

Leadership emergence and missional theology: A biographical leadership study of Nelus Niemandt

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This article explores the emergence of leadership within ecclesial and secular contexts through a biographical case study of Prof. Nelus Niemandt, a prominent South African church leader and theologian. Drawing on leadership emergence theory and social constructionist perspectives, the study investigates how leadership identities are collectively granted, individually internalised and contextually shaped. By analysing Niemandt's own reflections on his life, ministry and leadership journey, the article provides empirical insight into the relational, adaptive and often subversive nature of leadership in faith communities navigating systemic change. The study traces Niemandt's development from a conventionally socialised Afrikaner youth to a leading proponent of relational and missional leadership. It highlights his formative influences, his resistance to hierarchical structures and his role in institutional innovation, particularly in integrating systems theory, Trinitarian theology and the missional turn into church life. Rather than portraying leadership as individual heroism, the study foregrounds communal discernment, shared agency and the importance of marginal voices. The narrative arc culminates in a vision of anticipatory leadership – marked by trust, vulnerability and agility – as demonstrated in Niemandt's final leadership role at Hugenote Kollege.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: By situating this journey within the broader theological and social transformations of post-apartheid South Africa, the article contributes to both leadership studies and missional ecclesiology. It argues that the future of leadership in the church lies in relational networks of trust and discernment rather than centralised authority, and calls for renewed theological reflection on leadership as a collective vocation.

Keywords: missional theology; leadership emergence; relational leadership; Dutch Reformed Church; ecclesial innovation; social construction of leadership; biographical case study; transition to post-apartheid South Africa.

Introduction

Leadership emergence theory, which spans seven decades, is a well-established approach to understanding the processes impacting leadership development (Acton et al. 2019; Badura, Galvin & Lee 2022:2069). Leadership emergence typically refers to the processes, traits and behaviours through which an individual is perceived as influential by others, as well as the contexts in which this occurs. From a social leadership construction perspective, this involves the implicit or explicit granting of leadership roles (Badura et al. 2022:2070). Leadership emergence may occur in both formal and informal settings, with the former involving specific leadership roles being explicitly assigned to an individual, while the latter recognises that leadership in social settings routinely emerges independently of explicit leader roles.

In their recent integrative review of leadership emergence, Badura et al. (2022:2070, 2071) point to the fact that literature has tended to focus on informal leadership emergence at the expense of formal leadership emergence, which presents a skewed understanding of leadership emergence when compared to the lived contexts where the leadership phenomenon emerges through dynamic processes that include, among others, both formal and informal leadership. In their seminal paper on the social process of leadership identity construction in organisations, DeRue and Ashford (2010) express that empirical research needs to provide clarity on the relation between collective endorsement and individual internalisation of a leadership identity:

Is it possible that a leadership identity cannot be collectively endorsed until it is individually internalised or relationally recognised, or might collective endorsement prompt individuals to internalise a leader or

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follower identity – and how would processes starting from these different points unfold differently over time? (p. 641)

This study attempts to address both the gap in empirical studies of formal leadership emergence and the above question on the relation between the collective granting of leadership roles (i.e. collective endorsement) and individual acceptance of a leadership role (internalisation of a leadership identity). It accomplishes this through a biographical case study of an influential leader in the church and theological context, Nelus Niemandt, where both informal and formal leadership emergence processes appear and where the process of his leadership identity internalisation developed over time (see the section *Adventures of an unlikely leader*). The article utilises this leader's life narrative and leadership journey as told in his own words to unearth insights into the process of leadership emergence in the context of the Dutch Reformed Church during a time of great political and theological transformation.

The case for exploration of life stories as sources of insight into leadership has been made by Ciulla (2016:186–197), Nkomo and Kriek (2011:453–470), Redekop (2016:159–185), Shamir, Dayan-Horesh and Adler (2005), *inter alia*. However, the use of an individual's life story as a case study should not be mistaken for an endorsement of singular, heroic models of leadership. Rather, as Raelin (2016:131–158) has argued, the article understands leadership as a collaborative agency that is mobilised through engaged social interaction. Theoretically, this study aligns with social construction approaches that see leadership as an ongoing co-construction, which occurs through the granting and claiming of identities by both leaders and followers.

Missional leadership through a biographical lens

This section presents the findings of a thematic analysis of eight semi-structured personal interviews with Niemandt, with other sources sometimes cited for clarity and triangulation purposes.

Influential figures: From the centre and the margins

The influence of role models and influential figures has emerged as definitive in the life story of leaders (Shamir et al. 2005:22). This section explores the influence of personal and professional figures on Niemandt's leadership journey.

Of a mother and (two) father(s)

Both of Niemandt's parents embodied distinctive forms of relational and ethical leadership, and in his own assessment, both also modelled servant leadership (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). Niemandt credited his mother with instilling in him a sensitivity to justice and the inclusion of the vulnerable. A tender-hearted woman, her emotional response to injustice – particularly during the era of the pass laws – left a vivid mark on his ethical imagination. He recounts how she would cry when police trucks came down the street, rounding up those without passes (N Niemandt pers.

interview, 10 October 2024). Although not politically vocal, his mother's deep emotional resistance to injustice conveyed a moral clarity that influenced his later resistance to exclusionary forms of power. Her lifelong emphasis on compassion, restraint in speech and deference to human dignity also contributed to Niemandt's commitment to relational and inclusive leadership (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). Niemandt's recent discovery that his maternal grandmother was born out of wedlock somewhere in the 1880s, and the fact that his mother as a young girl was sent away to be raised by her grandmother, gave Niemandt a new perspective on his mother's vulnerability and concern for the marginalised. While this cannot be confirmed, Niemandt reflected on how the shame of three generations of women might explain his mother's compassion for those on the society's fringes, which in turn powerfully impacted his own life and leadership (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024).

