



Chapter 7

Congregational research in a context of poverty: Methodological markers for conducting Practice Orientated Research

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1. Introduction

Do we conduct empirical research in a context of poverty, different than in an affluent context? Does the identity of a congregation in a context of poverty differ from congregations in other contexts? Does the nature of relationships between congregants and leadership in different congregations, variate? Accepting the answer to these questions as a positive “yes”, we need to determine what is different, how it implicates relationships, and how should we go about conducting research in a context of poverty. Methodological markers are necessary to align the research outcomes to be relevant and useful to the professional practice in a congregation.

This chapter will utilise the results of a case study¹ on the involvement of congregational leaders in communities where a high incidence of poverty prevails, to determine essential methodological markers for research in a context of poverty. The discussion that follows will attend to four fields of interest:

1. The background and motivation for the empirical research
2. The research
3. How does the relationship between congregants and leaders implicate the research results?
4. The relevancy of methodological markers for research in a context of poverty.

2. The background and motivation for the empirical case study

Before attending to the methodological markers used in the empirical research, a background discussion about the case study enlightens the choice for methodology.

Reformed Initiative for Community Development (RICD), a registered non-governmental organisation institutionalised through congregational participation of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa (URCSA), experienced a problem in their professional practice. The RICD provides services and funding to enable congregational involvement and participation in development practices focused on the enhancement of the well-being of people - especially children. They (RICD) expressed the need for data about the possible reasons why congregations do not engage with them. One of their prime goals is to provide funding and expertise for early childhood development, and it seemed that no one was interested. Are there obstacles, and if so - what can they do to enhance the engagement with congregations in a context where high levels of poverty exist.

The RICD, as the problem owner,² looking for answers to the question on why congregations do not utilise their services. RICD needed data that will

1 The case study was part of a research study for a DTh submission.

2 The problem owner refers to the professional institution, who experiences a problem, challenges, or difficulties in their professional practice. For more details, see the discussion on Practice Orientated Research in 3.1

enable them to make positive shifts towards improving their professional practice in serving the congregations.

The RICD, as problem owner, operates in the Free State province of South Africa. The Free State is known for high levels of poverty - especially in rural areas. The Free State is mainly rural, with Bloemfontein the biggest city in the province. According to the Community Survey of 2016 (Stats SA, 2016), 41% of people older than 15 years in the Free State, do not take part in economic activities. Only 36.2% of people older than 15 years were employed. In 2016, 14% of people lived in informal dwellings in the Free State. At the time of the research study in 2020, Trading Economics³ indicated that the living wage of a person in January 2020 in South Africa, was R6,570. At that time in Bloemfontein, the NGO (non-governmental organisation), Towers of Hope, served ± 290 (off-street and in shelters) of the 500 to 600 homeless people in the city centre every day. Because of the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, these numbers have recently risen significantly. Other main challenges amongst people living in a context of poverty are health, education, and access to public transport.

In the Free State, there are numerous registered non-profit organisations assisting people in need, whether it is about disability, mental health, childcare, AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), food programmes, education, or old age. The RICD represents 381 congregations, of which the DRC is 154, the DRCA is 135, and URCSA, 92. The different denominations have their own diaconal services that attend to congregants with the same needs that the NGOs attend to. In these congregations are 240 ordained pastors. In the URCSA and DRCA, evangelists, elders and deacons are also responsible for the leadership and preaching in their congregations. The leadership are the main drivers and motivators in the work of the diaconal services in their congregations. Because the RICD is connected to the same values as the NGOs and the diaconal services of the congregations, it seemed appropriate to investigate the role of leadership in the problem they (the RICD) experienced. To assist the RICD in their professional practice, empirical research was needed. Empirical research

3 <https://tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/living-wage-individual>

provides new knowledge that can inform new practices. Because of the nature of the context of poverty, the empirical study needed to be amongst congregations in a context where a high incidence of poverty prevails. In that way, it was possible to determine if and how the relationships and consequent practices of both leaders and congregants influence the need for assistance from the RICD.

