Chapter 9

Engaged congregational research serving communion driven transformation of church and society[1]

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1. Introduction

The research in this volume stands in a long tradition of "*reimagining community engagement within the context of a responsive, responsible, and transformative university*" (Hart et al., 2023:224). Practical theology (PT) has "the responsibility to embrace engaged scholarship and decolonisation process that provides African people with ideas, methods, habits of the mind to critically evaluate their societies, and reconstruct their culture and consciousness for the well-being of African community" (Pali, 2024: chapter 1 this volume).

Engaged scholarship aims at scholarly engagement activities with emphasis on activities that redress past inequalities that have historically evolved in societies (*idem*: 239). Reports of the South African Reconciliation Barometer show that social inequality is still dominant in South Africa.

1 The aim of this chapter is to reflect on previous chapters from an "engaged-outsider" perspective. This is explained in more detail in the introduction to this volume.

> The Lived Poverty Index (LPI) asks how often people go without basic necessities: food, water, medicine, fuel for cooking, cash income, electricity (excluding load-shedding) and, for the first time, internet access. Consistent with national poverty data, levels of deprivation are high: a quarter (25%) of South Africans answered that they or their family members have gone without enough food to eat in the past year (several times, many times or always). Forty-four per cent (44%) have gone without a cash income (several times, many times or always) during this period. Experiences of lived poverty continue to differ significantly between South Africans of different races. Analysis of LPI data from 2023 shows that average lived poverty scores are highest among black South Africans and lowest among white South Africans (Lefko-Everett, 2023:17-18).

Community partnerships should demonstrate the following seven key features:

i. "the linking of human needs with societal problems, issues, and concerns;
ii. the direct application of knowledge to human needs, societal problems, issues, and concerns;
iii. utilisation of professional and academic expertise;
iv. the ultimate purpose of public or common good;
v. the generation of new knowledge for the target groups in the community and the discipline;
vi. a clear relationship between programme activities and HEIs (higher education institutions) mission; and
vii. a commitment to long-term engagement" (Hart et al., 2023:236)

The Mangaung research aims at scholarly engagement with congregations in an African township in view of the transformative role of congregations for the well-being of the community and to redress inequalities that have historically evolved in society. In this contribution, I will formulate some characteristics of engaged congregational research aimed at transformation of church and society.

The limits of my contribution are that I am an engaged outsider coming from the Netherlands. I am an outsider who has been part of a scholarly debate on the engagement of research to societal problems in the past twenty years. I observed a debate on what engagement implies and to which problems? Is it the transfer of any kind of knowledge from scholarly research to society? Does it prioritise dominantly economic impact and/or engagement with specific issues of inequality, societal challenges like climate change, or specific deprived communities? (De Jong et al., 2016). I conducted much research on action problems of teachers and school leaders, school communities and congregations and learned with trial and error that the focus of the research was more on theory-building and not so much serving the action problems of the practitioners. All this changed me in my understanding of practical theology and scholarly engagement with action problems with and for practitioners, leaders, communities (see Hermans, 2023, 2014; Hermans & Schoeman, 2015a, 2015b). From 2010 onwards, I visited South Africa and worked with many scholars and supervised researchers in the field of practical theology. I learned from their practical engagement with societal needs, inequality, human concerns and adversity. These are the limits of my contribution.

I start my reflection on engaged congregational research with the notion of communion of *Ubuntu*. Transformation has a normative orientation, and specific for the African context, is the orientation on communion or *Ubuntu*. Next, I will reflect on the position and power of the researcher in the construction of knowledge in line with the process of decolonisation. We will raise two questions: Whose actions are the (material) object of our research? and, what knowledge is the result of our research? The research strategy should be characterised by a decentring the theological scholar as all-knowing subject. Next, we focus on the formal object of practical theology and congregational studies, i.e. the kind of knowledge or theory that is the aim of the research. What are the kind of reasons, i.e. religiously, social, wellbeing, personal, communal, for acting in situations of heartbreaking adversity, such as endemic poverty, violence, etc.? The situation of endemic poverty which is dominant in the context of townships in the Mangaung area, leads to the next topic; that is, the influence of scarcity on transformation of persons and communities in

