

Trends in missional ecclesiology

Author:

 Cornelius J.P. Niemandt¹
Affiliation:
¹Department of Science of Religion and Missiology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Note:

Prof. Niemandt is a member of the mission and ethics research group of Prof Kobus Kok.

Correspondence to:

Nelus Niemandt

Email:

nelus.niemandt@up.ac.za

Postal address:

Private Bag X20, Hatfield, Pretoria 0028, South Africa

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Missional ecclesiology emerged as one of the significant trends in mission studies and ecumenical discussion in the last couple of years. What were these trends in missional ecclesiology? What kind of missional theology formed and fuelled the renewed interest in missional ecclesiology? What impact flowed from the important ecumenical events in 2010 (Edinburgh 2010 World Mission Conference, World Communion of Reformed Churches and Lausanne III)? This article explained the term 'missional church' and explored missional theology as participating in the life of the Trinity and thus mission as 'joining in with the Spirit'. It explained the relationship between ecclesiology and missiology. The trends in missional ecclesiology were tracked by focusing on an *incarnational* approach to the church; *relationality* in the community of believers; the role of the *kingdom of God*; *discernment* as the first act in mission; *imago Dei* and creativity; the *ecclesia* and *local community* and finally *mission and ethics*.

Introduction

This research focuses on the emerging contours of a missional ecclesiology that developed since the term 'missional church' came into broad use after the publication of the influential *Missional Church: A vision for the sending of the church in North America* in 1998 (Guder 1998) and the research done by the *Gospel in our Culture Network* (GOCN). The research problem can be defined as an investigation into the trends in, and emerging contours of, a new missional ecclesiology since 1998, with a particular focus on the impact of and renewed interest in missional ecclesiology that can be identified in the important ecumenical events of 2010 (Edinburgh 2010 World Mission Conference 2010, World Communion of Reformed Churches and Lausanne III). The hypothesis of this research is that important developments in missional ecclesiology can be identified in the documents and proceedings of these ecumenical events and that these developments constitute an important contribution towards the formation of a new missional ecclesiology. These discussions enhance the focus on missional ecclesiology in mission studies.

Growing interest in missional ecclesiology

Studies in missional ecclesiology emerged as one of the significant trends in mission studies in the last number of years. Ecclesiology is a theological discipline that seeks to understand and define the church, and missional ecclesiology does this from a missional point of view where the Church is understood as a community of witness, called into being and equipped by God, and sent into the world to testify to and participate in Christ's work. It is the discussion of what the church is called to be and to do – its nature, its purpose, its hopes, its structure and practices.

There is a significant resurgence in missiology and a focus on the local church and its mission (Drønen 2011:4). In this research, it is argued that the surge in academic research is the result of a number of factors. Firstly, recent developments in the area of missional theology, especially under the influence of the GOCN, and a missional Renaissance (McNeal 2009). The term missional church gained prominence in the work of the GOCN, with books such as *Missional church: A vision for the sending of the church in North America* edited by Guder (1998) and *ChurchNext* by Gibbs (2000). The works of Lesslie Newbigin, and the influential *Transforming Mission* by David Bosch (1991), played an important role in laying the groundwork for this new interest in mission. To use the words of Mancini (2008):

The idea of the missional church has single-handedly captured the imagination of church leaders of all backgrounds and denominations. Take your pick: from the boomer power pastors of suburbia to the preaching punks of 'emergia' and the collared intellectuals of 'liturgia', everyone wants to be missional. (p. 33)

Secondly, the burgeoning ecclesiology of the Emerging Church Movement – these churches being a response to a changing culture in especially the traditional northern Christian countries and Christians becoming differently religious (Jones 2008:2, 2011:125), as well as the multitude of responses to emerging churches (see Anderson [2007]; Gibbs & Bolger [2005]; Jones [2008, 2011]; McLaren [2000, 2001]). Thirdly, mainline churches in decline are challenged to re-imagine old ecclesiologies (Van Gelder 2007:16). Fourthly, add to this the explosion of new churches in the global Christian world. This changing face of Christianity and the fact that Christianity experiences a profound shift in its ethnic and linguistic composition (Johnson & Ross 2009:8), raises the issue of ecclesiology. Fifthly, major ecumenical events generated interest in missional ecclesiology. 2010 was a year of great ecumenical significance. At least three important ecumenical events define 2010, and all paid considerable attention to matters ecclesiological:

- The Centennial World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, celebrating Edinburgh 1910 from 02 to 06 June 2010 – Edinburgh 2010.
- The Uniting General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in Grand Rapids from 18 to 26 June 2010.
- The Third Lausanne Congress (Lausanne III) on World Evangelisation from 16 to 25 October 2010 – Cape Town 2010.