3. The research

The problem owner was seeking new knowledge towards understanding the lack of interest and involvement in the opportunities that they provide for assisting the development of congregants, especially children, in a professional practice in congregations. The professional practice of the RICD in conjunction with congregations, seems problematic. They wanted to know how they can enhance their professional practice to help their stakeholders. There was only one sure way to acquire the data: ask the stakeholders (the congregations). The leaders and congregants know best what they want and what they need. The voice of the possible beneficiaries needs to be heard. Without the voice of the people, no new knowledge can be generated to improve the professional practice of the RICD. If the data provides positive possibilities, it will contribute to the enhancement and relevancy of the professional practice of the RICD. The empirical research needs to focus on data that can provide positive new knowledge attaining through consultation and interviews with all people involved in the practice. Empirical research was needed. The problem and the quest for answers on what is happening in the practise, led to the choice for practice-orientated research (POR).

3.1 The methodology of practice-orientated research (POR)

There are many theories and biblical markers to evaluate the nature of a professional problem, but the researcher opted, above literature studies, for the use of practice-orientated research (POR) as a method of empirical research. Although statistics provide good demographical background, quantitative research (only) would not guide the researcher to provide relevant solutions to the problem of the RICD. Qualitative empirical research, informed by literature (existing knowledge), could provide new

knowledge to inform advice to the problem owner on possible solutions to their problem.

POR is used as a suitable empirical approach to gain new knowledge to understand the lack of engagement that a problem owner (the RICD) encounters in the professional practice. Key elements of POR involve the voice of the people involved in the practice; an evaluation on the performance of practises of the parties involved; and positive suggestions to enhance the professional practice. POR happens at ground level – there where theory and biblical guidance impacts the practise.

Theologians⁴ developed a model of POR: “Research in which the research goal is coming from the professional practice and in which the knowledge created in the research contributes directly to this professional practice” (Hermans & Schoeman, 2015a:26). In POR, the problem owner identifies a professional practice problem. This probes investigation for new knowledge that can enlighten (give reasons for and why) the problem in the practice. The new knowledge, when applied, may initiate change or intervention.

Miller-McLemore (2011) argues for the creation of a new *space* in which an ongoing circular process and action can function towards a *new understanding*. In POR, the focus lies in the fact that the new knowledge comes from a process and intervention in the professional practice. The process of gaining new knowledge happens in two streams: evaluating and interpreting existing knowledge, and research towards finding new knowledge. The explicit voices ground the positive results from the realities of the practises. The positive results that the POR provides need to be workable, practical, doable, beneficial, and relevant to both the questioned practice and the problem owner.

During the search for new knowledge, people start to evaluate the existing knowledge (for example, during an interview). When this happens, it acts as an intervention in the practice. The interviewee, in trying to answer the questions with their own experience and existing knowledge, starts to think. This is an intervention in the life of that person. By asking interview questions according to the four tasks of Osmer (2008), new understanding

4 Hermans and Schoeman (2015b) built on the work of Vershuren as in Verschuren, P. & Doorewaard, H. (1999) *Designing a research project*.

emerges. Therefore, the practice does not necessarily need separate interventions to create and implement new knowledge.

In the *Descriptive-Empirical Task*, as described by Osmer (2008:31-78), we determine *what* is going on. Through a process of priestly listening, individuals receive intensive attention, and in POR - their actions, to define what is really happening. Empirical descriptions are conceptualised from qualitative interviews during empirical research. Because practice-orientated research is concerned about attitudes, culture, emotions, history, and the so-called facts behind the obvious, a qualitative approach seems more appropriate to use in POR. This does not rule out the contribution of quantitative data. Both quantitative and qualitative data contribute to the description of what is happening - not only in the practice, but also in the context.

The *Interpretive Task* (see Osmer, 2008:79-128) is all about asking *Why are things happening?* In POR, the focus will be the reason why certain practices happen in certain ways. It can therefore be argued that in the case of practice-orientated research, the answers gained, while compiling the two tasks of description and interpretation are combined in one action of collecting existing knowledge. The latter emphasises the importance of combining a qualitative and quantitative approach when collecting data to enlighten the research problem.