a situation of endemic poverty. Scarcity deeply affects the mindset and practices that keep people in the poverty trap. There is no "one size fits all" concept for transformation of persons and communities, no blueprint programmes. Transformation is local, contextual, co-constructed by the persons (stakeholders) in the poverty trap and grounded on the stories of resistance connected to Gods' promise of human fullness. An important research strategy for township research is practice-oriented research which has the potential to generate new knowledge for the community and the academic discipline; to use professional expertise of ministers, or groups within congregations and academic knowledge; to apply knowledge directly to human needs and societal problems, and to build long-term engagement. Finally, we reflect on leadership in connection to community development and empowerment of the community. We will reflect on the content of servant leadership in light of the Afro-communal ethic of *Ubuntu*; the research strategy chosen to study leadership in townships' congregations and the practice of discernment as a core aspect of servant leadership.

2. Communion as basic African value

Transformation has to do with overcoming challenges or problems. How to overcome them? And where is this transformation leading to? To answer these questions we need an ethical or prescriptive understanding of human life. Not anything goes. What is an ethically right way of transformation of society or human life? We need an ethical perspective to value the direction of the change or the lack of change of a situation. There is a widely accepted understanding that two maxims express the "indigenous sub-Saharan ethical thought, namely 'I am because we are' and 'A person is a person through other persons'" (Metz, 2020:41). Often the Nguni term of *Ubuntu* is used to refer to this African value. The philosopher Thaddeus Metz uses the concept "communion" or "communal relatedness which is pursued as an end and not merely as means to some other value" (Metz, 2020:42). We will focus on three questions. What is relational communion? How to live in communal relationship? and finally, how to deal with partiality towards those who are in a long-term communal relationship with us?

What is communion according to the two maxims mentioned above?

- The first part in the maxims refers to the fact that a person can become a better or more complete person, a basic aim in life is to develop "one's humanness, personhood or selfhood as much as one can" (Metz, 2020:42).
- The second part related to the first element is that we become a more complete person "through other persons". Ethicists working in the African tradition hold that "the only comprehensive respect in which one can exhibit human excellence is by relating to others communally or harmoniously" (Metz, 2020:43). This relational nature of human life is also expressed as "relationship[s) of interdependence, fellowship, reconciliation, relationality, community friendliness, harmonious relationships and other-regarding actions" (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019:100).

Both elements are part of a relational good which is an aim in itself.

The next question is, what does it mean to live in communal relationship? What capacities (attitudes, motivations, competencies) are needed related to fellowship, reconciliation, belonging and harmonious relationships? On the one hand, one can think of capacities like positive attitudes of belonging or cohesion, empathy, motivated towards cooperative behaviour, taking pride in others and reconciliation (Metz, 2020:45). On the other hand, capacities related to achieving the good of all, serving the community and advancing the common good such as empathic awareness of the needs of others, being motivated that others are better off, commitment to long-term engagement with disadvantaged groups, capacity for the same and reduce discord.

The last question concerns the practice of prioritising in sub-Saharan ethics, notably to blood relatives. Here, Metz offers in interpretation of partiality in communal. He offers the following rule of thumb:

> All things being equal, the stronger and longer one's communal ties with others, the greater the obligation to help them, even if it comes at some cost to communal relationship elsewhere in the world (Metz, 2020: 45).

This rule denies the possibility to exclude needs of others who are potential sites of communion.[2]

3. Decentring of the researcher

Engaged scholarship is connected to the process of decolonisation in theological education and theological research.

> Decolonisation in the African continent is undoing the process of colonisation by liberating the African mind, spirituality and the body from the lingering forces of colonisation (Pali, 2024: chapter 1 this volume).

The anthropologist Linda Smith writes in the opening lines of her influential book *Decolonizing Methodologies*:

> It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us…. It appals us that the West can desire, extract and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas..." (Smith, 2004:1).

Who is the owner of the knowledge that is leading the research methodology? Does the researcher and the research community desire and claim ownership? Whose actions, cultural imagination, practices do we study in congregational research? Is the theological researcher of congregations the all-knowing subject? Who "owns" the practices, images, dreams and stories that are the "object" of our knowing? What room is there for not-knowing and resistance in the methodology which we use and the theory (knowledge) that we develop? The core issue here is "the old colonial adage that knowledge is power" (Smith, 2004:16).