Although all five factors are taken into account, this research focuses particularly on the emerging contours of a missional ecclesiology that can be identified in these three ecumenical events. These contours serve as an illustration of an emerging missional ecclesiology.

Participation in the life of the Trinity

Mission begins in the heart of the Triune God and the love that binds together the Holy Trinity, overflows to all humanity and creation. The missional discourse shifted the agency of mission from the church to God (Van Gelder & Zscheile 2011:4). Mission is an extension and amplification of God's very being. Missional theology builds on the understanding that God is Trinity and missional. Mission is participation in the life of God. It is to be caught up within the dynamic sending and being sent that God the Holy Trinity has done and continues to do (Wright 2010:211). In the words of Moltmann (2010:26), the community of the church is like the Christian faith itself, a Trinitarian experience of God. The reciprocal interpenetration of the ways of activity and the living spaces of the three divine persons constitute the church's unity in its fullness. Since the missionary conference in Willingen (1952) (Bosch 1991:370), Trinitarian reflections are seen as being foundational for a proper understanding of, and action in mission. The Trinity is the determining reality of the church (Volf 1998:195), therefore we must start with the Trinity in order to understand mission.

The *missio Dei*, affirming that mission is God's sending forth, expanded during the ecumenical discussions in the

20th century to include the participation of the church in the divine mission (Balía & Kim 2010:23; Edinburgh 2010). It reframed mission from being church-centric to becoming theocentric.

This kind of theology of mission finds its basis in the creation (Wright 2010:40–48). The logic of withdrawal or self-limitation, withdrawing to send, creating to redeem, is at the heart of a theology of mission (Fensham 2010:127). Of course it is important to remember that the story of God's sending reaches its climax in the story of Jesus Christ, the one whom God sent into the world so that the world should be saved through him.

This theological focus on the mission of God, God as the agent of mission and the church's participation in the *missio Dei*, is a common theme in recent ecumenical events. This is, for example, echoed in the Edinburgh 2010 *Common Call*, where the church is described as a sign and symbol of the reign of God, called 'to witness to Christ today by sharing in God's mission of love through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit' (Edinburgh 2010:1). The report of group 1 at Edinburgh 2010, 'Foundations for mission' states: 'The central foundation for mission is the nature of the triune God, and how God works in the world' (Kim & Anderson 2011:119). Lausanne III says that the mission of God flows from the love of God: 'World evangelization is the outflow of God's love to us and through us' (Lausanne III 2011:5). The WCRC concludes with the remark that the WCRC is sent into the world by God to love and serve the Lord, 'called to communion and committed to justice' (World Communion of Reformed Churches 2010a). A Trinitarian approach is explicitly stated in the report of the section on 'Spiritual and Worship renewal':

Blessed are the people of God who are deeply aware that they are both called by and address the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who gathers, protects and cares for the church through Word and Spirit ... (WCRC 2010b:141)

The section report on 'Mission' (WCRC 2010b:163–164) defines the theological basis of mission in terms of God's mission – God's mission is God's purpose in Christ to renew the whole of creation. It is a dynamic process whereby God's people are called to participate in God's mission.

Joining in with the Spirit

One of the important arguments in this research is that life in the Holy Spirit is the essence of mission. The Holy Spirit is the 'agent' of Trinitarian mission and the era of the Spirit is the era of the church (Bosch 1991:517). Mission is joining in with the Spirit or, in the words of Archbishop Rowan Williams 'finding out where the Holy Spirit is at work and joining in' (Kim 2009:1). The Spirit is transforming God's creation so that God's new dispensation and kingdom can continue to break through. The missional church is about congregations in this transformational field of power created by the Spirit. The church is a community created by the Spirit and derives its unique identity from this very fact, or as Volf (1998:130) puts it: '... the character of the presence of the Spirit ... [g]ive[s] to an ecclesiology its specific configuration.' The church

is the result of God's action through his Spirit and is thus dependent on the Spirit for its very existence. It is critical to see God through the Spirit as the acting subject at work in the lived lives of congregations and the church (Keifert 2009:11). Studying missional churches presupposes an expectation that the unbound nature and unpredictability of the Spirit's presence and activity associated with the Spirit, will cut across human expectations and never cease to surprise students of ecclesiology. Flett (2010:239) states that the Spirit is the power of the transition, mediation, communication and history which takes place first in the life of God Himself and then consequently in our life, in the relationship of Jesus with us.