Niemandt speaks of his father's influence in terms of his example of hard work, tenacity and especially his collective approach to leadership (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). Andries Niemandt emerged as a prominent civic leader in Kempton Park, serving first as councillor, then mayor and eventually chairman of the South African Municipal Council, all while simultaneously climbing the ranks in the business world where he became director of a large company in Pretoria and president of the Afrikaans Trade Institute. While Niemandt therefore observed his father in a variety of leadership roles throughout his life, it was especially how he practised leadership that left an impression on the boy. Andries Niemandt was a self-made man who, in his son's eyes, modelled resilience, integrity¹ and community-oriented leadership (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). Originally moving to the East Rand from the hardy Mariko bushveld as a very poor farm boy, Niemandt's father studied part-time by cycling the 40 km from Kempton Park to the University of Pretoria after work, only to return after class and do it all again the next day (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). Like his mother, Niemandt recalls his father's preference and activism for marginal figures² and a deeply relational orientation to leadership that favoured doing things together with others (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024).

One of the most remarkable figures in Niemandt's early life was Johannes Poee, the black worker on and later manager of the farm, whom Niemandt calls his second father. Recalling how Poee addressed his father by name – a rare and telling breach of racial protocol in the 1960s Apartheid South Africa – Niemandt suggests this relationship quietly undermined Apartheid's social norms (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). An emotional Niemandt reported the entry of Mr Poee into their household during his farewell address at Hugenote Kollege (N Niemandt pers. interview, 13 March 2025).

1.Niemandt described his father's aversion to civil servants using privileged information to their own benefit (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024).

2.Such as when, as a civic leader, he rallied local business leaders to support community initiatives such as *Huis Erna* for intellectually and physically disabled children (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). Niemandt also recalled how his father was known for mischievously walking around with scissors at work functions and cutting off men's ties – a humorous, yet subversive way of resisting power and pretence (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024).

The angel that visited our home happened when ... I was about six years old. Then my Dad's boyhood friend, Jo Poee, knocked on the door. [...] So, Jo grew up with my dad and in those years, 60 years ago, no black man knocked on the front door. It was not accepted. So, they were a little bit surprised, my Dad told me, that this guy was knocking on the door [...] and then he recognised his boyhood friend. And he [Poee] said to him, 'Andries', [...] that's how they spoke to one another... that his forefathers appeared to him, and said he must come and take care of his³ son. ... So, what I think makes the story precious is that the second father I received was Jo Poee, who taught me so much about life.

Poee taught Niemandt how to drive a tractor, prune peaches, slaughter cattle and sheep (N Niemandt pers. interview, 13 March 2025) shared tents with the family on hunting trips (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024) and was consistently treated with a dignity that defied the prevailing racial order. This embodied counter-narrative within his own home offered Niemandt a lived example of mutual respect across racial lines, long before formal theological or political critique entered his thinking (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). The central place that this marginalised person occupied in his family would later be echoed in Niemandt's inclusive approach to leadership.

The influence of theologians and spiritual leaders

Johan Wolfaard was a Dutch church minister who had a profound formative influence during Niemandt's teenage years when he was chair of the Church Youth Action (*KJA, Kerk Jeug Aksie*). Niemandt describes Wolfaard as a young and passionate preacher who almost saw his call to the congregation annulled because of having studied at the too-liberal Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. In addition to his passionate ministry, Niemandt was impressed by Wolfaard's active encouragement of young people, despite resistance from the church council, to take initiative and experiment with new forms of church life (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). Wolfaard's trust in youth leadership and his openness to experimentation provided legitimacy to Niemandt's own early explorations of collective, grassroots leadership.

In his academic and ecclesial career, Prof. Johan Heyns stands out as a further significant influence. Heyns was not only a powerful intellectual presence in the Dutch Reformed Church but also one of the few established leaders who offered active support to the kind of reform-from-within leadership that Niemandt embraced. He reflects on how Heyns, as both an academic and a leader in the *Broederbond*, used his intellectual credibility to shape public discourse and create space for alternative voices (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). This affirmation provided an important sense of belonging and legitimacy, particularly during Niemandt's later advocacy for inclusive and transformational church practices within restrictive Afrikaner structures.

Christian Afrikaner nationalism: Niemandt's formative context

I was probably in many ways an ordinary, conventional 1970s product of an Afrikaans high school on the East Rand. (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024).

3. By 'his', Mr Poee referred to Nelus Niemandt as his own son.

Apartheid, as a legal framework, unfolded through a series of laws passed from 1948 onwards. The 1970s, or the South Africa of Niemandt's formative years, were a period of intensified Afrikaner nationalism, marked by the consolidation of Apartheid ideology, the expansion of the state's security apparatus and the entrenchment of hierarchical structures in society. Growing up in this environment meant being socialised into a worldview in which authority was rarely questioned and loyalty to the *volk*,⁴ the church and the state was paramount.

