need just one?
- The steering team wonders how individual leaders from congregations not formally part of 'In step' might be supported to join learning communities and bring their churches along later. Webinars and online spaces may offer new avenues for participation.
- There can be synergy between 'In step' and the work of training ministers and in continued education of leaders.
- 'In step' can be helpful in other Dutch Reformed Church congregations' processes and therefore partnerships are especially important. We are partnering with the task teams of evangelism, race and reconciliation, missional diaconate and interim ministry.
- It has become increasingly clear that some congregations are in trauma or conflict, and that 'In step' must first take that context into account. Trauma is one of the major mission fields in our denomination, and practices need to be developed to engage with trauma.
- The formation of congregational leaders – both in individual and communal practices – is a growing desire. Developing a rule of life has proven deeply formative and should be explored further.
- In the steering team's research in 2024, they are finding that 57% of the ministers and congregational leaders that partake in a learning community manage to start the 'In step' process in their congregations. The two main reasons for not starting are leadership challenges that hinder the formation of a steering team, and the busyness of ministry.
- Skills are particularly important. Facilitation is one of the most important skills that must be learned.
- Mobilise circuits to engage with 'In step' as congregations might be a fruitful proposition.

- The steering team recognises the importance of encouraging leaders to cultivate practices that promote discernment and identify and unlearn those habits that are toxic (Marais 2017b).

Conclusion

In this article, the missional prototype 'In step' was discussed. The article described the process of development and discussed the importance of moving from framework to a possible prototype. The influence of the SAPMC was described and how the prototype was iterated. The rhythms and habits of the iteration were discussed. Furthermore, the importance of a holding environment was shown, and some reifications were shared. The article concluded with a reflection on the lessons the community of practice is learning. Throughout this research and the development of the prototype, the influence of Nelus Niemandt can be observed. As a researcher, I am thankful for the example he has been. He helped the denomination to develop imagination and language for participating in the *missio Dei*. His influence looms large, and his encouragement is appreciated.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the leadership of the Dutch Reformed Church and the many congregational leaders, both ordained and lay, who participated in the 'In step' learning communities and gave valuable feedback throughout the development of this instrument. Special thanks to the 'In step' steering team and facilitation partners across the regional synods. I am also grateful for the theological imagination and encouragement of Prof. Nelus Niemandt, whose legacy continues to shape this work.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

T.J.S. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The author declares that all data that support this research article and findings are available in the article and its references.

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