






# Introduction

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The empirical research that is the focus of this volume aims to critically reflect on the role of congregations and their leadership in the community through a critical discussion that contributes to new perspectives, with specific reference to the South African context, to enhance the field of congregational studies.<sup>1</sup> The aim is to be significant, transformational, and relevant to the context and its challenges in developing contextual ecclesiologies within congregational studies. The contributions to this volume have a specific empirical, methodological aim to map markers to conduct empirical research within the context of the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality.<sup>2</sup> The research question in this volume focuses on the following: In conducting practical theology and empirical research within an African context, what methodological markers could be identified for this specific context?

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- 1 This focus aligns with the values formulated on page 2 of the “Engaged Scholarship Strategy” (2020) of the UFS.
  - 2 The Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality is a metropolitan municipality that governs Bloemfontein and the surrounding towns in the Free State province of South Africa. Mangaung is a Sesotho word meaning “place of cheetahs”.

The research is grounded in the field of “Congregational studies and leadership”.<sup>3</sup> The academic endeavours of practical theology and the department during the last decade developed towards a more hermeneutical-focused discipline emphasising the context and working inductively.<sup>4</sup> A hermeneutical approach<sup>5</sup> profoundly impacts the understanding and practising of engaged scholarship. The research is strongly inclined towards a hermeneutical and inductive approach and takes the local context seriously.

As a University of Free State (UFS) strategy, engaged scholarship and research seek to build a partnership between academic scholarship and the community to generate and integrate new knowledge for all partners’ mutual benefit.<sup>6</sup> In the case of this volume, the research focuses on congregations and their leadership and contextual relevance; in other words, their involvement within society and the local community, the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality. The context of the research is the Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality metro, and all the congregations participating in this research project are from this metro, either in the township or in the suburbs of the metro.

The research aims to bridge the gap between the academy and the pastoral ministry by creating opportunities for academics and the congregational leadership to share the researched knowledge and pastoral experiences to enrich each other.<sup>7</sup> Academic research should be part of the ministry; hence, there is

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3 See Schoeman, W. J., 2015. Exploring the practical theological study of congregations, *Acta Theologica*, Supplementum 22, 64–84.

4 See Schoeman, K. et al., 2012. Practical theology at a public university: The road travelled and the road ahead at the University of the Free State, in Venter, R. and Tolmie, F. (eds.) *Transforming theological knowledge. Essays on theology and the university after apartheid*. Bloemfontein: Sun Press, 123–139.

5 Kim (2007:430) defines the hermeneutical approach as the interpretive activity of Practical Theology that attempts to understand our concrete situation and discern God’s will through a hermeneutical circle that develops an understanding of the text through the interplay between text and context. Ganzevoort (2009:5) says that in Practical Theology, the hermeneutical approach helps to construct the meaning of lived religion through conversations with other human beings, and the traditions that model our lives

6 Refer to the “Engaged Scholarship Strategy” (2020) of the UFS page 5.

7 See pages 13 to 15 of Osmer, R. R., 2008. *Practical Theology. An introduction*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

a need for interconnectedness and mutual empowerment of each other with the interconnection of academic knowledge, students, and religious context and to explore unique and good ministerial practices and challenges in the township ministry.

From an epistemological perspective, practical theology is understood as a hermeneutical discipline, where learning is conducted through an indicative and contextual discourse broader than the academic space. In conducting empirical research, a mixed methodology is used, and the congregations and their leadership are seen as co-researchers.<sup>8</sup>

The bigger demographic picture of the South African religious landscape is a valuable reference point for positioning congregations within their communities and enhancing the role that they may play in the development of society. The General Household Survey (GHS) 2013, for the first time since 2001, included religious affiliation and adherence as a question. The GHS is an annual household survey conducted by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) since 2002. The 2013 GHS helps congregations to position themselves within the macro–South African religious landscape.<sup>9</sup> The Community Survey 2016 looked further into the denominational diversity within South African society. The bigger South African picture gives congregations important contextual and unique information about their societal role and position. Both these surveys indicate that about 80% of the South African population adhere to the Christian religion and that more than 50% attend a worship service every week.<sup>10</sup>

This research project aims to critically describe and evaluate, from a contextual and practical theological perspective, the role of township congregations as faith communities within their communities and broader society. The focus is

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8 See Schoeman, W. J. and van den Berg, J. A., 2016. Practical Theology exploring interdisciplinary practices: The quest for engaging with lived religion in the South African context', in Venter, R. (ed.) *Theology and the (post) apartheid condition: Genealogies and future directions*. Bloemfontein: Sun Press, 213–231.

9 Schoeman, W. J., 2017. South African religious demography: The 2013 General Household Survey, *HTS Theological Studies*, 73(2).

10 Refer to the Statistics South Africa reports on the General Household Survey 2013 and the Community Survey 2016.

also on practice-orientated research as a framework for empirical research; in this instance, a multi-cultural congregation and congregation within a context of poverty are also analysed from an empirical perspective. The empirical research is conducted using quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

The following is a broad outline of the chapters of this volume. Chapter one introduces the research being conducted in this volume by reflecting on practical theology and empirical research in an African context. The importance of context in performing practical theology and a relevant methodology is the focus of the first chapter. The second chapter describes township congregations using a quantitative empirical lens.

The following two chapters (three and four) use a qualitative methodology to evaluate congregational leadership in the township. Chapter three is a practical theological reflection on the leadership of the pastors in the township of Mangaung, and Chapter four is an empirical exploration of leadership approaches in African Independent Churches in Mangaung. Both chapters attempt to develop a new understanding of congregational leadership within a township context by utilising empirical data and reflection.

Chapter five focuses on post-colonial preaching in a township: Discovery and critical reflection on an African sermon. This chapter aims to use a post-colonial theoretical framework and empirical data to reflect on a sermon in a township context.

The following two chapters use practice-orientated research (POR) as a methodological framework. Chapter six refers to POR in service of the study of multi-cultural congregations, and Chapter seven reflects on Congregational research in a context of poverty: Methodological markers for performing POR.

Chapter eight focuses on Children's ministry in the Mangaung Township with special reference to early childhood development. The early childhood ministry of three Charismatic / Pentecostal congregations is discussed in this chapter.

The last chapter of this volume, Chapter nine, provides a methodological reflection on engaged research within a specific context as an overview of the research that was reflected on in this volume. The chapter evaluates engaged congregational research from an "engaged outsider" perspective.