The *Normative Task* (see Osmer, 2008:129-173) requires prophetic discernment to ask the “theological” question: *What should be going on?* Although POR is concerned about the practises or actions, it needs to look at “informing” knowledge that directs the actions in the practice. Collecting existing knowledge or knowledge about the expected practice is an integral part of POR. In this case, a biblical understanding of the ecclesiastic approach in congregations will enlighten answers towards the normative question about the professional practice.

The *Pragmatic Task* (see Osmer, 2008:175-218) asks the question of *how* things should be performed. In the case of POR, this part of the hermeneutical process will consist of elements of planning, suggestions for an intervention, actual interventions, or generating professional practice models – all based on the outcome of the totality of the research.

When these different tasks are used in POR, there are no definite borders between them. Interpretation happens all the time. Moreover, when the interviews are conducted with an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach,⁵ the whole research process is an intervention. In an AI approach, questions are formulated to obtain answers with positive outcomes. In the research process, the new knowledge gained during interviews, both by researcher and researched, acts as interventions. The interviewed person is guided in new positive thinking (through an AI approach), and the researcher gains knowledge from the practice which can be used to compile new knowledge for the professional practice (which may be used in interventions).

To ensure that POR practices provide relevant and contextual contributions to the professional practice, it needs to answer the question of how? To ensure effective POR, Hermans and Schoeman (2015a:28-42)⁶ suggest the following steps:

1. Identify the problem owner, the researcher, the researched, and the model.
2. Describe the action problem.
3. Establish the nature of the problem: action, knowledge, an improvement, or a design?
4. Determine the connection between the knowledge problem and the action problem.
5. Determine what the contribution to the practice would be.
6. Decide which stage(s) of the intervention or design cycle will be the focus of the research.
7. Formulate the research questions.
8. Define the concepts.
9. After all is done, utilise the new knowledge in the professional practice.

It is important to note that step 9 is only possible after all data collection was performed. The new data informs, through analysis, the new knowledge to inform an amendment, probe an intervention, or enlighten the problem in the professional practice.

5 Appreciative Inquiry approach: Refer to 3.4

6 The same argument is followed by Niemandt et al., 2018

3.2 *Qualitative approach*

Central to the above-mentioned steps is a qualitative approach. In qualitative research, theoretical issues drive the formulation of a research question, which in turn drives the collection and analysis of data. Findings then feed back into the relevant theory (Bryman, 2012:383).

Qualitative research increases the understanding of human behaviour. It contributes, through involving the feelings, attitudes, emotions, and behavioural practices, to the extraction of data from the lives of people in a specific situation.

Qualitative research involves people. When people become involved through participatory research, the researched forms part of the formation of new solutions and new knowledge.⁷ Where participation (or as De Roest, 2020, calls it: collaboration) of the researched is included in the research, the intervention in the professional practice might succeed with less resistance to change. Change happens where the researcher and the problem owner collectively generate solutions and insights.

To utilise the new knowledge, improve the professional practice by using the scientific knowledge gained through empirical practice orientated research with a qualitative approach and the inclusion of the voices of all participants.

3.3 *Participation*

It is important for people to participate (collaborate) in the sustainability of their own well-being. If, in this case, the RICD wants to improve or assist in their (people living in a context of poverty) well-being, the people individually or corporately need to identify and agree to that. In this case study, three groups were involved: the RICD, congregational leaders, and the congregants. The RICD wanted information on the why, or why not, of the involvement of congregational leaders, as well as the lack of interest from congregation (members). The leadership plays an important role in the well-being of the congregants. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to involve both leaders and congregants: consult leaders on their involvement in the

7 De Roest (2020) uses “collaboration” in the same sense as “participation” and “involvement” are used in the descriptions in this article.

congregation, and congregants on their expectations from the leaders of the congregation concerning their well-being.

Congregational leadership needs to understand what is happening in the local community and congregation. Leaders who understand the “poverty” phenomenon and the challenges that poverty imposes on a congregation, will be able to minister more effectively in their congregations and context.

