

C.A.M. Hermans

Prof. C.A.M. Hermans, Practical Theology and the Empirical Study of Religion, Radboud University, The Netherlands; Extraordinary Professor, Department Practical and Missional Theology, University of the Free State, South Africa. E-mail: chris.hermans@ru.nl, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9416-3924>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/acta.vi.8757>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2024

Supp 38:101-118

Date received:

6 March 2024

Date accepted:

12 September 2024

Date published:

14 November 2024

Towards an agency-oriented model of congregational vitality: How (not) to transform congregational vitality

ABSTRACT

The author defines “congregational vitality” as a disposition of the members of the congregation, who act in a role within the social system of the congregation. He connects this agency-related perspective with a structural-functionalist perspective on local churches after the agentic turn. Functions are dynamic processes of a system that are “needs” in terms of maintenance of stability or production of change. Two functions are necessary for survival and continued operation (adaptation and goal attainment) and two functions are related to the quality and internal regulation of cultural patterns and values (integration and pattern maintenance). Contextual changes, notably ethnic exclusivity and social justice, affect the congregational vitality of the actors. This loss of vitality deepens the crisis of congregations. The author concludes with two evidence-informed programmes which can transform this loss of vitality related to the challenges that congregations face.



Published by the UFS

<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons

With Attribution (CC-BY)



1. INTRODUCTION

Kobus Schoeman has dedicated his academic career to the empirical study of congregational life. He was one of the driving forces to introduce the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) as a quantitative research instrument in South Africa to understand and evaluate congregational vitality (Schoeman 2020a:14). Vitality is related to health and growth in terms of the relationship to

God (internal), to each other in the community (inspirational), and to society (outward). Vitality offers resistance to decline, which is characterised as a maintenance mode. Based on the findings of two congregational *Church Mirror* surveys (2010 and 2014), in which the NCLS instrument was used, Schoeman (2020a:117) concludes as follows regarding the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC):

A majority of congregations (an increase from 49.8% in 2010 to 61.6% in 2014) are busy with maintenance and a declining number of congregations (less than 40% in 2014) are growing.

The shift from growth to maintenance is based on quantitative indicators such as an increase in congregations with a shrinking financial position (Schoeman 2020a:116) and a decline in membership of the DRC (Schoeman 2020a:115).

A more qualitative insight in congregational vitality is presented in the South African Church Life Survey 2014 (Schoeman 2020b). He presents a circle of strength of nine core qualities regarding the internal, inspirational, and outward dimensions (see above) for the DRC in 2014. The circle of strength helps identify areas of growth (Schoeman 2020b:155). For example, if the quality of “practical and diverse service involvement” is low, much growth is to be realised in the outward dimension. What is this saying about congregational vitality? On the other hand, there are two internal qualities “worship” and “faith” that have a high level of agreement. How do we interpret this in terms of vitality? Is a high level of agreement an indicator of vitality? When is a certain level of agreement an indication of vitality? Schoeman (2020b:156) is very critical about the result of the DRC on the internal qualities:

the negative side of the internal core qualities may be that the congregation is not as involved in the society as it should be.

This seems to imply that vitality is also related to a normative understanding of what the calling or purpose of the local church should be. If so, then vitality is not equal to a growth or decline in numbers. Is vitality a function of the church or a quality of actors related to their role in the congregation? What role does reading the context (need to) play in congregational vitality? (Neill 2020:147)

In this article, I first conceptualise “congregational vitality” as a disposition of the members of the congregation, who act in a role within the social system of the congregation. I argue: Is an agency-oriented perspective of congregational vitality not an institutional perspective, as in the NCLS survey.

Next, I describe local churches/congregations using a structural-functional perspective of Parsons (1951). I opt for this theoretical perspective which aligns with the focus of pastoral theology on building local churches (action orientation). The major criticism on the theory of Parsons is that he is more interested in “how the system controls the actor, not [in] how the actor creates and maintains the system” (Ritzer 2011:245). To do justice to this criticism, I have incorporated the agentic turn in my social theory on congregations and linked the vitality approach to the needs of congregations as social systems. The second criticism is the lack of context. I take up this criticism in the last section and show how challenges in the context of post-apartheid South Africa have impacted on the functions (needs) of the local church.