The school system reflected and reinforced this logic through strict discipline that included corporal punishment. Uniformity of thought, dress and behaviour was expected and rewarded, and according to Niemandt, the principal of their school matched 'all the stereotypes of Afrikaans high school principals with crew-cut hair who were dictators in suits'. In this milieu, leadership was understood as deeply hierarchical, often modelled along military and bureaucratic lines. Military service was compulsory, and schools functioned with a hierarchical structure and a profound respect for authority figures whose power was rarely challenged (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024).

Niemandt admitted how deeply this cultural and ideological formation shaped his early life, even as he would later grow to question and resist its assumptions. He also reflected on how the leadership environment of the Dutch Reformed Church as *volkskerk*⁵ in many respects mirrored the societal obsession with power and hierarchy (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024). In a wider context, the 1980s saw profound social turmoil in South Africa. The post-Soweto protests took place as civil war raged on the borders of the country and as great constitutional upheaval permeated societies in what Niemandt calls 'almost a life and death battle of whether the right wing or the "enlightened" faction will take control. *Verkramp en verlig*' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024).⁶

Adventures of an unlikely leader

This section shines the light on how leadership unfolded in the life of a young man who did not identify as a leader (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024), yet saw himself elected to one leadership position after another.⁷ The

4. Meaning here the white Afrikaner people.

5. Denotes the overlap between the Dutch Reformed Church and the white Afrikaner State.

6. *Verkramp* [conservative] and *verlig* [enlightened or liberalising] were labels used within Afrikaner political and church circles to describe opposing views on reform. The former described those who upheld strict nationalist (Apartheid) ideologies, and the latter referred to those calling for reforms, greater racial inclusion, and a rethinking of Afrikaner identity and power.

7. In Niemandt's own words: 'So in ways it seems that people thought I could do these things without me thinking that I could [...] Afterwards it repeated itself many times ... that almost every time I became involved with something, it ended with me having to take full responsibility for it' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). The list of leadership roles, which does not claim to be exhaustive, included: deputy head boy in secondary school, editor of the University of Pretoria (UP) student newspaper, chairman of the UP student council, president of the *Afrikaanse Studente Bond* (ASB), chairman of the *Junior Rapportryer Beweging*, national leader of the *Ruiterweg* (the youth wing of the *Afrikaner Broederbond*, established to cultivate ideologically aligned leadership among young Afrikaner men during apartheid-era South Africa), Actuary of the Highveld Synod, Moderator of the Highveld Synod, Head of Department at the UP Faculty of Theology, Moderator of the General Synod and Rector of Hugenote Kollege.

discussion that follows casts these leadership cycles as a series of adventures⁸ that were usually collective in nature, morally motivated and grounded in spiritual discernment. From the perspective of the aim set out in the introduction, it will illustrate formal leadership emergence as well as demonstrate how collective endorsement of Niemandt as leader preceded and contributed to his internalisation of the leadership identity over time. Throughout, this leadership identity took the form of leadership *with* others, so that one may rightly speak of leadership emergence and not merely the emergence of an individual leader.

Tenacity and subversion

At school, I really didn't see myself as a leader at all. [...] I was the one at school who actually went against the group. [...] On the contrary, I enjoyed setting myself against those groups at school. Few things gave me as much joy as not being like they were. So, I really thought of myself in terms of simple anonymity – just getting my work done and enjoying my life. (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024).

Within the deeply structured and conformist environment described in the section *Christian Afrikaner nationalism: Niemandt's formative context*, signs of dissonance and resistance became increasingly obvious. Conversely, Niemandt's leadership identity, like that of many of his peers, developed along lines of resistance and subversion. Family influence contributed: Niemandt had observed his father during the turbulent political times as someone who 'followed his own mind', resisted right extremes of racial theory, and suffered resistance for it (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). He also sketched his grandparents on his father's side as rebels who had evaded English capture by hiding in cliffs during the Anglo-Boer War (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). He remembers his grandfather, Kerneels Kleinkoppie, as a small, thin man who repeatedly told him, 'A Niemandt bows only to God, to no one else' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024).

Niemandt recalls how, as a schoolboy, he often distanced himself from prevailing groupthink and found himself in a kind of 'contra-group' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024) instead of the 'cool group' that was aligned with rugby culture and social conformity (N Niemandt pers. interviews, 10 & 18 October 2024). This early tendency towards dissent would eventually grow to include deliberate acts of subversion to attempt to move away from rigid hierarchies towards a more relational and value-driven understanding of influence, where leadership is shared. Niemandt was always joined by his peers in this time of subversive questioning of authority, and so the 1970s is revealed as a powerful breeding ground of Afrikaner socialisation even as it simultaneously bore the seeds of an alternative leadership imagination that was quietly taking root.