To get our hands around this problem it might be useful to ask two questions: Whose actions are the (material) object of our research? and what knowledge is the result of our research? In the history of practical

2 The strength of this formulation is that it argues from the principle of relational communion in thinking about blood ties. If it is strong enough to deal with prejudice (us versus them) and to deal with otherness, is beyond the focus of this article.

theology in the Western world since the middle of the 20th century, we can see a change in the material object of practical theology. In the clerical paradigm of PT which was dominant until the middle of the 20th century, the practice of ordained ministers or priests was the object of research (Hermans, 2014:9-10). The object of research widened gradually to all believers in the (local) church, next to the church within society (the Kingdom of God), to other believers (interreligious dialogue) and to all people in search of the ultimate good in living with and for others, in just institutions and a sustainable world. This widening of the object of our research implied *eo ipso* a decentring of the theological researcher as a privileged holder of knowledge. Within the clerical paradigm, the theological researcher considered himself an "all-knowing-subject". By entering a new and unknown world of practices, images, beliefs as object of our practical theological research, a process of decentring emerged in which the researcher is no longer the privileged source of knowledge. Decentring of the researcher refers to the shift of the theological researcher from the centre to the margins of knowing and knowledge construction in empirical research.

If knowledge is power, decentring of the researcher in congregational research within the townships of Mangaung implies a shift of the researcher from the centre of knowing to the margin. How do poor people look to their leaders (ministers)? What do they expect from them, or from the community? What differences exist between families in short-term poverty and long-term (endemic) poverty? What role does African indigenous knowledge play in religious practices? Theological researchers are probably more inclined to accept that they do not know the answers to these questions. This may be different with research topics on leadership (ministry) or specific acts of ministers like preaching. However, the question is if this is true. We read in the research of Pali (chapter 3 in this volume) "we pray for and heal people according to their culture and tradition." What culture and traditions exist in the community in praying and healing? What role do indigenous traditions play? How does the leader deal with different traditions and expectations of the members of the congregation? Of course, a theological researcher can use their knowledge to analyse a sermon. Based on their knowledge, they can come to certain conclusions:

> The movement of the positionality of the sermon therefore moves from the non-ideal human to the Divine and then to the ideal human. This movement, to my mind, does not reflect the post-colonial centre of plurality (Wessels, 2024: chapter 5 this volume).

We now know what the theological researcher knows. But we do not know what the preacher uses as knowledge base for his ownership of the sermon. And we do not know the (plurality of the) reception of the sermon related to the ways of knowing, imagery, longings, stories of resistance of the members of the community. The focus of engaged scholarship in congregational studies is to get answers on the last questions related to ownership, empowerment and resistance of the community!

4. Practical reasons for acting and rules of action

The formal object of practical theology refers to the actions of people, more specifically the reasons for acting as well as the rules of action (Ricoeur, 1991:189). These practical reasons give meaning to actions within a community of people who share a certain background knowledge (language, values, etc.) In this section, I will first define what practical reasons are. Next, we will elaborate on tension between the rule-guided character of action and the freedom that an actor has in giving reasons for acting. This distinction is important because we should not restrict our congregational research to rules of action and neglect the reasons for acting of the agents which might be very different.

A person with a certain degree of experience is able to understand these reasons and can communicate about them with other people. People act on the basis of certain reasons that (1) have the character of a desire; (2) refer to a particular class of motives for action; and (3) constitute the goal or purpose of action. Desires are expressions of the will. Motives can have a different nature: cognitive, affective, social. Next to reasons for acting, actions are also rule-governed. The action itself expresses meaning which is the rule or *logos* of action (Ricoeur, 1991:197). For example the *orantes*- position of kneeling when saying a prayer, is meaningful not only for the actor themself but also in a public sense for others. This rule-guided character of action is epistemologically in tension with the freedom that an

actor has in giving reasons for acting. They cannot act according to these rules. An observer can establish the rule of action but cannot consider the freedom of the actor that is constitutive of practical reasoning from the actor perspective. Therefore, action cannot be reduced to an observer's perspective (Arendt, 1978).

Congregations are social systems characterised by institutionalisation. What do we mean by this? Parsons, in his structural-functionalist theory of organisations, states:

> "that institutions intimately are related to, and, in part at least, derived from ultimate value attitudes common to the members of a community";
>
> [and] "that the primary motive for obedience to an institutional norm lies in the moral authority it exercises over the individual" (Parsons, 1990:326).