Finally, I address some major contextual challenges that have a negative effect on congregational vitality in post-apartheid South Africa. Why do these challenges diminish congregational vitality? My argument is that, when the functions do not function as they should do, this affects the vitality of the actors. I present two evidence-informed sets of practices (methods) which can transform organisational processes and induce change.

The limitation of this study is that I focus on the DRC to illustrate my agency-oriented model of transformation of congregational vitality. But I consider the logic of my analysis and argumentation applicable to other churches.

2. CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY: AN AGENCY-ORIENTED CONCEPT

Congregations as religious systems have both an institutional and an actor/agency side. A system approach is capable of integrating both an institutional and an actor/agency perspective on congregations. In this section, I first distinguish between institution and actors/agency. The vast majority of agents are volunteers and not professionals, as evident in most of the literature on organisational vitality. First, something on the agentic turn in the scientific discourse on institutions. Agency is not individual and unrelated to institutions; it operates in conjunction with the structure of institutions. Secondly, I formulate an agency-oriented concept of congregational vitality. Congregations are religious systems. But what do we mean by “religion”? Religion deals with a specific kind of adversity, namely heartbreaking adversity, where people experience the loss of the ultimate good or purpose in life and/or the absence of God.

A resilient religion consists of religious systems – in a dynamic relationship with other systems – that can prevent or process the loss of the good and/or the absence of God as a possibility in and of life-events with and for others, insofar as this becomes visible in the practical way of life that follows from the meaning of this experience (Hermans 2022:47).

Religious systems aim to prevent or process the loss of the ultimate good and/or the absence of God. They help people experience the ultimate good and God as a possibility in and of life events with and for others. It is a real possibility emerging in the experience of people. This meaning of a real possibility becomes visible in the practical way of life grounded in this experience. When we refer to religious systems as institutions and agency, we refer to this aim of religious systems.

In the past decades, there has been an intense debate in sociology, management, and organisation studies about the connection between institutions and agency.¹ There is a long history in which institutions are considered to create dominant patterns of social systems that are pervasive and unchangeable. This changed in the so-called agentic turn at the end of the 20th century:

actors are theorized to express agency through iteration (conditioned by routines and habits), projectivity into the future (conditioned by imagination) and practical evaluation (Abdelnour *et al.* 2017:1977).

The main idea of this agentic is that institutions are malleable to individual purposive action, and that agency is tied to the roles and social positions of actors.

Agency is thus a capacity of social actors tied to the resources, rights and obligations of roles and social positions. Actors enter the social 'stage' and exercise agency, not individuals (Abdelnour *et al.* 2017:1789).

Agency can create, maintain, and disrupt the institutions that structure their lives. But they can only do this by “relying on the established socially available role structures, agency forms and cultural understandings that engender institutional renewal or maintenance” (Abdelnour *et al.* 2017:1790).

How can we define congregational vitality from an agentic perspective? This vitality is not a function of the institution but a driving force of actors related to their social position as members of, and (possible) roles within

1 For an overview, see Abdelnour *et al.* (2017).

the congregation. In line with recent review studies, the subjective feeling of energy is regarded as a core dimension of the vitality of agents (see Lavrusheva 2020:6; Van Steenberghe *et al.* 2015:354). The second study also mentions motivation and resilience as dimensions of vitality.

- Energy is a disposition of feeling strength to fulfil activities, buzzing with energy, looking forward in a positive manner, a source of power within oneself.
- Motivation refers to setting goals in life and making an effort to achieve them. The goals are valued, thus making the person intrinsically motivated to act. If a person has a goal, s/he immediately makes plans to achieve it.
- Resilience consists of the ability to deal with everyday problems and challenges in life. Resilience is a dynamic learning process, in which people bounce back (or recover) after adversity and continue with daily life. Every time people bounce back, it makes them stronger in life.