Given the importance that the arts played in this process of dissent (see, e.g. Fiebach 2019:37–42; Serote 2019:27–36; Sichel 2019:53–58), it is interesting that despite the climate of

8.The word choice attempts to convey the way in which Niemandt spoke of these times.

political socialisation in and through student bodies, the *Afrikaanse Studente Bond*⁹ (ASB) expanded its politically oriented agenda to include an annual arts festival. In addition to its large, politically oriented annual conference, the ASB leadership now proceeded to create the *Fiesta* as a massive arts festival, as well as the *Kuesta* as a massive offering of practical micro-courses that students could master in a week. This included anything from learning to parachute to understanding how to dismantle and reassemble a motor vehicle engine – something unavailable to female students at the time. To suggest that student life might be about more than the game of politics served as a form of protest during the turbulent 1980s. Although this transpired while Niemandt was president of the ASB, he yet again made clear that this innovation was conceived and implemented 'together with a group of friends'.

Another instance of dissent transpired around the time that Niemandt assumed leadership of the *Ruiterwag*, which as the youth wing of the *Afrikaner Broederbond* was expected to receive and distribute ideas developed by its parent body and deemed appropriate for the 'youngsters' – men aged 18 to 35 (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024):

My conviction, and that of some of my friends, was that they were moving far too slowly and were not willing to accept a constitutional order in which power-sharing was genuinely on the table. We began to follow our own path and drafted a document outlining a [...] constitutional framework for a new dispensation in South Africa.

Keeping things under wraps, they succeeded in creating a wave among *Ruiterwag* members through widespread discussion in the branches before the *Broederbond* caught on to the initiatives of its youth wing. The eventual outcome was that the *Ruiterwag* had created pressure from inside these secret organisations to force a change in thinking (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). Niemandt again describes this act of subversive moral leadership in collective terms, pointing to the gifted and hard-working individuals who collaborated on the document (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). He also referred to the high level of trust among these young people that enabled them to produce such a document in the context of the times, which, according to him, was filled with a kind of collective awareness that new alternatives had to be found for the country. Leadership, as a social process of granting and accepting leadership and followership identities, is beautifully illustrated through this case, where those in formal and informal leadership roles collaborated and took collective responsibility for working towards a future where all people would have the right to vote.

Niemandt's leadership in the struggles surrounding the ordination of women, the acceptance of the Confession of Belhar in the Dutch Reformed Church, and the gay and gender debate unfold along similar lines. Because of a lack of

9.The 'Afrikaans Student Union' was a national student organisation that promoted Afrikaner nationalism and cultural identity among Afrikaans-speaking university students during the apartheid era.

space and these being more familiar and captured in many official documents of the Dutch Reformed Church, the anecdotes above were covered in more detail. Together, these narratives highlight leadership based on conviction that is willing to challenge established thinking and able to engage in it through distributing the leadership and empowering collaborators towards a shared, collective outcome.

Innovating and experimenting – Together

I realise in retrospect that time and circumstance placed me in a position to [practice] what we would nowadays call innovative leadership. You know, to experiment [...] without knowing what either of the two things were. (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024).

When asked about the first such experiment that he could remember, Niemandt described a leadership initiative of the young people in their church when he was about 16. When the strict oversight of the church council resulted in the youth budget being suspended over fears that the young people were becoming unruly, the youngsters organised among themselves to generate their own funding for their youth ministry (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). The tendency to follow conviction rather than external authority, and to do this through acts of collective, innovative leadership, would both repeat themselves throughout Niemandt's leadership journey (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024):

Throughout my entire experience of leadership, there has always been something of collectivity – being in community with others has been critical. I don't think I've ever been a lone ranger type of leader. [...] even later in my theoretical reflection on it, but from the very beginning, it was something I felt quite strongly about.

Another instance of leadership innovation occurred during his chairmanship of the *Junior Rapportryer Beweging*,¹⁰ when they developed the first-ever (in South Africa) leadership development training material for high school student councils (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024) based on Strategic Goal Planning that they had been exposed to on the University of Pretoria Student Council. This involved designing a strategy according to a vision and mission, certain envisioned outcomes, SWOT analysis and resource allocation. The complete novelty of this way of thinking amid the dearth of leadership thinking at the time unleashed an enormous amount of energy (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024), and it is these insights that the *Junior Rapportryer Beweging* repackaged as training material for school leadership development. In a time when there was absolutely no leadership development of young people, and young leaders were practically just 'an extension of the principal and the teachers' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024), this was a subversive innovation that dared imply that young people could lead themselves. In Niemandt's words, as a group of friends, they 'figured this thing out together'. The story repeated itself years later when he and other police chaplains¹¹ ran into strong opposition when attempting to take

10. A national youth movement aimed at cultivating Afrikaner leadership and identity among male students during the apartheid era.

11. Niemandt completed his compulsory military service in the South African Police Force and served as a Chaplain for several more years.

young police members on weeklong leadership development camps, while the higher ranks protested that young officers had the sole purpose of blindly following orders. The chaplains eventually prevailed, arguing they were developing leaders for the church (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024).

Finding God at the margins: Inclusivity and a hermeneutics of collective discernment

While raised in a Christian home, Niemandt describes his younger years as profoundly impacted by what he describes as a kind of revival in the congregation in Kempton Park, which was further strengthened by the *Jeug-tot-Jeug Aksie* [Youth to Youth Action] that spread throughout South Africa soon after that (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). He remembers a passion for evangelism that took hold among their group of friends, five of whom went on to study theology. This revival, which Niemandt describes as a gift brought about by 'no one' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024) became associated for these young people by an atmosphere of trust and communality that contributed to how notions of leadership formed in his young mind, even if there was no conscious reflection on leadership at the time (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024).

