

M. Nel

Identity-driven churches: Who are we and where are we going?
(Shumani Mills Communications, Tygerberg Business Park. 2015).

Biblecor, Library of Congress Control Number

ISBN: 978 0 86487 7635

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v35i2.13>

I have no hesitation in recommending this book for study by every minister, pastor, priest, bishop, denominational executives, “apostle”, and church leader in South Africa. In fact, I suggest that it become an essential tool in helping leaders develop missional churches. It is not always an easy read, but neither is it obscure, being clearly written, calling for a thoughtful and systematic study that produces a wealth of contextual biblical ideas concerning building up the local congregation in the present world. Why am I so enthusiastic in my recommendation?

The first reason is that Nel is currently extraordinary professor in Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria. He specializes in Congregational Studies, Evangelism, Youth Ministry, and Christian Education. He has acted as a consultant in developing missional congregations in over 130 congregations, mainly in South Africa, but also in other countries. From his many years of experience, this book is the result of his deep biblical and theological reflection on how to develop missional congregations. We can all learn from his experience.

Secondly, it is both very practical and yet up-to-date with the ideas, debates and empirical data that have emerged and are still emerging concerning theology, New Testament scholarship, Practical Theology, and most of all issues surrounding the building up of the local church, both in South Africa and in much of the remainder of the Christian world. Nel is clearly an evangelical who takes the Bible as his authoritative guide in all matters of doctrine and conduct. Yet he is cognisant of all the recent theological trends and is willing to learn from them and include those ideas he considers biblical and useful for his subject.

The third reason is that it gets to the heart of the missional debate. Nel’s primary theological theme is that facilitating the development of missional congregations will be achieved as they discover their identity. He approvingly quotes Zscheile: “At the heart of the missional church conversation lies a challenge: to recover and deepen the church’s Christian identity in a post-Christendom world in light of the triune God’s mission in all of creation”.¹ His major premise is that, if a congregation

1 Zscheile D.J. 2012:1.

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discovers, through going back to the scriptures under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, its God-given missional identity, then by the grace of God it will begin to become a missional congregation influencing and transforming its contextual community for the kingdom of God. Thus real church growth is not primarily caused by becoming relevant, implementing programmes, imitating so-called “successful” congregations, but by being faithful to living out the image of God as the DNA implanted by God in every congregation in the context of their environment. Thus, the title, *Identity-driven churches: Who are we and where are we going?*, is a question every church leader needs to ask him-/herself and the congregation s/he is leading.

As such, Nel covers theological perspectives on building up a missional local church. He roots his ideas in the Trinity, the kingdom of God, the *missio Dei*, the holistic perspective of the eightfold ministries of the church, biblical apostolic and servant leadership, and, of course, the church’s identity in Christ. (This list is by no means exhaustive). While he gives many practical ideas about “how-to”, his conviction is that fruits that will last for generations need to have roots that go deeply into Christ and his Word, through daily meeting Christ and the Holy Spirit, theology and doctrine which equip the local congregation so that it is transformed and influences society.

Lastly, it is my hope that some will assimilate the wonderful teaching in this book and apply it to congregations that are culturally “Black”. This leads me to my only criticism, namely that the book, while being very contextual for many congregations in South Africa, does not dialogue with many congregations influenced by the “Black” cultural milieu. Many culturally Black congregations worship, pray, are led, and operate very differently from European congregations. Then Nel’s wish will be truly fulfilled that his book will “inspire and inform local churches, pastors and other leaders to participate in God’s mission in his world, and above all find ways to participate in reformation in even the smallest local church in South Africa”.²

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2 Nel 2015:8.