The ecumenical events of 2010 reflect this focus on the Spirit as agent of God's mission and the growing realisation that we are living in the new age of the Spirit (Cox 2006:97). At the Edinburgh Conference (2010:1) it is stated that: 'Knowing the Holy Spirit who blows over the world at will, reconnecting creation and bringing authentic life, we are called to become communities ...' (followed by a description of aspects of this community life). Stated in the *Common Call* (Edinburgh 2010) it is also recognised that the Holy Spirit equips the church for mission by the gifts of the Spirit.

Lausanne III (2010) has a clear missional understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is described as the missionary Spirit sent by the missionary Father and the missionary Son, breathing life and power into God's missionary Church. Without the Spirit, no mission is possible.

The WCRC did not discuss the work of the Holy Spirit in a separate document and has the least developed understanding of the Holy Spirit in mission. The most evident remark was the call by the assembly to stress 'the renewal of the Holy Spirit in the church' (WCRC 2010b:19). Perhaps this serves as evidence of the need of Reformed ecumenical theology to reflect more intensively on the Holy Spirit and mission.

The reaffirmation of the importance of the Holy Spirit for mission theology in the ecumenical events is an important element in the emerging missional ecclesiology. It results from the concept of *missio Dei*, which uses a Trinitarian understanding of the divine reality.

Ecclesiology follows mission

The basis of the argument is that ecclesiology follows mission – the church *does* what it *is* and then *organises* what it *does*. The shift towards a Spirit theology – as argued in the previous paragraph – has engendered a missiological understanding of the Christian community (church) and its internal work (liturgy) and has far-reaching ecclesiological consequences (Balía & Kim 2010:25, 202). God's mission is directly related to the world and the church is an instrument privileged to participate in God's mission of redemption and the recreation of humanity and the cosmos. We must conceive an ecclesiology in the light of the social perichoretic character of God the Trinity – the church in the likeness of God (Volf 1998:129; see also Fensham 2010:131).

The *missio Dei* institutes the *missiones ecclesiae* (Bosch 1991:370, 391; Heyns 1978:374). Mission does not belong to the church, it is not something people do – it is a characteristic of the Triune God. The very character of the Trinitarian God serves as identity marker for the church, or as Wright (2006:66) puts it: 'The church's mission flows from the identity of God and his Christ.' The church does not only correspond to the unity of the Triune God, it also finds its living space in the Triune God (Moltmann 2010:26, 162). The church has come into being as a result of mission and mission characterises the whole of Christian existence. Its missional existence is visible in the fact that it is an apostolic community in active movement towards the world. The new kingdom inaugurated by Jesus Christ, the reconciling work of the living God in Christ, gives birth, through the Holy Spirit, to the missional church. The church is mission and participates in God's mission because it cannot do otherwise. This is the very reason why the church exists.

The Edinburgh study process says that the church has not always existed, but has come into being – theologically as well as empirically – as a result of mission. It is therefore impossible to separate church from mission in terms of its origin and in terms of its goal (Balía & Kim 2010:210). The history of the church is the story of the church in mission. The goal of the church is to fulfil God's missionary purpose and to be God's missionary church. Mission is central to the identity of the church because the community of believers exists as a sign of God's mission. The church is the primary locus of Christian participation in God's mission (Thompson 2011:275).

According to the Cape Town Commitment (The Lausanne Movement 2011) the Church exists to worship and glorify God for all eternity and to participate in the transforming mission of God within history.

The church is mission (Hauerwas 2010:62). In a missional ecclesiology, says Hooker (2008:1, 2), the church is not a building or an institution but a community of witnesses, called into being and equipped by God, and sent into the world to testify and participate in Christ's work.

The preamble to the Cape Town Commitment (The Lausanne Movement 2011) says:

The Church's mission goes on. The mission of God continues to the ends of the earth and to the end of the world ... the Church's participation in God's mission continues, in joyful urgency, and with fresh and exciting opportunities in every generation including our own. (p. 5)

This argument can be concluded by stating that mission is the life of the church and the church is central to mission. The church is God's people erecting signs of God's new dispensation, or modelling here and now what the world is called to be ultimately. The church is those people of God, who are called, gathered and equipped by the Spirit and sent to participate in God's mission by bringing the gospel of God's love and new life.