Vital members of congregations are bursting with energy; they have the ability to pick up life again after a negative event, and they do so fuelled by the fact that they are motivated towards goals which they value. In line with my definitions of resilient religion, the core business of congregations are events of heartbreaking adversity where people are alienated from the ultimate good and/or God. This can be experiences of themselves, or other people in the community, or in society at large.

3. AN INSTITUTIONAL MODEL OF LOCAL CHURCHES: FUNCTIONS AND FIELDS

A local church or congregation is an assembly of persons who come together for worship in a specific location. In many Christian traditions, these local churches are part of a larger body called a church. I focus on the vitality of local churches, and approach local churches from an institutional perspective after the agentic turn. In this section, I describe local churches/congregations using a structural-functionalist perspective following Van der Ven (1993; 1996). I first describe four functional needs that all systems have, according to the sociologist Parsons.

I choose this theoretical perspective because of its action orientation, which aligns with the action orientation in practical theological theory-building on church. I am aware of the major criticism on the theory of Parsons. He is more interested in “how the system controls the actor, not [in] how the actor creates and maintains the system” (Ritzer

2011:245). Therefore, I have incorporated the agentic turn in my theory on congregations. I link the three elements of vitality (energy, motivation, and resilience) to the functions of systems, linking the vitality approach to the needs of systems. The second criticism is the lack of context. Van der Ven took up this critique with regard to the Western context in his “ecclesiology in context”. I take up this challenge in the next section for the context of congregations in South Africa.

Congregations are social systems characterised by institutionalisation. Next, I define institutionalisation from a structural-functionalist perspective. And finally, I describe the sectors or fields of work within congregations.

In the heart of the structural-functionalist is the argument that all action systems are characterised by four functional imperatives. Functions are dynamic processes of a system which are “needs” in “terms of maintenance of stability or production of change, of integration or disruption of the system in some sense” (Parsons 1951:13). Two functions (adaptation and goal attainment) are essential for survival and continued operation and two functions (integration and latency; pattern maintenance) are related to the quality and internal regulation of the system.

- Adaptation to its environment and of the environment to its needs is the first function (Ritzer 2011:242). A system must cope with external situational exigencies created by the context. Adaptation refers to the mobilisation of resources for the survival of the system. For congregations, there are mainly two resources: persons and money and/or possessions. Congregations adjust to their environment by seeking other sources for income or by reformulating the kind of persons needed for certain roles or tasks in the congregations. Resources are decisive for the energy which is available in a social system to survive and continue. Congregations need to have a cycle of planning and control regarding their resources (including a membership and financial administration). A decrease in members’ contribution will have consequences for the goal attainment (next function). This is why the cycle of planning and control (adaptation) and the policy cycle (goal attainment) need to be integrated.
- Goal attainment is the second function of systems. A system must define its purpose and goals, in order to achieve its primary goals (Ritzer 2011:242). In line with the concept of “resilient religion”, the purpose of congregations is to prevent or process the loss of the ultimate good and/or the absence of God as a possibility in and of life events with and for others. Purpose refers to the “why we do it”; goals to “what

we do". Van der Ven (1993:79) refers to this function in congregations as the management processes of congregations in terms of planning, organising, staffing, directing, and controlling. Without management (or policymaking), we cannot get the work done that is necessary to achieve the goals of the congregation. What is more, the achievement of goals needs to be realised efficiently and effectively. There are different levels of policymaking. On a strategic level, the focus is on goals in the long term, in line with the purpose (mission and vision) of the congregation. There is an explicit focus on issues of survival and continuity, and of quality assurance. For example, how do we guarantee the quality of pastoral care when we have a part-time minister and less volunteers? The tactical level is focused on organising and structuring tasks in service of the realisation of goals at an operational level. For example, the development of an annual plan for pastoral care, specific projects, and the distribution of volunteers for certain tasks. The operational level focuses on the implementation and progress of the work, the quality of the process (such as learning in catechesis), and the quality of the outcome.