From an institutional perspective there are limits to the permissiveness for action, and these limits inform the rule-governed character of actions. Disobedience of the institutional norms will tend to lead to disapproval and "sanctions" on those who violate them. All agents in the congregation act according to the status connected to the structural position within the social system, and the role of the agent in such a position (Ritzer, 2011:244). In congregations, what actors should do and are not allowed to do is derived from the ultimate values and beliefs grounded in their understanding of the gospel. All members in the congregation share this common ground.

How does this relate to our definition of practical reasons? We made a distinction between reasons for acting and rules for acting, which express the goal or purpose of actions. The rule-led character of religious practices such as the Lord's supper, baptism or healing are based on constitutive rules which grants the status function as "act of God" to this religious practice; by the authority of the sacred tradition as shared by the collective "we" of the community, and mediated by status-role of ministers in the social system who can perform these religious practices (Hermans 2020c:58-59). In the Mangaung metropole there are Christian churches that differ in religious practices because of the constitutive rules which define the meaning of a religious practice (see Schoeman, 2024: chapter 3 this volume). African

Independent / Initiated Congregations (AIC) are explicitly in conversation with African indigenous traditions. Their understanding of certain religious practices (like baptism) might be completely different from mainline Christian churches with strong historical roots in Western Christianity. And both types of Christian churches may differ deeply from Charismatic or Pentecostal Congregations which centre around the working of the Holy Spirit as powerful force amongst believers. The consequence of this for engaged scholarship in congregational research is, that we need to "respect" (i.e. recognise and understand) the differences between churches and within churches. Religious practices which have the same name like baptism, praying, outreach or mission have different constitutive rules, (possibly) different understanding of the gospel, different status-function of ministers, a different understanding of Gods' power within this practice. In line with this, I agree with the conclusion of Schoeman (2024: chapter 3 this volume) that "There is a need for the development of a relevant mixed methodology to understand congregations.". For two reasons. The first is that under the same label like baptism or healing, deep theological differences might exist! The second reason relates to the freedom of the agents who participate in religious practices. Agents can have personal longings connected to certain practices, because of certain experiences of heartbreaking adversity, extreme poverty, living conditions, health issues, etc. And they can have different kinds of motives for participating in religious practices apart from obedience to the values of the religious community. Agents can be driven by social motives related to intimate partner violence, or affective motives such as anxiety, shame or guilt about things that happened in one's life. Engaged scholarship is specifically focused to hear stories of resistance related to personal longings and motives of persons and not only to understand the rule-governed reasons of taking part in the religious practices as members of the community.

5. Scarcity: how it affects the life of people and congregations

Scarcity can be defined as "a subjective sense of having more needs than resources" (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013:4). Poverty is the key domain to which scarcity theory is applied. In South Africa, living in extreme poverty is still a reality for many black and coloured people, as indicated by the SA

Barometer report of 2023 (Lefko-Everett, 2023:17-18). But scarcity not only affects the life of individual persons and families, it also affects the way that congregations handle the problem of a shortage of financial resources. One-third of the AICs report that their financial situation is a serious threat to our ability to continue as a viable congregation (see Schoeman, 2024: chapter 3 this volume - Table 7.6). In this section, I will first introduce how scarcity changes people's mindset and the practical reasons that they use in handling their situation. Although the mechanisms of scarcity are the same, the way that persons and congregations find their way out of the scarcity trap differs. There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution, which implies that engaged scholarship means a long-term engagement with people in finding a sustainable way to get out of the scarcity trap.

The theory of scarcity originated in 2013 when Mullainathan and Shafir published their influential book *Scarcity. Why having too little means so much* (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).[3] Scarcity is not an objective indicator but a subjective feeling. "The key idea of scarcity theory is that scarcity itself induces a specific mindset by affecting how people think and decide, and subsequently affect human behaviours" (De Bruijn & Antonides, 2022: 8). Scarcity affects the mind, and this change of mindset influences the way that people act given certain socio-economic conditions. The way that they act keeps them in the scarcity trap.