Coming of age in the 1980s in South Africa, however, Niemandt encountered a very different approach to leadership where a military-like authoritarianism pervaded both public and religious life through layers of hierarchy. Just like Apartheid, this system had to be deconstructed and dismantled (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024):

[...] Apartheid racial thinking, but underneath it the way that people functioned in systems [...] a different imagination had to take hold of 'there isn't always someone on top knowing best and having the best information. Maybe there's something from the edge knowing better'. I think it is that terrain that we unconsciously began exploring [...] I think that's why I later developed an affinity for things that were not so hierarchical but organic, and that grasped that things such as the culture of an organisation, how people collaborate and the communality between them is much more important than formal structure.

Amid the pervasive narrative of conflict and debate in the hierarchical system, Niemandt began to create space for hearing a multiplicity of voices, and especially marginal voices (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024). This was not entirely new to Niemandt, who had campaigned against the practice at the University of Pretoria that women's residences would nominate individuals from the male residences to represent their interests (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). While serving as national leader of the *Junior Rapportryers*, he had argued for the exclusively male organisation to open membership to women, and later became involved in the theological movement in the Dutch Reformed Church that argued for women to be ordained as clergy (N Niemandt pers. interviews, 10 & 18 October 2024). Niemandt also argued that young voices should be heard (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). In later years, however, this tendency became theologically grounded and operationalised through techniques based on big systems theory.

The lesson from the management sciences was that (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024):

[I]f you can hold one another in relationship and a strong identity of what you have been called and sent; you can navigate the chaos of such relationships. And you don't need to get everything perfectly right – you can do it organically... a process that grows towards things emerging.

Theologically, Pat Keifert had refined the notion that he had inherited from Ricoeur of *listening each other into free speech* (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025). The relational aspect became incredibly important in this process of discerning what was emerging and which of those were to be pursued. The respectful and skilled pastoral leadership of someone like Johan Symington, moderator of the Highveld Synod where Niemandt was first involved in implementing these principles, provided an atmosphere of respect and openness within which believers began to learn the art of collective discernment (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024). The story of the Samaritan woman at the well also played an important role during the Season of Listening, when the church at large learned to listen to the voice of an outsider (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025).

Subverting the hierarchical system to suggest that someone from the sidelines might have the insight the group needed, distributed leadership and relativised the identified leader(s). As Niemandt later occupied moderator roles in the Highveld and General Synods, this meant to avoid taking himself too seriously – he even mounted a large painting of a clown in his study as a constant reminder (N Niemandt pers. interview, 13 March 2025). Rather than overestimating their own importance and that of the Dutch Reformed Church, Niemandt insisted that 'the important thing was to figure out God's will' (N Niemandt pers. interviews, 18 October 2024). Grounded in Trinitarian theology (see *Relational leadership, the Trinity, and kenosis* section), this led to early encounters with the idea of *mission from the margins* and self-sacrificing *kenosis* as developed by Frederick Marais.

The first seeds had been sown for understanding missional leadership as deep listening and discernment about what needs to happen. 'God works, *missio Dei*, in this world, and you must discern where the Holy Spirit is working' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024). The emphasis here fell on discerning *with others*, which included the faith community as well as the faith tradition as captured in the Scriptures and the history of the Church (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025). This had been present to some extent in the young Niemandt, such as when he described the notion of following his 'own head' (see *Tenacity and subversion* section) as 'an intuitive gut feeling supported by intellectual engagement' with gifted leaders in the field (N Niemandt pers. interview, 10 October 2024). Later, it matured into an integrated praxis based on Trinitarian theology and the theology of missions: '... the voices of strangers are critical, because this might be how God shows up in your meeting' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024).

The double movement of *dwelling in the Word* and *dwelling in the world* meant that the collective discernment of what God

was calling the church to also required the context to be taken seriously. 'The heart of the missional movement is the incarnation – Christ becoming flesh through God's outreach and embrace of the broken reality where we find ourselves', and this means that our reality became a legitimate place where God could be found and God's saving work discerned (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025).

Theological perspectives on leadership

Hierarchy and power in the church

The hierarchical system described in the section *Adventures of an unlikely leader* pervaded ecclesial life in the Dutch Reformed Church just as it did many other organisations of the day. Young ministers were also habitually disempowered during meetings and put in their place through derogatory language such as '*Ag, broertjie...*' [little brother]. In contrast, moderators had extraordinary power in persona and public profile. Niemandt describes *die groen tafel* [the green table] at synods as the ultimate symbol of power through exclusivity and the handing out of favours through the gift of association (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024).

Niemandt described how he and his young friends resisted these symbols of power at every opportunity. One rather humorous way was by sneaking up the stage to *die groen tafel* during lunch break and slipping gold fish into the water jars (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024). Another was through insisting that the principle of *primus inter pares* be upheld at meetings of chaplains where Colonels and Brigadiers were present. The youngsters insisted that all were equal as ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church, consistently and rather blatantly using the opportunity to question sensitive decisions of the General (N Niemandt pers. interviews, 10 & 18 October 2024).