- Integration refers to the regulation of the relationship between actors and the different functions. Van der Ven (1993:79) refers to integration in terms of cohesion, (degree of) uniformity, and diversity. Systems have all kinds of processes to create and strengthen a shared culture. In congregations, we think especially about liturgy, preaching, and different kinds of rituals, but also about all forms of catechesis and schooling programmes. The mechanism that transfers the culture and values system is internalisation and socialisation. According to Parsons (1951:155),

the combination of value-orientation patterns which is acquired must in a very important degree be a function of the fundamental role structure and dominant values of the social system.

Role structure refers to the responsibilities, forms of leadership, and representation, as defined by the system. There are two main issues in congregations in the function of integration. The first issue is the "negative problems of defining the limits of permissiveness" (Parsons 1990:90). What are the limits of "private" interests or self-orientation within the congregation in terms of the belief system, values, behaviour, and so on of both individual actors and sub-collectivities? The second issue is that of

the institutionalization of the positively integrative functions of the social system considered as a collectivity; that is, the definition of the gradations of responsibility, and the structuring of leadership, including executive and representative roles (Parsons 1990:90).

The functions of adaptation, goal attainment, and integration form an integral part of the activities of leaders in the congregation.

- Latency (pattern maintenance) refers to “both the motivation of individuals and the cultural patterns that create and sustain that motivation” (Ritzer 2011:242). A system must furnish, maintain, and renew trust and confidence in cultural-motivational patterns. Congregations, families, and schools can be characterised as fiduciary systems with a main purpose of existence in transmitting culture (norms and values) to actors and allowing it to be internalised by them (Ritzer 2011:246). Obligations to furnish, maintain, and renew cultural patterns of the system are collectivity obligations, which are

an aspect of every institutionalized role. But in certain contexts of orientation-choice these obligations may be latent, while in others they are ‘activated’ in the sense that the actor faces the choice either of choosing the alternatives which conform with these values or of accepting the negative sanctions which go with violation (Parsons 1951: 65-66).

The functions of latency and integration are most important in terms of controlling the lower levels of goals attainment and adaptation. Van der Ven (1993:79) refers to latency as the identity of the church.

Congregations are social systems marked by a process of institutionalisation. First, a definition:

By institutionalization we mean the integration of the expectations of the actors in a relevant interactive system of roles with a shared normative pattern of values. The integration is such that each is predisposed to reward the conformity of the others with the value pattern and conversely to disapprove and punish deviance (Parsons & Shils 1962:20).

The basic unit of institutions is the status-role complex that is not an aspect of interaction, but rather a structural component connected to the functions of the system.

Status refers to a structural position within the social system, and role is what the actor does in such a position, viewed in the context of its functional significance for the larger system (Ritzer 2011:244).

Secondly, in an institutional approach, the system of regulatory norms is evaluated in their conformity with the ultimate common value system of the community (Parsons 1990:325).² The moral aspect as component in the orientation of actors according to their status role defines the institutional limits of permissiveness for action (Ritzer 2011:32). Parsons' (1990:326) central thesis is

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.

Disobedience to the institutional norms will tend to lead to disapproval and “sanctions” on those who violate them.

Finally, I mention sectors or fields of work within congregations. The key question is: In what kind of activities or practices are congregations involved in realising goals and aims related to their primary purpose (intrinsic reason of existence)? For Van der Ven (1990:52), the purpose is religious communication. From the perspective of a theory of resilient religion, the focus is on practices that

prevent or process the loss of the good and/or the absence of God as a possibility in and of life-events with and for others, insofar as this becomes visible in the practical way of life that follows from the meaning of this experience (Hermans 2022:47).

The sectors or fields of work operate within the framework of the functions of the congregation. Religious practices are institutional facts created by both constitutive rules and shared value attitudes by the members of the congregation. Religious practices as institutional practices can be described as follows:

1. By constitutive rules, water becomes baptismal water, a book becomes a holy book, and the laying on of hands becomes a blessing.
2. The participants in a religious practice collectively share the same constitutive rule(s). The participants form a community in the sense (and only to the extent) that they act in this practice from a shared ‘we’ intention.

² A value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action (Parsons 1990:331).

3. By participating in practices, we recognise the authority of the tradition that assigns a certain status function (holy book, baptismal water, etc.) to an act or agent.