Because of the strive for a better life for their people, economic and social development agencies or projects in South Africa, as part of the United Nations, need to subscribe to the eight United Nations Millennium Goals⁸ articulated in 2000 (UN, 2018). The goals imply high levels of development of communities and individuals. Poverty and development are interrelated, poverty being one of the main reasons for the stimulus to development, and development one of the main solutions to relieve and eradicate poverty. All too often, poor people experience little benefit from the development projects.

In the early 1990s, development practitioners started to realise that they needed the assistance of community members in their projects of development. If the development practitioners do not consult the intended beneficiaries, the development project may fail. Development agencies, stakeholders and facilitators started to realise that “*development is about people*” (Davids et al., 2009:106). When beneficiaries of the development project are involved and are active participants in the process of decision-making and implementation, they grow in capability to make their own decisions and thus be empowered and developed. Participation (collaboration) of the people, in any project or process of development, needs to be valued. Beukes (1992:3) agrees with Korten’s formulation:

Development is a process by which the members of a society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to reproduce sustainable and justly distributed improvements in their quality of life consistent with their own aspirations.

People must be involved in their own aspirations to accomplish their own development goals.

8 <http://www.developmentgoals.org>

When people participate in the enhancement of their own well-being (through development), they will attend to their own needs, dreams, and expectations. Martinussen (1997:298) argues:

Basic needs include, first, the individual human being's and the families' need for food, shelter, clothes and other necessities of daily life; secondly, access to public services...thirdly, access to participate in, and exert influence on, decision making both in the local community and in national politics.

Where these needs, and their emotional and psychological needs, their need for belonging, etc., are not fulfilled, people experience a certain level of deprivation. The ten basic needs that Max-Neef (1991:20-40) listed,⁹ act as a framework for congregational leaders to attend to people living in a context of poverty.

Where people participate in their own development, naming their needs, and experience that they can contribute to a positive outcome of enhanced circumstances in a context of poverty, a positive attitude and trustworthiness towards their leadership is evident.

Research results show that where a congregational leader attends to these needs and includes people through trustworthy relationships, their well-being improve. In following the suggestion that "(d)iverse professional interests, ... are promoted by doing research in and with a community of practice that discusses and shares specific norms and values and that shares a common spirituality", De Roest argues that "collaboration with practitioners *always* enhances the utility of practical theology" (2020:180). When congregants living in a shared context of poverty are involved in their own development and growth; when they experience that they themselves contributed to the improvement of their lives, they experience that they

9 Max-Neef. List of basic needs (in no particular order): · Subsistence (means of supporting life / the bare necessities of life)⁸¹ · Protection (safeguard / prevent injury) · Affection (emotion / goodwill / love) · Understanding (having insight / power of abstract thought) · Participation (share in) · Idleness/ leisure · Creation (investing with title / a production of the human intelligence, especially the imagination) · Identity (individuality / personality / absolute sameness) · Freedom (personal liberty / independence / power of self-determination / exemption from) · Added later on: Transcendence (beyond the grasp of human experience, reason, description, belief, etc.)

have value; their self-image improves, and these experiences and realisations create and enhance feelings of well-being.

The discussion above illustrates the importance of the participation of people in their own development. The voice of the people reflects the real facts of the reality that informs the new knowledge. John Reader constituted in 2008: “Being practice-oriented, practical theology is committed to engaging with real problems, often from a grass-roots perspective.” The voice of the researched, the congregants on grass-roots level, are an indispensable marker of “participation” (collaboration) in the qualitative search for new knowledge to inform a relevant professional practice.

3.4 *Appreciative Inquiry (AI)*

Because of the search for positive contributions during interviews, an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach was chosen to conduct interviews. To gather information that could enlighten the difficulties and uncertainties raised by the RICD, the researcher opted for an AI research approach. An AI approach to data collection enhances the outcome of positive inspirational data from participants in a context of poverty.

AI engages members of an organisation in their own research - inquiry into the most life-giving forces in their organisation, the root causes of their success, and discovery of their positive core (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010:12).

Asking positive outcome questions enables people to discover their strengths, assets, and best practices, making them realise that a life of well-being is possible.

...by discovering the best and most valuable narratives and qualities of an organization, participants can construct a new way that has the most important links to the past and the most hopeful images of the future (Branson, 2004:23).