Incarnational – or universal and contextual

The next area that needs investigation is the relationship between church and the world. It is argued that understanding mission as life in the Trinity, and building ecclesiology on mission, leads to a change in the understanding of the relationship between church and world. A social Trinitarian understanding as a ground for a theology of participation rather than an understanding of God as single acting Subject (Moltmann 1981:139), helps to bring clarity in the understanding of the interrelatedness of God, church, and world (see Roxburgh 2011:55). In Moltmann's (2010:163) words: 'The Trinity is our social programme.' This allows for a church constituted by both its participation in the life of God and the world, a constitution necessary for mission. Such a missional-incarnational ecclesiology more often than not leads to being church in the world – the world becomes the larger horizon of God's activity (Van Gelder 2007:18). Guder (2000:81) describes the Gospel as fundamentally missionary in nature, universal in scope and translatable into a particular context. This translatability of the Gospel is understood as an incarnational process (Reppenhagen 2010:169). The church does not pass through time and context in hermetically (and hermeneutically) sealed containers but rather like yeast that takes new form and changes every culture (Sweet 2009:178).

According to Kim (2009):

The gospel is never encountered, and the Holy Spirit is never at work in human lives, except within a particular cultural setting, so the Spirit can only be discerned in and through human culture. (p.42)

In every new situation, our faith seeks to comprehend what the living God requires from us. The missional church is an incarnational movement sent to engage its context.

Sweet (2009:35) describes the church's most basic characteristics as its *operating system*, and this is missional, relational and incarnational. Being incarnational is an essential component of the missional paradigm. Incarnational entails listening to people and entering their culture. It is to be with people where they are whilst going and catching up with the Spirit. According to Sweet, the church as body of Christ:

is less an aggregate of persons than an aggregate of cultures; the body of Christ is an ark of cultural organisms, each one contributing something unique and indispensable to the body. (p. 165)

Hirsch (2006:133, 134) describes four important elements of a missional-incarnational lifestyle. It implies *Presence* – to become part of the fabric of a community and to engage in the humanity of it all. *Proximity* assumes not only presence, but also genuine availability – spontaneity as well as regularity in the communities the church inhabit. *Powerlessness* means servant hood and humility in the relationship with the world. It is a kenotic lifestyle where baptism and the Lord's Supper remind us that Christian life is shaped by the identification with the death of Christ. At the heart of incarnation is 'suffering alongside' (Sweet 2009:51). The fourth element is *proclamation*. An incarnational approach requires that we

will be willing to share the Gospel story with those within our world.

A missional-incarnational ecclesiology decentres the church from a self-centred life and makes the church sensitive towards outsiders and strangers:

Ecclesialogically, we have to be incarnational instead of attractational: Jesus's incarnational ethos results in the bringing of the presence of God into marginalised places or spaces where such presence is usually believed not to be found. (Kok & Niemandt 2009:6)

In the *Common Call*, Edinburgh (2010) reports:

Hearing the call of Jesus to make disciples of all people – poor, wealthy, marginalised, ignored, powerful, living with disability, young, and old – we are called as communities of faith to mission from everywhere to everywhere. (p. 1)

The report on 'Foundations for mission' reiterates the importance of building mission on how God works in the world (Kim & Anderson 2011:119).

The Cape Town Commitment (The Lausanne Movement 2011) echoes this approach:

We must love all that God has chosen to bless, which includes all cultures. We long to see the gospel embodied and embedded in all cultures, redeeming them from within so that they may display the glory of God and the radiant fullness of Christ. We look forward to the wealth, glory and splendour of all cultures being brought into the city of God – redeemed and purged of all sin, enriching the new creation. (p. 14)

The WCRC understands mission as the crossing of all borders that separate people from God, one another and creation. It is only by crossing borders that reconciliation through Christ becomes a reality (WCRC 2010b:164).

This argumentation leads to the observation that the 2010 ecumenical events clearly understood the importance of a missional church that seeks to shape itself in relation to the culture in which it is located or to which it is called.

Relational

Sweet (2009:99) stresses the importance that Christianity should get rid of its relational impotence: 'We must resign from the proposition business and rehire into the people business.' One of the unique contributions of Christianity is the understanding of truth as a person, not a principle. Christianity has a deep relational component, appreciating a covenant-making God who wants a relationship with us. Conversion is more than a change in direction; it is a change in connection (Sweet 2009:128). Mission is expressed in relationships.

It has already been shown that a missional ecclesiology is deeply characterised by a Trinitarian approach. This leads to a strong focus on the relational, because mission is a 'relational commitment: the engendering of a new family of faith, to be a blessing for all' (Balía & Kim 2010:21). The argument is that mission, beginning in the heart of the Triune God,

emphasises the relational nature of mission. Communion is constitutive for the divine life. Christians participate in and practice the relationality of the Triune communion. This ultimate expression of relationality (*koinonia*) and love is transmitted to the whole world not as dogmas or ethical commands, but as a communion of love.