5. The status function of religious practices refers to God as the ultimate good, the perfect happiness. Religious practices are culturally set apart because they can bring people into a relationship with God.

6. Within religious institutions, there are power constellations and ideologies that determine which practices are promoted and when there is a deviation from the status function of religious practices (Hermans 2022:58-59).³

The goals and content of religious practices are determined by the functions of the congregation as institution. For example, proclamation of the gospel related to the function of integration. The goals are realised in operational sense by performing tasks by actors with a specific status role, with the aim of promoting these goals. For example, preaching is a task of the minister. Finally, concrete activities can be ordered in sectors or fields of religious practices. Van der Ven (1990:81) mentions five fields: pastoral care (resilience; mourning); catechesis (learning); liturgy (celebrating); preaching (deliver a sermon), and diaconate (support). Van der Ven (1990:82-83) adds another field, namely church development, which he considers to be integrative and supportive for activities in other fields. The distinction in fields is different in Christian churches reflecting a different understanding of value patterns in Christianity, different status role complexes, different patterns to ensure integration, and so on.

4. CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES: “HOW (NOT) TO TRANSFORM CONGREGATIONAL VITALITY”

What contextual challenges are considered to have a negative effect on congregational vitality in post-apartheid South Africa? Why do these challenges diminish congregational vitality? And how to transform them to strengthen congregational vitality? Actors experience contextual challenges in concrete activities such as the lack of volunteers in catechetical groups. But that is not the heart of the problem and not the level on which to transform them. We need to analyse them in the framework of the functions which are the needs of congregations in terms of maintenance of stability or source of change. In this section, I start with

3 For a more detailed explanation, see Hermans (2003:188-214).

the challenge of congregations that experience a scarcity of members and money. Next, I focus on challenges related to whiteness, ethnic exclusivity, and social justice.

4.1 Scarcity of members and money

I start with a finding, reported by Schoeman, regarding congregations functioning within a maintenance framework. A maintenance framework focuses on *status quo* and a short time survival which is found in congregations with less members and less resources (Schoeman 2020a:116). Which function of congregations is at stake in this problem? How can we explain the impact of scarcity of members and money on congregational vitality? How to transform this effect of scarcity on congregational vitality of actors?

In the functional-structural model, congregations need resources: without energy, all functions come to a halt. Agents have a drive to act, but what happens to that energy when congregations are in a situation of increased scarcity of members and means? Scarcity changes the way in which people feel and think. We will understand this process using insights of the so-called theory of scarcity which originated in 2013 when Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) published their influential book *Scarcity. Why having too little means so much*.⁴ Scarcity is defined as “having less than you feel you need” (Mullainathan & Shafir 2013:4). 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).

Poverty is the key domain to which scarcity theory is applied, but also in the case of loneliness, facing deadlines, or when people are dieting. The main idea derived from cognitive theory is that scarcity can change the mindset of actors. The first change regards the attentional focus of actors. On the one hand, there is the attentional focus on scarcity-driven demands such as resource efficiency. But there is also an attentional neglect called “tunnelling”. “Scarcity leads us into a tunnel, so that we neglect other (possibly more important) things that we value” (Mullainathan & Shafir 2013:28). While our mind is drawn to scarcity, all other things are harder to reach. The second mechanism which scarcity reduces is our mental “bandwidth”.

4 For an overview of 10 years of research and theory-building, see De Bruijn & Antonides (2022).

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. People have fewer mental resources and are more impulsive. “They tend to focus on immediate rewards, and their willpower is affected” (Hermans 2017:46). In other words, the vitality of actors in terms of their power to act and engage in activities is reduced. The “talk of the town” is on a lack of resources, finding volunteers for activities (in the short term), neglecting long-term perspectives and planning, and making erratic policy decisions.