Asking questions and listening to answers with a positive intent creates images with a collective theme or topic that inspire people. These images are on different levels: biblical, social, individual, educational, and even medical. The different images work together to create hope. Although

reciprocal trust is vital in the AI approach, Branson (2004:24) lists a few principles that AI builds on:

- In every organisation, some things work well.
- What we focus on becomes our reality.
- Asking questions influences the group.
- People have more confidence in the journey to the future when they carry forward parts of the past.
- If we carry parts of the past into the future, they should be what is best about the past.
- It is important to value differences.
- The language that we use creates our reality.
- Organisations are heliotropic [lean towards the source of energy].
- Outcomes should be useful.
- All steps are collaborative.
- Where these building blocks, which include trust, exist in relationships in a congregation, people will have a sense of well-being. Respondents and leaders will talk about the interviews. They will share their positive experiences. A collective sense of well-being and faith strengthens, which is essential in their circumstances of a high incidence of poverty.

The methodology of AI “is re-shaping the way organisations all over the world are thinking about change” (Whitney et al., 2005:xi). AI is “built on theories that move a congregation away from deficit-based models toward the images and forces that are most life giving” (Branson, 2004:39). AI opens the knowledge and positive contribution of individuals in a congregation. The AI approach builds on the theories of new science, social construction, and the power of images. These images are rooted in “our own narratives, the biblical and traditional narratives, and the “what ifs” of our conversations” (Branson, 2004:40), giving us courage and direction in our sanctified imaginations.

The five steps that Branson (2004:28) suggests when conducting research interviews with an AI approach, adds to the construction of the interview questions. He suggests as follows:

1. Choose the positive as the focus of inquiry.
2. Inquire into stories of life-giving forces.
3. Locate themes that appear in the stories and select topics for further inquiry.
4. Create shared images for a preferred future.
5. Find innovative ways to create that future.

It can be argued that these steps all have a positive intent, and therefore add positive value in the research process with an AI approach. The contribution that Cooperrider et al. (2008:105-228) made to the AI approach, was the development of the 4-D Cycle of Appreciative Inquiry. It starts by choosing a topic that needs inquiry. Then a circular process starts: first with the leaders, then groups of people to individuals and eventually back again to the leaders. This engagement takes place in four phases of the 4-D Cycle: Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny. During the discovery phase, people identify and appreciate the best of their current situation: the identification of the life-giving sources and the appreciation thereof. They perform this by sharing stories about exceptional accomplishments, look at positive possibilities, and the capital available to them. Thereafter, they start dreaming. The dream phase is all about 'what might be': envisioning and expanding people's views of what might be. By looking at change and history, a new dream emerges for the future. This brings them to the design phase: the phase where they identify what the ideal situation should be or look like. By enlightening themselves through consultation with other disciplines (futures studies for instance), they create a new design for the congregation to operate upon. The 'design team' suggests some provocative proposals to help to move the congregation to positive actions relevant to their new environment. The destiny phase does not mean that the process has ended.

The Destiny phase delivers on the new images of the future and is sustained by nurturing a collective sense of purpose and movement. It

is a time of continuous learning, adjustment and improvisation (like a jazz group) – all in the service of shared ideals (Cooperrider et al., 2008:46).

The 4-D Cycle of Cooperrider et al. (2008), in conjunction with the five focuses of Branson, directed the design of questions in the interviews in the case study. The AI approach, with special focus on the first three steps of Branson, contributed to positive knowledge about the professional practice. Because the focus of the case study was research towards a positive intervention to better the lives of people living in poverty, the approach of AI enhanced the design of the interviews and resulted in data with a positive voice.

3.5 *The process*

The process of research in the case study started off with a pilot study. The pilot study was conducted with the main purpose of refining the interview questions. After completion of the reformulation of the interview questions, sampling was conducted. Interviews were undertaken, transcribed, and analysed to produce new knowledge from the interpretation of the analysed data.

3.5.1 *Sampling*

To determine what is really happening, data (existing knowledge) was collected from three communities living in poverty in and around Bloemfontein, SA, where three different reformed congregations are operational. The diversity of white, coloured, and black people was included, because different racial groups' affiliation determines the mainstream of the three congregations. Inclusion in a homogenous group in the local congregation determined the choice of respondents from the poverty contexts in their community.

