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Interview with Prof. Kobus Schoeman on the occasion of his retirement at the end of 2024

Jan-Albert van den Berg (JAvdB): Kobus, it is a great privilege to conduct this interview with you after 16 years of friendship and collegiality. Please tell us first about your life journey until the present.

Kobus Schoeman (KS): In October 1978, the General Synod decided to establish a third theological faculty, this time at the University of the Free State. As a first-year student, I was sitting in the gallery of the synodal centre in Bloemfontein when this decision was made. For me, this was the beginning of an exciting journey with the Faculty, first as a student and later as a lecturer. Prof. Mias de Klerk played an important role in my decision to complete a Masters degree in Sociology of Religion under the mentorship of Prof. Jan Coetzee. Later on, I completed my doctoral thesis on a theory for the analysis of a congregation, with Prof. Kobus Kellerman as study leader.

For over 20 years, I was full-time minister in three DRC congregations (Voortrekkerhoogte East, Witbank, and Riviera; later part-time in Hugenoot). In 2009, I returned to the Faculty as lecturer in the Department Practical Theology. My interest and focus are congregation studies and leadership. I believe that one cannot lecture in this study field without having practical



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congregational experience. For this reason, I am always thankful to the congregations I could serve together with various colleagues. Serving the congregation is and was a call of indispensable value.

Since my school days, I have had a love for mathematics and later statistics. I completed my first empirical research project in my Honours year in Sociology. In 1988, I got involved in the Church Mirror (empirical research of various aspects of congregational service). In a sense, research was my hobby as a minister and this research became part of my formal assignment as minister. The Church Mirror aims to help congregations and the church understand and execute their call in a more credible way within the present context. It is essential to do this continuously in a fast-changing world. I was chairman of the research task team of the General Synod for over ten years. I was privileged to work with an incredible team.

The Church Mirror research (as well as the “Church Life Surveys”) has expanded further over the past few years, first to congregations of other mainstream churches such as the DRC family, as well as the Presbyterian and Methodist churches. In 2019, this expanded to a variety of congregations in townships and, at present, the research in congregations take place in more than five Southern African countries. My passion is to support congregations in such a way that they can better discern their call to be of more service in God’s kingdom. It is hoped that I will somehow be able to proceed with this work in the future.

Since my primary schooldays, I wanted to be a minister. On a journey full of twists and turns, I have remained loyal to this call. I am very grateful to the DRC, the Faculty, and all my colleagues who gave me the space and support to do this.

JAvdB: What do you see as important milestones in your academic career?

KS: My academic journey with theology was always informed by a keen interest in the sociology of religion. The empirical research, as part of my studies in the sociology of religion, contributed towards developing my skills to conduct empirical research among congregations, leading to my involvement with the Church Mirror research project. Church Mirror is a quantitative survey among synods and congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) that started in 1981. I was asked to continue with the research in 1987 as the project leader. I have been involved with this research project since then.

In June 2013, I attended the International Society for the Sociology of Religion (ISSR) Conference in Turku (Finland). I met Prof. R. Powell (Director of the National Church Life Survey [NCLS], Australia, and Associate Professor at Charles Sturt University in Sydney). I invited her to visit South Africa in 2014 and present NCLS research workshops. The survey was again done in 2018 among South African congregations, including, for the first time, township congregations. The current CLS-SA project includes congregations in six SADC countries.

I was a visiting scholar twice, at the request of Prof. C.A.M. Hermans, at the Radboud University in Nijmegen (The Netherlands) for a few months in 2014 and again in 2018. We collaborated on the development of a practice-oriented research methodology. The collaboration with Prof. Chris Hermans led to the publication of two volumes in the series “International Practical Theology”. I was co-editor with him of Volume 21, titled *Theology in an age of contingency* (2019), and Volume 24, *Resilient religion, resilience and heartbreaking adversity* (2022).

JAvdB: How would you describe your research focus?

KS: My research aims to develop a practical theological ecclesiology in the study field of Congregational Studies. Congregations are complex, multifaceted systems, implying that a multidimensional approach would be best suited to study congregations. In my positioning, I have developed a theological perspective on congregations that is also rooted within a specific contextual understanding. An empirical analysis is essential in the study of congregations, but an analysis cannot only be about quantitative growth. Both positions imply an integrated approach to congregational studies that seek a balance between a theological perspective and an empirical analysis. Thirdly, I argue that developing a general model for congregations that will apply to all congregations is outside my research agenda. Therefore, designing a framework for developing an ecclesiology from below is crucial for my research agenda. The publication of the volume *Churches in the mirror. Developing contemporary ecclesiologies* (2020), of which I was the editor, mainly focuses on the understanding the congregation as a community of believers developing an ecclesiology from below.

JAvdB: What is your future planning for your academic work?

KS: The focus of my planned future research is to continue with the development of a practical theological ecclesiology within the Southern African context. I have a specific conceptual framework in mind. As a theological reference point, congregations have a missional calling to serve society. Practice-oriented research and a mixed methodology provide a framework to develop contextual ecclesiology from below. These conceptual markers will be the roadmap for my future research, as I pay attention to the following within the study field of congregational studies:

- Research in the field of congregational studies needs to be contextual. Within the Southern African context, the sustainable development goals give direction to a contextual focus. Empirical research could describe and explore the contribution of congregations in building sustainable communities.
- Congregations need valid and reliable information about their own position and ministry. The Church Life Survey (CLS) methodology makes a vital contribution to giving a trustworthy voice to attenders. However, this needs to be developed in different congregations and denominations within the Southern African context.
- Practice-oriented research is a methodology used within the field of social research and within practical theology. A significant challenge is to develop concepts and theories that are part of, and relevant to the study field of practical theology using practice-oriented research.

The broad aim of my research journey for the next few years is to further develop a contextual ecclesiology from below for Southern African congregations. The intention is to highlight the differences with traditional theories and to move beyond a Christendom/post-Christendom distinction towards a contextual understanding of the mission of congregations in Africa. This should be informed by a reliable empirical methodology and a sound theological reflection.

JAvdB: Kobus, may our best wishes accompany you on a new stage of your life. May you experience, in a special way, how you will be employed further from now on in service of the Lord with His blessing in your life and work.