How to transform this effect of scarcity on the congregational vitality of actors? We should not make more effort to find the resources we lack (either members or money). If we want to transform our situation, we need to engage in things that we value. This is, first, a renewal of trust and confidence in cultural-motivational patterns, which define the purpose of our existence as congregation (latency). The congregation needs to renew its strength and awareness of the intrinsic value of being congregation in the context where it exists and to be faithful to its mission in this context. This will imply a positioning in a context that is marked by racial diversity related to differences in power and socio-economic inequality but also how to be faithful to its calling (see next point). Instead of putting all energy in short-term goals, it implies a renewed focus on long-term perspectives and planning; to invest in re-imagining what it means to be a local church, with a focus on human fullness in living with and for others following Jesus.

4.2 Whiteness, ethnic exclusivity, and social justice

The second challenge I address is whiteness in a social context of South Africa, which is characterised by social injustice, poverty, and reconciliation. I start with Van Wyngaard’s (2020:153) formulation of this challenge:

One important challenge facing this generation of leaders will be how to accompany local congregations being transformed: from how they are currently described as living out the envisioned calling, forming White Christians committed to charity as the ways in which they engage with their broader community, to a reconciled community that can seek justice together as equal members of local communities.

Whiteness is a lens on practices which unfairly privilege and place White people in positions of dominance (Green *et al.* 2007:298). Whiteness, like all racial categories, is fluid and is dependent on the changing and emerging

features of social life. The content and transmission of whiteness changed in South Africa with the transition of apartheid to post-apartheid.

Under the hegemonic operations of 'white talk', non-racialism – which historically advocated a form of race-cognisant inclusivity, mutated into colour blindness – and neo-liberal economic policies have been advanced as the only viable road for the country (Steyn 2018:10).

According to Steyn (2018:12), White South Africans have created a distance between themselves and accountability for the past in three ways: constructing innocence in claiming that White people were ignorant of what happened during apartheid; withdrawing into private spaces such as elite neighbourhoods, private schools, the private sector, segregated churches, and constructing themselves as victims. Ignorance of race and power is (re)produced by explicit and tacit practices of knowing and non-knowing that evade and distort racial reality and differences of power related with it (Mueller 2020:148).

Which function of congregations is at stake in this problem? Van Wyngaard (2020:145-146) suggests that the core issue is an uncertainty about the identity of the church, related to ethnic exclusivity and to the calling of the local church in the world. Congregations are fiduciary systems that furnish, maintain, and renew trust in cultural-motivational patterns based on shared norms and values. Most of the time, actors are not aware to act on the basis of shared cultural-motivational patterns (for example, they are "latent"). Van Wyngaard (2020:153-154) suggests that uncertainty about shared norms and values is related to privilege and power, placing White people in positions of socio-economic dominance, ethnic exclusivity, and uncertainty and/or embarrassment with regard to the calling of the local church in South Africa.

These problems impact on the function of latency, or the identity of the local church. Should we be an ethnic exclusive congregation? What is our calling as local church regarding the social injustice and endemic poverty of our neighbouring Black communities? The function of latency is deeply connected to the function of integration, which refers to the regulation of the relationship between actors (leaders, members with different roles in the community). Too much diversity about the way in which to deal with the challenges mentioned above leads to uncertainty with regard to the shared culture (we intentions). This affects the function of goal attainment. For example, the realisation of all goals, which organisations consider important and valuable.

This uncertainty with regard to the identity of the congregation, integration of actors, and goal attainment has a strong effect on congregational vitality, in terms of both motivation and resilience of actors. The actors' uncertainty about which goals are valued, affects their intrinsic motivation to act and make an effort to achieve them. Resilience will also be affected. Due to the challenges that actors experience, there is a deep uncertainty about the promise of God's future. What is the good life with and for others and the calling of the community, given the challenges that the congregation faces?

How to transform this situation? I refer to two different approaches that have shown to be successful. The first is a good example of what Van Wyngaard (2020:153) describes as living out the envisioned calling of a reconciled community. The first example is Forster's (2017; 2019) project on conflicting views of forgiveness among Black and White South Africans. Forster was able to show the importance of positive intergroup contact as method to open ourselves to understanding the other person's ideas about forgiveness. Anxiety blocks the ability to understand the other. Forster worked with direct intergroup contact between different racial groups to decrease anxiety and to foster empathy. Secondly, Forster worked with a method of intercultural Bible reading, in which a biblical text on forgiveness (Matt. 18:15-35) functions "simultaneously as a conversation starter for intercultural conversation and as a reflective surface" that allows the participants to "reflect on their own contemporary and contextual experiences" (Forster 2017:84).⁵ The shift in social imagination of forgiveness of White congregants corresponds with a shift in social identity, in which social justice and reconciliation are part of the calling of the community.