Because of the existing knowledge available to the RICD, the researcher requested the RICD to nominate the congregations suitable for the case study. The RICD identified three congregations where positive impacts are visible, one from each denomination in their partnership in the *Mangaung* Metropolitan Municipality.

To compare needs and practices, the researcher purposely chose to hear the voices from members and leadership. Interviews were conducted with the pastor, a deacon, an elder, and five members from each congregation. The members needed to be part of a congregational group or activity in the congregation. Because of the participation approach, it was necessary to hear the voices of people from the context of poverty. Therefore, the researcher requested the pastors to identify five congregants who come from a household with a collective maximum income of R7,000¹⁰ per month. These congregational members were adult men and women of any age.

The main purpose of the sampling was to be able to hear the voices of congregational members and leaders from the context of poverty.

3.5.2 Interviews

The purposeful sampling made it possible to hear voices from the congregants (the participants in the research study) living in a context of poverty.

Five respondents (men and women) from each of the three congregations were interviewed. The other group of interviews was with three congregational leaders from the three different congregations. In each congregation, the pastor was one of the leadership respondents.

The conceptualisations of poverty, the ecclesiology of a congregation, and congregational leadership served as the building blocks to inform the scheduled questions for the structured interviews. The interview questions aimed to produce information about the experiences of congregational members, and the professional practices of (in particular) pastors in the congregations.

All questions were asked with the intention of a positive response.¹¹ The answers to the questions reflected the people's voice. Questions were open-ended. Respondents were encouraged to voice more than the questions required.

10 The monthly living wage in 2020 was R6,570. R7,000 monthly income for a household seemed a fair comparison regarding the poverty-line at that stage.

11 Refer to the discussion on the literature by Branson and others in 2.4

All participant voices were recorded, coded, and analysed to provide new knowledge about the relationships between congregants and leadership in congregations where a high incidence of poverty prevails.

All ethical procedures were met before any interviews were conducted.

3.5.3 Analysis

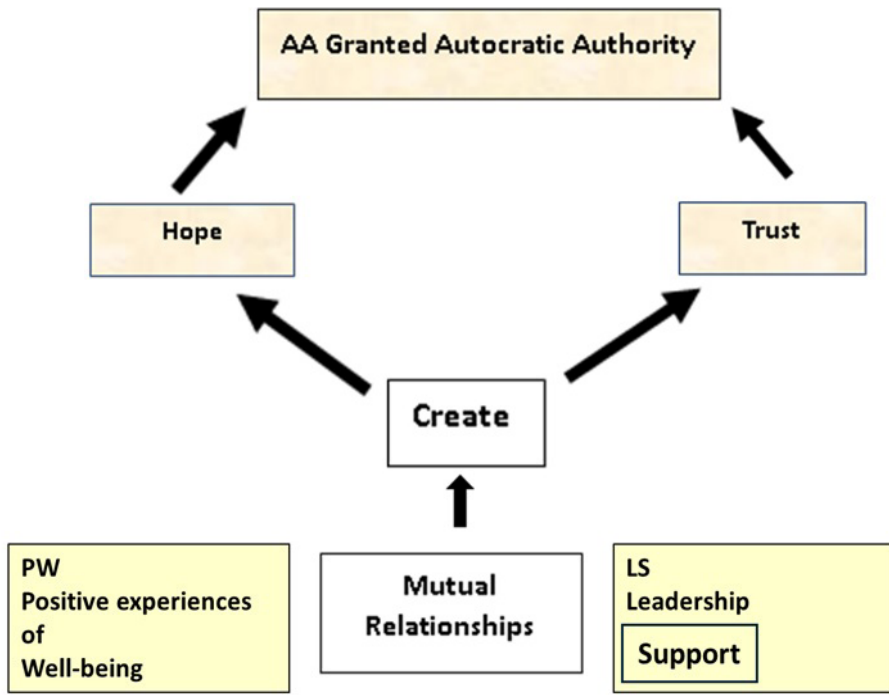
After concluding the interviews, the data was transcribed and imported into Atlas.ti. Atlas.ti is a computerised analysis program that enables researchers to code, analyse and compile data scientifically.¹²

A process of inductive coding, guided by knowledge from the literature, followed. The literature served to inform the conceptualisations of the codes in the coding process. The codes were grouped together through a process of comparing, thinking, sorting, and organising. The code families (as different codes grouped together), reflect collective answers to the research questions, as well as specific themes emerging from the data. Throughout the analyses process, the AI approach was applied.