Early signs of change began to emerge in the 1990s, when the political order in South Africa was also transitioning. The 1994 General Synod, which was visited by President Mandela, signalled that something different was possible. Even though the hierarchical structures persisted, the moderator Freek Swanepoel had a different demeanour, 'humble [...] less academic [...]'. This was followed by what Niemandt calls a 'strange' turn of events when the Highveld Synod elected Johan Symington as moderator (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024):

Revolution was in the air [...], because it was protest. Johan was a very famous TV [*television*] figure. [...] At the time they would have judged him as liberal, because he was a DRMC¹² minister for a time, and outspoken against the whole life of the National Party. A gentle, even-tempered person. So, then the dominoes fell.

The same Synod elected Niemandt as Actuary, and now, in Niemandt's words, the 'apple car had been tipped' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024). Change was in the air, and a time of great innovation followed as they requested two academic consultants who had researched Senger's Big Systems Theory to assist them in establishing a new relational paradigm

12. Now the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), but at the time known as the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), the branch of the Dutch Reformed Church established for non-white (primarily coloured) members during apartheid.

to replace the old hierarchies. Eventually, this led to a complete redesign of how synods were conducted, a point we will return to in the section *Relational leadership, the Trinity, and kenosis* (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024).

Visions, lead ministers¹³ and hierarchy persisting?

While the Dutch Reformed Church was thus moving towards a more relational approach, they found that attachment to power may linger in new forms. Strategic Theological Planning was developed from its secular cousin, Strategic Goal Planning (see the section *Innovating and experimenting – Together*), which had deeply influenced Niemandt in his younger years. Over time, although always remaining in conversation with it and utilising aspects when the situation called for it, Niemandt reached a turning point where he distanced himself from its more mechanistic aspects (N Niemandt pers. interviews, 10 & 18 October 2024).

It bothered me. The first thing that bothered me was the confusion between the definitions of vision and mission. It led to a situation where almost every congregation you visited had ... a mission statement on the wall. Everywhere you went in South Africa, there was something like 'this is our vision'. That began to trouble me. So what? It's displayed there in gold or silver letters, but it has no effect. And eventually, it led to a kind of scepticism in me about the processes surrounding it.

During this time, tour groups of church ministers often undertook tours to the United States of America to visit mega churches. While Niemandt considers these tours beneficial in many ways as legitimate exposure to what was known as the Church Growth Movement, it contributed from the late 1990s to a culture of lead ministers that Niemandt considered wholly foreign to the Dutch Reformed Church. A Lead Ministers Forum was then established in the Dutch Reformed Church that promoted the model of a lead minister who was responsible for determining a congregation's strategic vision, while the rest of the ministry team was to support the lead minister unconditionally (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024).

Niemandt shared how the congregation, where he and about four colleagues ministered at the time, resisted this culture and functioned through shared leadership, consistently declining invitations for Niemandt to join the Lead Minister Forum. As opposed to the personality culture associated with the lead minister model, they were convinced that structures that can flourish because of procedures and collective agreement are far more robust, even if a leader should falter. The Forum became particularly powerful in the Dutch Reformed Church between the mid-1990s and 2010, and true to form, this triggered dissent in Niemandt: 'I can say with boldness that I was the thorn in their flesh' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024).

Relational leadership, the Trinity and kenosis

When asked about relational leadership theory, Niemandt firstly refers to his father's influence, which became his default long before he understood the theory:

13. Usually 'lead pastors' in the American context.

'leadership functions on the basis of a relationship of trust [...] with people and not a structure of authority' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024). Secondly, he recalls the hierarchical structures of the synods of his youth and the team adventure of redesigning synods according to the principles of big systems theory. While keeping church polity requirements that all decisions had to be taken by means of a vote, this was preceded by various techniques to encourage open, creative dialogue and the sharing of collective knowledge by ensuring inclusivity, listening and the cross-pollination of ideas. The Westminster seating of previous synods was replaced by round tables and movement between tables in a World Café style, with walls that were open to anyone for sharing ideas visibly, and once even a live Twitter feed on a large screen (N Niemandt pers. interviews, 18 October 2024; 11 February 2025). Changing Synod meeting times to weekends enabled younger, working people to attend. Together, these methods aimed to facilitate collective discernment in the place of previous approaches that tended to use synods as the final step of endorsing decisions that had been predetermined by leadership structures (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024). While outsiders who were deliberately included did not have voting rights, their voices were heard through the preceding processes of active listening (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024). A listening team would meet at night to formulate what they had heard during the day into a decision that would be laid before the Synod the next morning for feedback and, eventually, a vote (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024).