Edinburgh 2010 describes the language of mission as a relational language (Kim & Anderson 2011:125). This inner communion of the Holy Trinity is the ultimate source of the unity of the church and the aim of God's mission: to invite every human being to experience fellowship with God and with one another according to the inner unity of the One God in three Persons in the eschatological hope of the restoration of the whole created world. The aim of God's mission is uniting all things in God as new creation so that God may be all in all (Balía & Kim 2010:208). A similar understanding is visible in the WCRC's (2010a:2) message: 'We heard and were touched by how the overflowing communal nature of God draws us into communion with God, with one another and with all creation.' The section report on 'Mission' (WCRC 2010b:164) refers to *communal mission*, because God is a communal God. The missional nature of this communion is recognised when the WCRC receives this communion for the sake of the world's transformation.

Lausanne III does not have such a strong emphasis on the relational. It describes the church as a community of grace, obedience and love in the communion of the Holy Spirit, in which the glorious attributes of God and gracious characteristics of Christ are reflected and God's multi-coloured wisdom is displayed (The Lausanne Movement 2011).

Koinonia is an integrating concept in terms of the identity of the church. For Brouwer (2009:70), the relational focus on *koinonia* is the most important entry point in the formulation of ecclesiology. The church and all its functions (proclamation, service and celebration) are the result of its relational nature. The church is a community that participates in something bigger than its components and the relations between its members (Brouwer 2009:11) – the church participates in a relational reality. An investigation of the emerging contours of a missional ecclesiology in the ecumenical movements has shown a deep appreciation for the *koinonial* nature of the church. Mission proceeding from the Trinitarian God emphasises the relational nature of mission.

The Kingdom of God

Moltmann (2010:7) has stated that the future of Christianity is the church and that the future of the church is the kingdom of God. He begins his chapter, 'The Rebirth of the Church', with the premise that the church is a 'community with a universal mission and an all-embracing hope for the kingdom of God as the future of the world' (Moltmann 2010:17). The understanding of mission as *missio Dei* has led to an appreciation of the present and eschatological kingdom of God reflecting God's missional praxis (Hendriks 2004:32;

Van Gelder & Zscheile 2011:4), distinct from but overlapping with the church (Balía & Kim 2010:26). This is embedded in a particular understanding of the Trinity, as Moltmann has indicated. He identifies in the biblical narrative a God who exists in an unmistakably open fellowship whose substantial unity is the reign of God. The kingdom of God:

does not merely run its course on earth – which is to say outside God himself – as dogmatic tradition since Augustine has maintained. On the contrary, it takes place in its earthly mode within the Trinity itself, as the history of the kingdom of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. (Moltmann 1981:95)

The coming kingdom is a present reality with the expectation of the future completion of God's redemptive work. The church is the community through which the kingdom is concretely manifested in history. The church's primary mission as citizens of God's kingdom, is to live as citizens of God's kingdom, thereby making visible in their own bodies the body of Christ (Stone 2010:112). The calling of the Church is to be a community of witness to and participation in God's future – here and now!

This kingdom is described as God's *shalom*. McKnight (2010:loc 402) says that by kingdom, Jesus means God's 'dream society' on earth, spreading out from the land of Israel to encompass the whole world. One of the reports on Theme 7 at Edinburgh 2010 describes 'wholeness' and '*shalom*' for the world as the goal of mission (Kim & Anderson 2011:168): 'We must pursue wholeness for ourselves and others, for individuals, families and communities.' 'We seek a positive and healthy environment for all, challenging [*sic*] powers and authorities that do not bring *shalom*-wholeness.'

Although the church must not be equated with the kingdom, it cannot be separated from it either. The church lives and proclaims the gospel here and now and is both a sign and promise of the kingdom. The Edinburgh study on the 'Foundations of mission' describes the church as a sign and symbol of the kingdom of God (Kim & Anderson 2011:120). The church has been given a mission oriented toward the building of a new humanity in which God's plan for his creatures is accomplished (Padilla 2010:49, 202). The church is the presence of God's liberating kingdom. This liberating kingdom can be found amongst those who understand that their mission is to make peace, do good and proclaim God's salvation.

The WCRC (2010b:130), in the section report on 'Reformed identity, theology and communion', appreciates the interrelatedness of mission and kingdom: 'The gracious sovereignty of God reminds us that God lovingly claims this whole world as God's own. That recognition energises our carrying out of our calling in God's mission.'