3.5.4 Results

The professional practice of the leadership in the congregations in a context of poverty, revealed leadership practices of autocratic authority. Pastors can ask almost anything from their congregants, and they would commit to it. Congregants in a context of poverty are so committed to their congregation and the leadership because they experience these relationships positively. These positive experiences of well-being create hope and trust towards the leadership in such a distinct matter, that the congregants who experience these feelings, grant their pastors autocratic authority in their lives.

12 For more information on Atlas.ti, refer to Friese in the Bibliography.



Mutual relationships between leaders and congregants, characterised by experiences of well-being, created through hope and trust, granted autocratic authority to leaders.

The contribution (collaboration) of the congregants provided evidence for these findings. In POR, the positive involvement and participation of the researched are of great value. The data from the researched case study showed the importance of the voices of the people living in a context of poverty - revealing their concerns and relationships with the congregation, and especially their pastors. Several voices were heard:

“We need to have trust in the church and the congregation... The congregation show us where we must go. Church attendance will grow due to love in the family-house”; “They [pastors] must treat the people nicely”; “With respect and honesty”; The pastor “Create and enhance feelings of happiness among small children. Let the small ones feel better and happy”.

Because the congregational members show their support for the congregation and trust the leadership, they expect the pastors to constantly evaluate the congregational practices and guide them accordingly. They grant the pastor the authority to guide them, and therefore *expect support* in their lives.

“Then we look at the problems that really matter”; “To sometimes ask the people how they are doing”; “Check on the circumstances at specific households”; “They must support and help the people”; “Help them and talk to them”; “The congregation...they do a lot...for all children...keep them away from the wrong things”.

The people voice their *witness about the support* they receive:

“I chose this church, because it provides the best spiritual lives for our youth and children”; “They guide you on the right path”; “The fact that the pastor gave us some work to do...that makes me excited... now I know that I do not need to worry”; “They assist with food. They give you some work to do”; “The pastor gave all of us a little job. That excited me...then I know I do not need to worry”.

The voices of the congregants are proof of the mutual relationship between pastor and congregation – *a relationship characterised by integrity, trust, and reliability*:

“The pastor is a good person”; “the leadership will seek advice from the pastor”; “Pastor solves the problem”; “You can phone him any time at night. You can phone him early in the morning. He is always available”; “The pastor will not only promise a food parcel...he will keep his promise”.

The participating voices are signs of experiences of (PW) well-being, characterised by trust and hope. Because these people have positive experiences in their relationship with the pastors, they grant their (LS) pastors (AA) autocratic authority in their lives.¹³

13 See graphic illustration above

3.5.4 *The relationship between congregants and leaders*

David Bosch published several works¹⁴ on the focus and intention that a congregation [by means of their leaders] should attend to in the community where they reside. Ammerman (1997, 2005) and Ammerman et al. (1998) also made meaningful contributions to the role of leaders in congregations. Because of their position, faith leadership in a congregation is mainly responsible to lead, model, and practise a missional ecclesiology in a congregation. Therefore we expect that the focus and intention of these leaders are derived, firstly, from the authority gained from the congregants. Secondly, Scripture¹⁵ substantiates the God-given authority for leaders to lead (Carroll, 2011; Stevens & Collins, 1993) in their congregations. Thirdly, congregational leaders in the communities where they reside, are generally authorised by the community to lead the people in the specific community where the congregation resides.