"Mindset" refers to the processes and mechanisms of the mind and how that shapes our choices and our behaviours. The scarcity mindset is characterised by both a positive and a negative process which changes the way that we react on a subjective feeling of having more needs than resources. The positive mechanism focusing on scarcity captures our attention and help to focus our energy on specific needs. Focusing is characterised by a sense of urgency, and heightened productivity. The negative process is one of neglect, caused by the mechanism of tunnelling. Scarcity leads people into a tunnel, causing them to neglect other (possibly more important) things that they value (*idem*:28). While our mind is drawn to scarcity, all other things are harder to reach. "We do not make trade-offs using a careful cost-

3 For an overview of 10 years of research based on the theory of scarcity, see De Bruijn, E.-J. & Antonides, G. 2022. Poverty and economic decision making: a review of scarcity theory. *Theory and Decision*, 92, 5–37.

benefit calculation. The tunnel magnifies the costs and minimises the (long-term) benefits" (Hermans, 2017:48). Secondly, according to Mullainathan and Shafir, scarcity reduces our 'bandwidth'. "Bandwidth measures our computational capacity, our ability to pay attention, to make good decisions, to stick with our plans and to resist temptation" (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013:41-42). The focus on scarcity is involuntary. It captures our attention and impedes our capacity to focus on anything else. People have fewer mental resources and are more impulsive. They tend to focus on immediate rewards, and their willpower is affected.

A second element (next to mindset) concerns patterns of practices and habits that keep people trapped in scarcity. Two features define the scarcity trap, namely tunnelling and one step behind. Scarcity draws the mind towards the behaviour (practice) that the person needs to avoid. If you have an endemic shortage of food or money, you magnify the behaviour that is causing the problem. Tunnelling is like juggling by focusing only on the ball that is ready to drop. At the same time, you do not see the next ball that is going to drop. This means that you are always "one step behind". When you see the next ball fall, you reinforce the behaviour which you should actually stop.

The third element are socio-economic determinants of poverty and household welfare in Soutth Africa. Research shows that

> levels of education of the household head, (…) , race of the household head, dependency ratio, gender of the household head, employment status of the household head and marital status of the household head are statistically significant determinants of household welfare (Biyase & Zwane, 2018:115).

Poverty and equality are related but different phenomena. "While poverty is characterised by a lack of basic needs, inequality is a relational phenomenon, at the centre of which is power"(Francis & Webster, 2020:733). Deep poverty and inequality persist in South Africa and are amongst the country's most significant obstacles to reconciliation.

How can the theory of scarcity help us to understand the transformation of persons in extreme poverty, or congregations who think that the lack of finance brings severe problems to the viability of the community? First,

the case of persons and families in extreme poverty. Scarcity influences the mindset of people, which makes them act in ways that keep them in the scarcity trap. Although the mechanisms (tunnelling, bandwidth, one step behind) are the same, the impact of what they do is different for different persons. What works to transform their situation is different for people. There is no "one size fits all". What is more: persons in extreme poverty have the knowledge and drive to escape the scarcity trap. Engaged scholarship means a long-term engagement with people in finding a sustainable way to escape the scarcity trap, where persons and communities are considered as a source of resistance and the solution of transforming their situation of extreme poverty. .

The same applies to congregations that experience a serious shortage of finances. Engaged scholarship demands that the research acts on the basis of ownership and empowerment of the community that experiences a serious shortage of finance. On the one hand, their mindset and practices keep them in this situation. But on the other hand, they also have this longing: ideas and knowledge to change their situation, they have images of the future of the community as given by God to all who believe in the triune God , and to the mission of the community in the context where they live. They share stories of resistance overcoming challenges based on shared communal values. In other words, instead of investing all their energy on short-term goals and focus all their practices on money-raising, they should invest in building long-term goals and on the power within the community to look for new possibilities of Gods' future which is emerging in their community.

6. Practice-oriented research and community partnership

The focus of engaged scholarship is to build community partnership. There are different types of research strategies which serve different goals.

> A research strategy incorporates all the decisions of the research design. It includes the method of research, in the sense of data collection and data analysis, but also decisions, whether it is theory oriented or practice oriented, about the depth or width of the research, the number of research units, and so on" (Hermans & Schoeman, 2015b).

Practice-oriented research has the potential to meet key features of community partnership. It has the potential to generate new knowledge for the community and the academic discipline; to use professional expertise of ministers, or groups within congregations and academic knowledge; to apply knowledge directly to human needs and societal problems, and to build long-term engagement (Hart et al., 2023:236).