A second approach focuses on the identity of the local church which "lives" in the narratives of the actors (Praas *et al.* 2020:32). The authors use a Ricoeurian perspective on ecclesial narrative identity, because it can deal with the tension between change and being faithful to its origin. Narrative identity can be approached by two questions: "Who are we as local church?" and "What are we as local church". The "who question" refers to selfhood or self-consistency, which reflect being faithful to its origin as Church of Jesus. The "what question" refers to tangible religious practices that sustain or keep the same "character" of the local church. Selfhood and sameness are two poles in narrative identity which stand in a certain tension because the historical manifestation of local churches

5 In this instance, Forster refers to Van der Walt (2012).

changes when the context, culture, and people change. The Holy Spirit is both the guarantee of continuity of the church with its origin and the source of renewal through the ages (Praas *et al.* 2020:16).

If churches only focus on sameness in their identity story, they do not know how to transform. This is often a dominant power in the history of local churches. Actors need to tell their lived stories of the identity of the church. They need to tell and share their stories about the identity of the congregation in keeping the dialectic of continuity and change, of sameness and selfhood. In line with this Ricoeurian understanding of narrative identity, the authors formulate four quality markers of story of the identity of the local church.

- The first is an orientation towards human fullness (or ultimate good). As Paul writes in the Letter to the Colossians: “For it pleased the Father that in him (Jesus) should all fullness (pleroma) dwell” (Col. 1:19). The identity of the congregation should be oriented to the promotion of human fullness in living with and for others, in just institutions, as response to the gift of divine fullness (pleroma) which was given in advance through Jesus Christ (Miggelbrink 2009:164).
- Secondly, the narrative identity should be a rich expression of the diversity of forms in which members express their faith and the variety of religious sources and spiritual traditions in the Christian faith. The richer the narrative identity, the better the actors can deal with challenges and show openness to transformation.
- Thirdly,

the story of a local church which is shared is (...) also an expression of the relationship of the members of the local church with one another and is, therefore, the *koinonia* of the local church (Praas *et al.* 2020:30).

The local community should be transformed in a community of storytelling in which they share experiences and strengthen their “we” intentionality and cultural-motivational practices.

- Finally, there should be a close connection between the narrated identity of the local church and the actual practices aiming at experiences of human fullness in living with and for others. “The story who we are as congregation is grounded in the attestation that is what we stand for” (Praas *et al.* 2020:30). The more our actual practices are not truly

and realistically reflecting the promises formulated in the narrative identity of our local church, the more it vitalizes [the] actor towards goal attainment and shared cultural patterns. “YES, we can!”

When agents tell and share their lived stories of the identity of the congregation, they can reimagine their identity in the dialectic of continuity and change. In this process, agents can regain congregational vitality in the context of deep societal changes and challenges in line with the calling of the community to be a sign of promise of God’s future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ABDELNOUR, S., HASSELBLADH, H. & KALLINIKOS, J
2017. Agency and institutions in organization studies. *Organization Studies* 38(12):1775-1792. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840617708007>
- DE BRUIJN, E.-J. & ANTONIDES, G.
2022. Poverty and economic decision making: A review of scarcity theory. *Theory and Decision* 92(1):5-37. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11238-021-09802-7>
- FORSTER, D.
2017. *The (im)possibility of forgiveness? An empirical intercultural Bible reading of Matthew 18.15-35*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1nzfwnk>
2019. A social imagination of forgiveness. *Journal of Empirical Theology* 32(2):70-88. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15709256-12341387>
- GREEN, M.J., SONN, C.C. & MATSEBULA, J.
2007. Reviewing Whiteness: Theory, Research, and Possibilities. *South African Journal of Psychology* 37(3):389-419. <https://doi.org/10.1177/008124630703700301>
- HERMANS, C.A.M.
2017. Love in a time of scarcity. An event-hermeneutical interpretation. *Acta Theologica* 30(2):30-50. <https://doi.org/10.18820/23099089/acta.v37i2.3>
2022. Resilient religion. In: C.A.M. Hermans & K. Schoeman (eds), *Resilient religion and heartbreaking adversity* (Münster: LIT Verlag), pp. 47-66.
- LAVRUSHEVA, O.
2020. The concept of vitality. Review of the vitality-related research domain, *New Ideas in Psychology* 56:100752. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2019.100752>
- MIGGELBRINK, R.
2009. *Lebensfülle: Für die Wiederentdeckung einer theologischen Kategorie [Fullness of life: Rediscovering a theological category]*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder. Quaestiones Disputatae 235.