The focus on the kingdom of God has led contemporary missiology to see mission under a Creator God as safeguarding the integrity of God's creation. A sense that God's mission encompasses the whole cosmos suggests that Christian mission includes all of God's created order

(Balia & Kim 2010:27). The *missio Dei* is the *missio Creato Dei* (Kaoma 2011:296). The Gospel is not only about salvation for problems of personal sin, but salvation of all of creation. The transformation brought by the Gospel must be demonstrated by the transformation of relationships with all people and with the ecology. It means a new lifestyle, a lifestyle where ecological justice becomes concrete and visible.

The final statements contain strongly worded commitments to ecological justice. Edinburgh 2010 states that the mission of Jesus Christ is to proclaim the kingdom of God to the world (Balia & Kim 2010:208) and calls churches to become communities of compassion and healing 'where there is a new zeal for justice, peace and the protection of the environment, and renewed liturgy reflecting the beauties of the Creator and creation' (Edinburgh 2010:1).

The WCRC expresses this in liturgical language, praying for the earth, the water and the air as they suffer from human exploitation of natural resources, and for all those who suffer from the devastating effects of climate change (WCRC 2010a). It promises to equip one another to participate in the mission of the Triune God in ways that strengthen a passion for justice, including respect for the environment (WCRC 2010a).

The new awakening of Evangelical social conscience (Padilla 2010:2) clearly influenced Lausanne III. Using the concept of *integral mission*, mission is understood in a more comprehensive sense:

Integral mission means discerning, proclaiming, and living out the Biblical truth that the gospel is God's good news, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for individual persons, and for society, and for creation. All three are broken and suffering because of sin; all three are included in the redeeming love and mission of God; all three must be part of the comprehensive mission of God's people. (The Lausanne Movement 2011:13)

Lausanne III clearly states its love for the world of God's creation. This must be done in a way that cares for the earth and all its creatures, because the earth belongs to God, and for the sake of Jesus Christ who is the creator, owner, sustainer, redeemer and heir of all creation.

In conclusion it is clear that the emerging ecclesiology understands the mission of God's people as to be a community that tends and takes care of all creation and to be a blessing to all nations of the earth. It is a theology of mission that builds on the social perichoretic character of God and that understands the creation as the very first act of mission, and leads to an ecclesiology calling for communities of integrity in relationship, combined with a radical care for creation.

Discernment as the first act in mission

The solution to faith communities' questions about how to participate in God's missional praxis is a critical, constructive dialogue or correlation between their interpretations of the

realities of the global and local context and the faith resources at their disposal. (Hendriks 2004:30)

It is a question of discernment – especially on how to keep God in the conversation (Van Gelder 2007:99). Discernment is the core practice of a missional church – seeking the presence or movement of the Triune God in relationship with all of creation. The church is a creation of the Spirit that participates in God's mission. It can only do so if the church is led by the Spirit – therefore the first act in mission is to discern the Spirit so as to understand how God is at work in the church and how God is leading the church in mission and ministry towards his preferred future (Kim 2009:40–66; Van Gelder 2007:107). It is textual and contextual exegesis, where a congregation discerns what God is doing in, through and amongst all the movements of change in which a congregation finds itself (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:24).

Van Gelder (2007:108) and Sweet (2009:70) underline the importance of discernment as a communal activity, because the Spirit is present in the midst of the congregation. According to Heitink (2007:158), acknowledging the work of the Spirit is to acknowledge the importance of participation. Vol's (1998:140, 141) ecclesiology can also be described as a participatory ecclesiology with a concrete theology of the laity. Participation means shared discernment.

The WCRC's reference to the 'sharing of wisdom', captures an important element of the missional practise of discernment:

To share wisdom is to knit together the sinews of Christ's body, the church. Sharing wisdom is, thus, a central practice for global Christian fellowships, like the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). When the wisdom that is shared is a faithful echo and appropriation of scriptural wisdom, a faithful testimony to the Word and 'Wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1.24), then this sharing of wisdom can be a sign of Pentecost, not Babel – a gift of the Holy Spirit, 'the Spirit of wisdom'. (WCRC 2010b:139)

Lausanne III recognises the important role of the Spirit in discernment. The Cape Town Commitment (The Lausanne Movement 2011) describes integral mission as:

discerning, proclaiming, and living out, the biblical truth that the gospel is God's good news, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for individual persons, and for society, and for creation. (p. 13)

The report on 'Foundations for mission' at Edinburgh (Kim & Anderson 2011) emphasises the importance of discernment of God's work through the Holy Spirit and in history:

Discerning foundations for mission requires listening to the voice of God amidst the clamour for life and justice, to the church, and to particular contexts using the tools of Scripture, and to spirituality and sources of the Christian tradition. (p. 126)

It can be argued that the ecumenical discussions acknowledge discernment as the core practice of a missional church. Missional congregations practice communal discernment as an integral part of their socially embodied participation in the Triune God's unfolding eschatological purposes and ongoing creative work in the world.