There are two examples of practice-oriented research reported in this volume. Dr Nico Mostert used this research strategy for the development of workable steps dealing with the problem of segregation in a multi-cultural congregation (chapter 6 in this volume). And Dr Marelize Maritz used this research strategy in her research on supporting members in the congregation living in extreme poverty, specifically the role of leadership (ministers) (chapter 7 in this volume). We will use their projects as examples of what practice-oriented research has to contribute to engaged scholarship. At the same time, we will refer to ways to strengthen the development of practice-oriented research in congregation research in line with the key features of community engagement. I will first discuss the role of the problem owner, researcher and researched in terms of ownership and empowerment of the community. Next, I will elaborate five qualities of the utility of practice-oriented research. What criteria can we use to judge the utility of practice-oriented research? And finally, I will elaborate the quality of transformation in congregation studies. In many social sciences, transformation is connected with adaptation. In congregation studies (theology) it relates to the possibilisation of a new and better life based on Gods' promise.

The action problem for Mostert is the division of different cultural groups within one congregation. The different cultural groups in the congregation are "living apart together" under one (church) roof. For example, "different worship services are conducted in the same church building at different timeslots in different languages" (Mostert, 2024 - chapter 6 in this volume). The problem at the start of the project is not knowing how to move from this situation of exclusivity to a desired situation of (more) inclusivity. The way forward to enhance inclusivity was a strategy of attentiveness. At the end of the chapter, the researcher formulates a "disclaimer" regarding the effectiveness of interventions in the implementation. I share this disclaimer, but this might be the consequence of the way that the different roles of the

researcher, the researched and the problem owner are operational in this research. According to the researcher, he worked according to participatory research in which "solutions and knowledge are the result of a co-construction between the researcher, the researched and the problem owner" (Hermans & Schoeman, 2015b:3). A participatory research strategy has the strongest guarantee for ownership of the community. But is this also what happened? The problem owner is the *kerkraad*. The researcher is aware of the fact that this is an "all white" *kerkraad*, which implies that the other cultural groups are excluded from ownership of the problem. Next, we do not observe any contextual information of the different cultural groups on the understanding of the action problem. In a participatory model, one expects a co-construction of the action problem by (different) groups involved in the research.

The problem owner in the project of Maritz is the Reformed Initiative for Community Development (RICD). The action problem of the RICD is that they do not know how to change the practice of professionals in serving congregations. In the current situation there is a "lack of interest and involvement in the opportunities that they provide for assisting the development of congregants, especially children" (Maritz, 2024; chapter 7 this volume). In this project there is a clear distinction between problem owner (the RCID), researcher and the researched (people in endemic poverty) (expert model). The participants were all persons taking part in a congregational activity. They voice a positive relationship with the pastor and have high expectations of the help he gives them in their situation of poverty. Although the project uses a different model, I have the same questions regarding a deep contextual understanding of the persons living in endemic poverty, and their needs to escape the poverty trap. We know from scarcity theory (see above), that the problem of not being able to escape the poverty trap is connected to their mindset and practices which keep them in poverty next to the socio-economic conditions in which they live as community. The intention of the engaged researcher is to help people to escape the poverty trap, but her research strategy is not delivering her to that point. In situations of endemic poverty, we learn from the scarcity theory that all the steps in the regulative circle (action circle) need to be taken in co-construction by the community using their values and wisdom

to find sustainable ways to escape the poverty trap. There is no evidence that the minister has co-constructed this knowledge with the poor. And if the minister doesn't have that knowledge, the professional workers of the RCID cannot serve congregations, especially with the development of children. Community development demands the generation of new knowledge for the target groups in the community (e.g. in the practice stream of the research) and the discipline (e.g. the knowledge stream). There is no blue print of how to perform practice-oriented research in this situation. What we do know is that participation should lead to ownership and empowerment and that we need good practices of how to do this.