MUELLER, J.

2020. Racial ideology or racial ignorance? An alternative theory of racial cognition. *Sociological Theory* 38(2):142-169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275120926197>

MULLAINATHAN, S. & SHAFIR, E.

2013. *Scarcity: Why having too little means so much*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

NELL, J.A.

2020. From maintenance to mission? Maintaining mission – Towards an integrated approach. In: W.J. Schoeman (ed.), *Churches in the mirror – Developing contemporary ecclesiologies* (Bloemfontein: Sun Media), pp. 125-140.

PRAAS, D., HERMANS, C.A.M. & SCHERER-RATH, M.

2020. The local church and the quality narrative identity of ecclesiology in a Ricoeurian perspective. In: W.J. Schoeman (ed.), *Churches in the mirror – Developing contemporary ecclesiologies* (Bloemfontein: Sun Media), pp. 9-36.

PARSONS, T.

1951. *The social system*. London: Routledge.

1990. Prolegomena to a theory of social institutions. *American Sociological Review* 55(2):319-333. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095758>

PARSONS, T. & SHILS, E.A.

1962. The general theory of action. In: T. Parsons & E.A. Shils (eds), *Towards a general theory of action*. Fifth edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 3-29.

RITZER, G.

2011. *Sociological theory*. Eighth edition. New York: McGraw-Hill.

SCHOEMAN, W.J.

2020a. An empirical exploration of the missional ecclesiology of congregations in the Dutch Reformed Church. In: W.J. Schoeman (ed.), *Churches in the mirror – Developing contemporary ecclesiologies* (Bloemfontein: Sun Media), pp. 109-124. <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928424710>

2020b. The South African Church Life Survey 2014: An exploration of congregational health. In: W.J. Schoeman (ed.), *Churches in the mirror – Developing contemporary ecclesiologies* (Bloemfontein: Sun Media), pp. 141-159. <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928424710>

STEYN, M.

2018. Whiteness: Post-apartheid, decolonial. In: J. Netshitenzhe (ed.), *Whiteness Afrikaans Afrikaners: Addressing post-apartheid legacies, privileges and burdens* (Johannesburg: Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA)), pp. 9-15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh8qzw9.8>

VAN STEENBERGEN, E., VAN DONGEN, J.M., WENDEL-VO, G.C.W., HILDEBRANDT, V.H. & STRIJK, J.E.

2015. Insights into the concept of vitality: Associations with participation and societal costs. *European Journal of Public Health* 26(2):354-359. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckv194>

VAN DER VEN, J.

1993. *Ecclesiology in context*. Kampen: Kok.

1996. *Ecclesiology in context*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans.

VAN DER WALT, C.

2012. Close encounters: Creating a safe space for intercultural Bible reading. Part I. *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa* 109:110-118. <https://doi.org/10.7833/109-0-128>

VAN WYNGAARD, H.J.

2020. A next generation? Young Dutch Reformed Church ministers and their vision for the church in South Africa. *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 30:133-157.

Keywords

Trefwoorde

Congregational vitality

Gemeente vitaliteit

Functions of congregations

Funksies van 'n gemeente

Whiteness

Witheid

Narrative identity

Narratiewe identiteit