Creativity

The recognition of discernment leads to a new appreciation of creativity in mission. Mission is a multifaceted ministry where theory alone will not help. Discernment is the first act in mission. It is seeking the movement of the Triune God in relationship with all of creation. This kind of discernment is a communion imagination that participates in the movement of the Spirit in the world (Swart 2008:115). Communion imagination is closely associated with *poiesis* – imaginative creation and beauty (Bosch 1991:431). Fensham (2010:126) made a case for a 'generous and creative imagination that roots mission in the generosity of a self-limiting God – a kenotic God – appearing already in the act of creation.' A lack of creativity indicates a reduced (and probably a reductionist) understanding of God that underestimates the unbound nature and unpredictability of the Spirit's presence. Drane's (2010:160) description of innovation and creativity found in the Fresh Expressions initiative of the Church of England, is an excellent illustration of the importance of creativity – 'it is creating spaces for the invitation to follow Jesus to be heard in new ways and empowering converts to identify resources that will sustain discipleship in the emerging culture.'

Lausanne III includes a whole section on 'Truth and the arts in mission'. It states:

We possess the gift of creativity because we bear the image of God. Art in its many forms is an integral part of what we do as humans and can reflect something of the beauty and truth of God. (The Lausanne Movement 2011:23)

The Cape Town commitment calls artists 'truth-tellers' and sees the arts as an important way in which we can speak the truth of the gospel. The arts can serve as a hospitable environment in which we can acknowledge and come to know the neighbour and the stranger.

The most comprehensive reference to creativity and mission at Edinburgh 2010 is found in the report of the group on 'Youth envisioning ecumenical mission' (Koshy 2011:266–267). The report finds the basis for creativity as a vital dimension of human existence in the *imago Dei*. The church must unfold the possibilities of mission in creative ways. 'Today's youth thus envisions such a Church where they can dare dream creatively and these creative dreams are transformed into actions' (Koshy 2011:266). It is only by way of such a new approach and creative style that unusual, imaginative responses will grow. Postmodernity, with its emphasis upon aesthetics more than ethics (Kim & Anderson 2011:302), challenges us to provide space for the aesthetical and the experiential.

In conclusion – creativity and imagination is closely linked to the work of the Spirit. The 'liberation of the Spirit' in this 'age of the Spirit' might just enable us to imagine a missional ecclesiology that transcends our traditional ideas of church. It might just enable us to imagine a missional ethic that, in the words of Cox (2006:99), help us 'to embrace the soil and the stars, the animals and the plants, along with all God's human creatures.'

Local community

The church is not just missional. The church is a missional community – that is, people who come together to live out the mission to which God has called them on earth. Salvation is a distinct form of social existence. To be saved is to become part of a new people and a new social body (Stone 2010:107). The *missio Dei* presupposes mission communities that witness to the work of God being carried out. The witness to God's work is through the people God calls and sets apart for this mission (Guder 2000:146). Reppenhagen (2010:174) draws attention to the focus on local communities in the broad sense of the word, as communities in which people can experience a full Christian environment. He reminds us that one of the major media of early Christian witness was the *ecclesia*, the gathering of saints.

The church exists first and foremost on the level of a local community. Denominational structures and church hierarchies might be important, but the missional church is a local church. The church living its life in the Trinity, and after the likeness of the Trinity (Volf 1998), cannot be something other than a social, self-giving loving community in reconciled union. The Spirit forms mission communities in local communities or spaces so that the gospel may be incarnated in particular places. McKnight (2010:loc 1510) says that God's kingdom happens when human beings are empowered by God's Spirit to do the work of God's kingdom in the shape of a new community. Church needs locality (Hauerwas 2010:55). The logic, spirituality and poetry of mission call for the building of integral relationships in community so that the church may be an intimate relational communicative communion (Fensham 2010:131–132). The local congregation is the basic unit of Christian witness and the environment in which discernment takes place (Hendriks 2004:31).

Edinburgh 2010 refers to the local church as the people of God in the local context: 'In each local context the people of God are the footprint of the Church universal' (Balía & Kim 2010:118). Thompson (2011:275–276) states that the primary locus of Christian participation in God's mission is the church and more specifically faithful communities that testify to that mission. These local communities proclaim and participate in God's mission not only in their words, but through their very lives.

The section report on 'Mission' of the WCRC states: 'The primary place for missional engagement is the local community in which Christians live' (WCRC 2010b:165).