The type of knowledge produced in practice-oriented research is geared towards the action problem. The criteria for the quality of practice-oriented research is the utility of knowledge about the intervention to improve the socio-economic and religious well-being of people in a specific contextual situation. The criteria for quality of the utility of research are different from internal scientific criteria (Verschuren, 2009:21-22; Hermans & Schoeman, 2015a:21). Verschuren mentions five criteria: holism, interdisciplinarity, context restraint, profoundness, and transformation. Holism refers to the fact that one researches the entire phenomenon, in all aspects (social, economic, practical, cultural, emotional) in the conditions of time and place as it manifests. Interdisciplinarity refers to the fact that many real-life problems cut across different disciplines because they touch multiple aspects in real life. A good example of this is work on participatory development by Davids et al. (2009). Thirdly, the knowledge about the intervention is bound to the context in which it is gathered. Yes, there are mechanisms working in the scarcity trap which can be found in different setting of poverty, like tunnelling or bandwidth (De Bruijn & Antonides, 2022). How they work in an intervention for persons in a specific context is context-bound. Fourthly, profoundness refers to the fact that behind problems, a myriad of causes can influence this problem. The aim is to support a community to escape their situation of endemic poverty. In both researches of Mostert and Maritz presented in this book, I think this myriad of causes did not become clear. Finally, transformation refers to the fact that it does not suffice to understand phenomena. The important issue is whether the problem can be transformed and whether the stakeholder(!) can do it.

The next issue concerns the specific character of the intervention in practice-oriented research in congregation studies. The type of intervention is what we call a regulative (normative) cycle, and the kind of resilience in religious transformation is not based on adaptation but on the emergence of new beginnings based on Gods' promise of the ultimate good. Interventions of practitioners are characterised by the so-called regulative cycle in which different steps (phases) are identified to solve a practical problem (Van Strien, 1997).

> Whereas the methodology of scientific hypotheses testing is geared toward the 'disinterested' *prediction* of future behaviour, the methodology of practice is geared towards the 'interested' *regulation* of the behaviour of individuals, groups or organization in the desired direction (the normative component of practice) (Van Strien, 1997:689).

The goal is not to test theoretical predictions for a certain type of practice (as in social sciences or natural sciences) but to engage as scholar in an individual case to find a solution for the stakeholders involved in this situation. Ownership and empowerment of the stakeholders is the aim of intervention. Yes, we can use insights from psychological theory in helping stakeholders to ask the right questions to diagnose their contextual problem and reflecting on conditions to escape the poverty trap. But we are not testing predictions but solving an action problem of stakeholders in this specific case. Engaged scholarship implies that the scholar has an interest in changing the behaviour of individuals of groups in a desired direction. This positive involvement of the scholar implies the anticipation of a desired future (Van Strien, 1997:688). This is something completely different to the objectivity and distance demanded in theory testing research. This attitude can be seen in the way that Mostert and Maritz conducted their research. To strengthen this in future practice-oriented research in congregation studies, one would like to see a methodological reflection by scholars on this "interested" engagement within the intervention. What decisions were made based on this interested position? On what grounds? Another point concerns the fact that in the regulative cycle, the different phases are less distinct and well defined than in hypothesis testing research. For example, it can be necessary in the stage of formulation of a plan of action to go back

to the diagnosis, because some aspects of the action problem are unclear. The regulative cycle is less rigid than the methodology of falsification of theoretical predictions. It is a holistic process in which researchers should describe carefully in their research report, but the good news is that researchers use this freedom in view of the "interest" in transforming the action problem.

This brings us to the issue: What is the "interest" of the stakeholders and researcher in congregational research? Resilience as preventing or processing adversity can be seen as a common interest of engaged scholarship. Resilience is something different in social sciences than in theology and congregation studies. In social sciences, resilience refers to "processes of adaptation to deal with adversity, and a resilient system is better adapted to deal with adversities. Adaptation presupposes an existing order, and the best condition to deal with changes in this order" (Hermans, 2020a:4). The point of reference of resilience is the stability and continuity of the existing order, and resilience is considered a bouncing back to a new situation of stability in the existing order of living with and for others. Theology and congregation studies have a completely different understanding of resilience. Resilience in religion is not about adaptation to the existing order, but about new beginnings based on Gods' promise. New beginnings of what is considered to be ultimate good in life with and for other, transformation to a better, more fulfilling life grounded on Gods' promise in Jesus Christ (Hermans, 2020a:5). Mostert gives strong attention to this desired situation as normative component in practice-oriented research. He uses a reading of Acts 10:1-43 in his intervention to find their understanding of God's desire for the congregation in terms of inclusivity. I think we need to build deeper knowledge on the role and impact of religious stories in imagining the desired situation which individuals and communities long for (well-being, justice, a good life with and for others). This experience of new beginnings is contingent: not necessary, but possible. How can stakeholders experience a passion of the heart where God's promise of the good life if experienced as actual, e.g. emerging in their life? (Hermans, 2020c:62). What is the role of liturgy? Healing? Or contextual Bible-reading fostering resistance and resilience?