Niemandt considers these shifts from hierarchy and power, which took place in various forms in the structures of the Dutch Reformed Church, as systemic outflows rather than the result of the extraordinary vision and leadership of an isolated individual (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024). For instance, Dr Frederick Marais from Stellenbosch started collaborating with Dr Arnold Smit from Johannesburg, who would later join Stellenbosch Business School, to publish a book on how to enable church assemblies to meet their task of discerning what the Spirit was doing (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024):

My homecoming was in systems theory – organic, with leadership emerging where it is needed. The glue that holds things together is our connectedness to one another, and strong identity formation happens within that system.¹⁴

For Niemandt, this understanding of reality was directly related to his exposure to the 'Trinitarian turn in Theology'. Building a friendship with Lutheran theologian Pat Keifert and reading Eastern Orthodox theologians such as Miroslav Wolf led him to the awareness that he – along with the Dutch Reformed Church in general – had harboured hierarchical understandings of the Trinity (N Niemandt pers. interviews, 18 October 2024; 11 February 2025). Theological engagement with other ecumenical voices had not been tolerated in the Dutch Reformed Church,

14. Preliminary explorations of Swarm Behaviour and Chaos Theory also provided context, with Big Systems Theory, for how large groups of people would move from one conviction to another in making decisions as discerning communities (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025).

and this exposure led to a revival in Niemandt's own theological thinking, which included the rediscovery of Bosch's *Transforming Mission* (1991) and experiencing the 'awakening' of seeing the Trinity as open, inviting the church into the life of the Trinity for communion and commission (N Niemandt pers. interview, 18 October 2024).

Early attempts to work out what this might mean for local congregations were undertaken in the Partnership of Sent Churches, where Niemandt and the congregation where he ministered were also involved. While the early ideas of missional ecclesiology in the Dutch Reformed Church were conceptualised here, there was also the awareness that they would bear little consequence if not institutionalised in the church denomination (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025). Eventually, Prof. Piet Meiring co-authored with Niemandt the 'Framework document on the missional nature and calling of the DR [Dutch Reformed] Church' under the order of the Moderating Committee, which was approved by the General Synod of 2013, and which gave legitimacy to the changes that had been developing from below through the Partnership for Sent Congregations.

The General Synod of 2013 internalised the theology underlying the Framework Document through periods of reflection, silent meditation and sharing around the tables – a process that included Rublev's icon of the Trinity (cf. Niemandt 2017:1–18). Together with this deepening awareness of being called into communion with the Trinity and sharing in the mission of God, Niemandt was also elected Moderator of the General Synod in the same year. Following these significant events, missional ecclesiology became thoroughly institutionalised in the Dutch Reformed Church (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025).

The shift to a missional ecclesiology that emphasised the calling of all believers to partake in the *missio Dei* stimulated greater imagination regarding the office of the believer (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025). Like the shift from a preoccupation with leaders to an appreciation for how followers constitute and co-construct leadership that had taken place in leadership studies, the theological grounding in the relational Trinity held immediate implications for seeing believers as emissaries of God. The result was a necessary decentralisation of the church minister and the final deconstruction in the Dutch Reformed Church of the notion of lead ministers with their ability to formulate a vision for the congregation. Missional theology's appreciation of incarnation and contextualisation took the fluidity of change in the postmodern world seriously, acknowledging that such single-decreed visions were often already outdated power projections of the leader. Models that can release power and leadership to emerge organically became more appropriate (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025).

Even though work was performed in different corners on the capacities of missional leaders, this was very different from previous personality-centred traits. Instead, it had to do with the skill of forming community, building

relationships, and the ability to listen and discern together. There was the acknowledgement that the abilities and gifts spoken of were often not located in one individual, but could only emerge in the fellowship of believers: 'All those things had to do with a relationally driven model of leadership' that moved from something that could be presented by an organogram to something much more organic (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025).

Yet, in retrospect and amid increasing tensions and polarisation in the church, Niemandt feels that the wide-ranging potential of relational leadership should have been further developed. Referring to the failed attempts at church unity with URCSA, as well, the issue at stake is relationship (N Niemandt pers. interview, 14 February 2025). For him, leaders such as Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel and others had an incredible ability (N Niemandt pers. interview, 14 February 2025):

[...] to build relational foundations of mutual trust which could help the church tremendously, but often this was just destroyed again by leaders who were unable to trust one another. [...] even now with the division that's been carried into the heart of the DRC [Dutch Reformed Church]: Some of those things were latently present, but [...] people could hold on to one another in relationships of trust that said, 'I accept your *bona fides*, I accept your faith, you are my friend'. Now we no longer talk to each other like friends. The language is hostile, biting, sharp, violent. So, what I learned is that propositions and statements divide, and relationships heal.

Uncircle the wagons: Pioneering to God's future, together¹⁵

Despite its powerful past, the Dutch Reformed Church of today has been pushed to the fringes of society. In such situations, the temptation is always to circle the wagons and enter survival mode. In contrast to this, Niemandt shares lessons from his latest leadership role at Hugenote Kollege, which serves a vulnerable student population. He considers the Kollege as an alternative story both because of its own marginal position, and its commitment to those on the fringes from its conception (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025). This section brings together the strands that Niemandt mentions when he speaks about moving into the future.