There is no particular focus on the local church and local communities in the Cape Town Commitment of Lausanne III – perhaps because of the unique compositions of these ecumenical organisations and the significant influence of parachurch organisations.

It has been argued that the church is a missional community. People not only engage in God's mission individually,

but as a community called by God to serve God. It has been indicated that Edinburgh 2010 as well as the WCRC recognised this important trend in missional ecclesiology, although Lausanne III did not pay any attention to the issue.

Ethics and mission

The missional church is transformational. It exists for the transformation of the community that it serves, through the power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit. Therefore it is clear that ethics and mission are integrally bound together. The mission of God's people is to be a community who lives by the ethical standards of the ways of God, so that God can bring about the blessings of the nations (Wright 2010:94). The kingdom is not about an experience with God but about the society of God participating in God's mission. Mission is thus ethical at its core, for it demands lives committed to obedience to the Lord. Wright calls this deep relation between mission, ethics and calling a missional logic. 'Ethics is the purpose of election and the basis of mission' (Wright 2010:93). God's election of his people is intended to produce a community committed to an ethical life and in doing so be a fulfilment of God's mission of blessing the nations.

There is a rediscovery of missional ethics, especially as a matter of counter cultural witness. The understanding of mission is certainly no longer limited to evangelism, or social action, but is understood as an outflow of these theological convictions of a living God who has acted in redeeming the whole creation to him. 'Missional ethics' speaks of the missionary dimensions of the life of the people of God and the ethical features of mission. This connection between mission and ethics is fundamental for how life in the Spirit is perceived.

Christopher Wright's book, *The mission of God* (2006), represents one of the significant reflections on mission and ethics, especially from a missiological hermeneutic of the Old and New Testament. His dictum is that there is no biblical mission without biblical ethics (Wright 2010:94). According to Wright, God's mission of blessing the nations is integrally related to the demands concerning righteousness and justice. There is no biblical mission without biblical ethics. God's mission calls for human response and that includes ethical dimensions (Wright 2006:358). The ethical challenge to God's people is to recognise the mission of God that is the centre point of a faithful life and to respond in ways that express participation in God's mission. In the Old Testament this ethical response is closely associated with God's election of Israel to be a community that lives according to the way of the Lord in righteousness and justice – thus an ethical life. In the New Testament, the integration of Christian ethics and Christian mission can be summarised as follows: Christians as God's covenant people are meant to be people who are a light to the world by their good lives (1 Pt); people who are learning obedience and teaching it to the nations (Mt); and people who love one another in order to show who they belong to (Jn) (Wright 2006:392).

Lausanne III (2010) acknowledges the importance of ethics in mission and describes ethical transformation as one of the important dimensions of mission. Christians must live ethically as an act of obedience to the Gospel.

The Edinburgh *Common Call* (2010) acknowledges the fact that the church will have to deal with controversial issues and reminds followers of Christ as follows:

We are challenged to witness and evangelism in such a way that we are a living demonstration of the love, righteousness and justice that God intends for the whole world. (p. 1)

The study group on mission and postmodernities discussed the proper balance between word and deed. They emphasised that the church must deepen the discussion of ethical responses to new challenges presented by postmodernity, addressing them with a prophetic voice (Kim & Anderson 2011:138). The church must discern how to proclaim the kingdom of Christ in a meaningful way in this new world.

The WCRC faced the huge ethical issues of our time in the opening report of the president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, when Clifton Kirkpatrick stated that churches face an urgent ethical challenge to build an economic system that lessens rather than increases the gap between the rich and the poor, that ends grinding poverty for billions of people, and that creates a more just and sustainable world – because it is at the heart of the gospel for our time (WCRC 2010b:67).

It has been shown that mission is always transformative and thus ethical at its core. The Spirit's transformative presence leads the missional church to embody Christ's mission in communion with Creator and creation in an ethical Kingdom-orientated life.

Conclusion

The missional church conversation and emerging missional ecclesiology present an alternative way to think about the church and an alternative hermeneutic to read the Bible and context.

Careful research into the documents and proceedings of Edinburgh 2010, the World Community of Reformed Churches and Lausanne III revealed that these events supported the renewed interest in missional ecclesiology. This missional ecclesiology begins in the heart of the Triune God, is determined by the *missio Dei* as a restatement of Trinitarian theology and focuses on God's life of communion and God's involvement in history. It aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into this communion with God's very life. The following contours of an emerging missional ecclesiology became visible: an *incarnational* approach to the church; *relationality* in the community of believers; the role of the *kingdom of God*; *discernment* as the first act in mission; *imago Dei* and creativity; the *ecclesia* and *local community* and finally *mission and ethics*.

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