Rising poverty, rising unemployment, corruption, and a lack of proper services to the poor and helpless are the true challenges of society in the South African context. Poor people look towards their leaders, especially their faith leaders, to alleviate their situation. Congregational leaders need to pay attention to the needs and active relational participation of people (living in poverty) towards their own development and methods of poverty alleviation. It is much more than poverty alleviation - it is an ongoing improvement of the well-being of the people. Poor people have specific expectations of their congregational leaders. Research results show that the two most appreciated and needed qualities of congregational leaders are integrity and trustworthiness (Maritz, 2021:168-194). Where congregational leaders attend to the needs of people (even the needs that the people do not comprehensively realise) with integrity, people trust them to act with autocratic authority over their lives. Leaders need to take care on how they use their influence on people: they must act with integrity, and always include people through participation.

14 1980. Witness to the world. The Christian mission in theological perspective. 2011. Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission. 20th Anniversary ed.

15 Scripture examples: Titus 2:1; 2 Tim 1:6-11; Ephesians 4: 11-16; Matt 28: 18-20

4. Methodological markers

Research in the field of Practical Theology needs to serve the professional practices of theologians, deepen the understanding of ecclesiastic work in congregations, evaluate programmes, develop a better understanding of the context, and enhance possible interdisciplinary influence, value, and cooperation. To achieve this type of contribution we need information from different fields of study. It seems inevitable to conduct *empirical research*, from a POR perspective, to inform us about the actual situation where theology is practised at grass roots level. We agree with Ward (2017:155) when he states:

(e)mpirical research brings something unique and special to the theological table: it enables theologians to investigate present-day practice and experience. An empirical project might take different forms, including exploring the self, exploring the community, testing theological assertions, generating new theological perspectives, or correcting problems.

The empirical research leads to new knowledge that is utilised to advise the professional practices of theologians. Again, if you do not (as previously discussed) involve *participation*,

Good ministry is never merely a matter of solving problems; it is a mystery to be ventured and explored. But we can journey into this mystery with knowledge and skills that help us find our way as we move along (Osmer, 2008:3).

Unfortunately, the hermeneutical process does not always provide answers. Therefore, if we want to know what is really happening and why it is happening in the action or practise, we need to investigate the practises and actions on what is really happening. If these investigations do not lead to an improvement of the practise, the new knowledge is worthless. The research needs to involve the professional practise, hence, need to be *practice-orientated*.

Use an approach of *Appreciative Inquiry* to enhance the contribution of new knowledge. Appreciative Inquiry enhances the knowledge and positive contribution of research participants.

Appreciative Inquiry engages members of an organization in their own research – inquiry into the most life-giving forces in their organization,

the root causes of their success, and discovery of their positive core. (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010:12).

...by discovering the best and most valuable narratives and qualities of an organization, participants can construct a new way that has the most important links to the past and the most hopeful images of the future (Branson, 2004:23)

Conducting qualitative research in a context of poverty by implementing the methodology of practice-orientated research, and using the markers of Participation and Appreciative Inquiry, gives rise to new knowledge which opens the possibility to enhance the professional practice of congregational leaders in a context of poverty.

During this case study it became clear that the voice of the participants expressed their needs and mutual appreciation towards pastors who were creating well-being in their lives while living in a context of poverty. Where people participate in the development of creating positive outcomes, through contributions of positive voices and active participation, they experience that their voice adds knowledge that will enhance mutual circumstances. Practice-Orientated Research opens the opportunity for the researched (professional practice and people involved) to contribute and collaborate towards the creation of new knowledge to improve the professional practice of, in this study, the problem owner.

Because of participation of the researched, the empirical data that was gathered from the interviews, is reliable. In this case, the reliability through participation, adds value to the ethical practices in the research study.

5. Conclusion

Do the methodological markers for congregational research differ in contexts? POR contributes to the improvement of professional practices and opens the door for various approaches and research methods to be used in different congregations. It seems though, that the inclusion, the participation, and the active listening to the voices of the researched is essential. Add to that a search for positive contributions by using an appreciative inquiry approach, and it will result in positive contributions to practice-orientated and applicable new data in congregations.

When the methodological markers of Participation, Appreciative Inquiry, and the empirical research method of practice-orientated research are used, research outcomes will be relevant and useful to the professional practice in any congregation, whether in poverty-stricken communities or not, as well as in other instances where problem owners seek new data and advice.

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