For Niemandt, anticipatory leadership expects by faith that something good may arrive in the future to which one is called. He considers our eschatology the source of visionary leadership in the church, but not in the sense of the old vision statements. Rather, it is the faith and hope that the future might be better – or 'Life in fullness', to echo *Together towards Life* (World Council of Churches [WCC] 2013; N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025). Anticipatory leadership supports missional leadership because the way of orienting oneself to the future is different from the typical modernistic attempt to manipulate the future. Missional leadership anticipates the future through a

15. The wording of this heading plays on the title of ch. 2 in *Nuwe drome vir nuwe werklikhede* (New dreams for new realities – translation YS; Niemandt 2007:36): 'Kerke se reaksie: Laertrek – of vorentoe reis?' (The Church's reaction: Circle the wagons – or journey ahead? – translation YS).

collective discerning gaze, informed by a faith tradition that prophesies amid terrible brokenness that something better is possible (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025). It means that missional leadership answers the call of discerning God's hopeful and preferred future even in the here and now – something that Niemandt considers should be more fully developed theologically and from a leadership perspective (N Niemandt pers. interview, 17 February 2025). Niemandt (pers. interview, 17 February 2025) also stated that:

The metaphor that comes to mind for me is that of a river. A river has its source far, far back. When you stand here, the place where you are in the river is by no means the whole river. You can walk back along the river's flow to where it began as a little mountain stream. And everything flows into the reality of where you are now. But ahead, the river has many bends, waterfalls, still pools – many things that lie in wait. So, it's also about being able to live in anticipation of the crises, opportunities, and turns that life brings. Yet the river also has a direction in which it flows – that is the hopeful future, the end in a new and hopeful place to which you are moving... It therefore means being able [...] to see the invisible – what is sometimes right here around you – but also to truly see and discern where things are heading.

Whereas a controlling gaze to the future needs to get everything right, leadership that is open to the future allows for mistakes and even celebrates them. Niemandt shares how a commitment in a previous congregation to celebrate both successes and failures, 'established a culture in the congregation of boldness [...] that it is okay to experiment and to have prototypes' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025). For Niemandt, this underlines the fact that leadership is not about certainty, because our world is vague and uncertain (N Niemandt pers. interview, 11 February 2025). As such, missional leadership is open to risk, but functions with extraordinary agility as it is called onwards by its vision of better possibilities for the future.

Niemandt shares his personal experience of this by admitting that his journey from a comfortable career at the University of Pretoria to the marginal institution that is Hugenate Kollege entailed risk and demanded deep trust and surrender, especially as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) lockdown was declared two months after he started as Rector. Both in his personal life and in that of the Kollege, he looked towards the future, inspired by the story of Abram taking Isaac to the 'mountain where God provides' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 14 February 2025). Although Niemandt was skilled in long-term planning, this period thrust him into the deep end, continuously demanding resilient crisis management, 'All management here was then crisis management' (N Niemandt pers. interview, 14 February 2025). Together, they learned that when the team was empowered to lead and accepted shared accountability, they weathered the storm far more effectively than through a top-down approach.

In charting a course to the future, sensemaking emerged as an incredibly important component in leadership. This is not about completely understanding exactly what is happening, but the semiotic skill of connecting dots and placing events in a larger narrative that allows one to chart a

direction amid sometimes conflicting claims and paradoxes (N Niemandt pers. interview, 14 February 2025). In the case of Hugenate Kollege, it meant locating individual stories in the larger story of Andrew Murray founding a place to empower women when they were marginalised. During COVID-19, this became a story to which individual stories could be joined for inspiration to keep innovating (N Niemandt pers. interview, 14 February 2025).

Theologically, this semiotic skill comes into play in the call to discern what God is doing (N Niemandt pers. interview, 17 February 2025):

One could say that it is a type of semiotic leadership of discerning the texts in the canon and tradition, with the creeds and theology and all it contains, and including the texts and symbols and observation of the reality of God's work in this world... which assumes a kind of semiotic foundational attitude.

Finally, it is about pioneering *together*. Niemandt stressed the great importance of partnerships and ecumenical relations in the context of faith communities, saying that this was a shift he should have made earlier in his life (N Niemandt pers. interview, 14 February 2025):

Partnerships and networks of partnerships are far more important than self-sufficient pride in being able to do everything on your own. [...] Life is too complicated, and the chaos is too great for even a church denomination, with its entire structure and network of congregations, to cope with this world on its own. From a young age, at every local level, throughout the entire system, I have learned one lesson – and that is that if I could do it over, I would want to be much more fragile and humble, and more dependent on others who meet you with grace, who help you, and who walk with you [...].

Conclusion

The biographical study of Niemandt's leadership journey offers a contextually embedded response to the theoretical questions posed at the outset – namely, how leadership identities emerge through the interplay of collective endorsement and individual internalisation, and how these dynamics unfold over time in complex social settings. Niemandt's story illustrates that leadership is not a linear ascent nor the product of isolated traits, but a dynamic, relational process shaped by context, community and conviction.

The study revealed that collective endorsement of Niemandt often preceded the individual internalisation of his leadership identity. Although formal leader roles were frequently assigned to him, what emerges from his journey is not the typical heroic leader, but the gradual internalisation of a leader identity in relation to socially constructed leadership as it emerged in complex settings that were characterised by networks of trust, communal discernment and shared agency amid intense socio-political upheaval.

The study contributes to leadership emergence theory by grounding abstract concepts in lived experience and to missional theology by demonstrating how leadership can be relationally constructed, contextually situated and

theologically animated by the life of the Triune God. In a world marked by volatility and fragmentation, Niemandt's story points towards a hopeful model of leadership: one rooted in vulnerability, interdependence and the shared call to discern God's future – together.

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Author's contribution

Y.S. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

Disclaimer

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