7. Leadership and discernment

Leadership is an important topic in congregation studies related to community development and the type of leadership that we need to empower communities towards development. In this section, I will first focus on the Afro-communal ethic ground of leadership as expressed in the ideal of servant leadership (see also Pali and Du Preez in this volume). Next, I will raise some questions regarding the research strategy chosen to study leadership in township congregations by Pali and du Preez. And finally, I will elaborate the practice of discernment as a core aspect of servant leadership.

In the chapters of Pali and Du Preez, we observe a focus on servant leadership based on an African understanding of communion. This specific Afro-communal value of communion specifies what should be involved of serving other:

> a good leader is one who helps to meet others' needs, and above all their need to realize their social nature by prizing communal relationship (Metz, 2020:47).

According to Metz, the difference with other conceptions of leadership is the idea that communion is an end and not a means to something else. In servant leadership this leads to a consensual way of making decisions; based on a "we-consciousness" and taking pride in collective accomplishments; prizing people by virtue of their capacity to relate communally, and celebrating this capacity in ritual, prayer and song (Metz, 2020:8-12). Communalism is also important in what is called the African development challenge. Development is at the end "not about leadership thinking what development is and pursuing programs that they consider to be advancing development" (Gumede, 2017:88) but must involve the people themselves. This involvement in development "is a liberatory human aspiration to attain freedom from political, economic, ideological, epistemological and social domination that was installed by colonialism and coloniality" (Gumede, 2017:88).

The research strategy selected by both Pali (chapter 3 in this volume) and du Preez (chapter 4 in this volume) is descriptive research using a qualitative interview. Du Preez uses a deductive coding system, where Pali works inductively. Descriptive research produces accurate descriptions of the leadership which are observed in the interviews of the ministers. Based on these observations, the researchers formulate hypotheses about the type of leadership of the minsters by asking questions about the observations (Why is this leader acting this way?) and formulating explanations about possible reasons of the way that they act, for example towards members of the community. The explanations are not observed in reality but are created by the researcher. In this way, we learn what the researchers think based on their models of leadership, but not how the leaders reflect on their ideas. If they had presented their statements to the respondents, the researchers would have gained more insight into the ministers' underlying views. If they had interviewed the ministers in a focus group, they would also have gained insight into the differences and contrasts in the views of the ministers. It would have generated new knowledge for the target group (community of ministers in townships) and tested knowledge for the discipline. Another possibility of course would be practice-oriented research. I know researchers do not always have time available to do this, but one can always cut a research project in parts connected with a long-term engagement with a community and involvement of other researchers in the project.

The last issue that I want to raise is the role of decision-making in leadership and the process of discernment connected to it. It is one thing to claim servant leadership and give reasons for it, but it is another thing how this is realised within the community. How are intentions brought into practice? What are the reactions of the members of the congregation, and how is the minister responding to it? In the history of Christian spirituality, there are different models of discernment given differences in context and culture (Hermans, 2021). The differences between models of discernment can be mapped along five dimensions. Each dimension can be described as a continuum of adjacent elements, the extremes of which are distinct but not completely disjunct. We think that the different dimensions offer a scheme to understand the specific kind of discernment in congregations as influenced by African ethic, values and wisdom.

- The first dimension refers to the difference of a (more) individual versus (more) communal discernment.
- The second dimension refers to the focus on the origin of the good (coming from God) versus the future of the coming of the good (the Kingdom come).
- The third dimension is the focus of discernment on exceptional situations, versus decision-making in general. "A situation is exceptional when the capacity of human beings to decide has disappeared, such that we need an extraordinary source for deciding the good" (Hermans, 2021:395)
- The fourth dimension is the focus on the penultimate versus the ultimate goal(s) of Discernment. "The penultimate goal is the purity of the heart (volitional). The ultimate goal is the contemplative state of the beatific vision of God" (Hermans, 2021:396).
- The fifth dimension in which concepts of discernment can differ concerns the source of reliance or authority for growing on the path of discernment, which may be ethics, ancient wisdom, (theological) dogma, or a spiritual teacher or minister.

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