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IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN CONGREGATIONS[1]

ABSTRACT

The religious identity of both worshippers and congregations is not static, due to a changing context. Do congregational members believe, belong and engage in the same way as they did previously, or is it possible to track certain changes? Two Congregational Life Surveys were conducted in 2006 and 2010 among the membership of Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) congregations. The two surveys suggest that attenders prefer a private expression of their religion in which the Bible plays an important role. They have a strong bond with the congregation, but the preferred role of the congregation is to provide in the spiritual needs of the attenders. The engagement with the community is not so important for the attenders; in fact, the majority of them are not involved in the community. They value what the congregation does in the community, but personal involvement does not receive much attention. The biggest challenge for the reformation of a religious identity for both the membership and congregations of the DRC is to be more contextual and engaged in their social environment and culture. The two surveys suggest a movement in the opposite direction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity describes who I am and who we are: both are socially formed and influenced by religion. The religious identity of both worshippers and congregations is not static; this is not possible in a fluid and transforming context (Joubert 2013:116-117). This article aims to seek changes in the formation and redefining of religious identity in reformed congregations and among their membership. "Understanding a congregation requires understanding that it is a unique gathering of people with a cultural identity all its own" (Ammerman *et al.* 1998:78). Do congregational members

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believe, belong and engage in the same way as they did previously, or is it possible to track some changes? Two Congregational Life Surveys (CLSs) were conducted in 2006 and 2010 among the membership of Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) congregations. What can be learned by analysing and comparing the results of these two surveys?

A changing virtual, socio-political and economic environment poses new and exciting challenges to congregations. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, three processes saw the development of a new society: information technology; the socio-economic restructuring of capitalism and the state, and the cultural and social movements that emerged in the Western world (Castells 2000a:694). Given the South African context, is it possible to identify certain markers, if any, in the reformation of a religious identity and the consequences thereof for congregations? The contextualization of faith practices asks for the re-evaluation of congregational life, identity and the congregation's role in the community (Brouwer 2008:59). The empirical results from these two surveys will be used to explore and rethink the identity and role of DRC congregations within the South African context.

The South African religious landscape is part of a changing world. Changes are inevitable in a dynamic and fluid world; this holds true for the South African society that moved from a racially divided society to a more open society, at least in terms of a new constitutional framework. The position and role of religion are not the same as a decade or two ago. Religious institutions are part of civil society, but they have a marginalized voice. Individual members find themselves within this context and must also redefine their own positioning.

2. THE RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF CONGREGATIONAL MEMBERS

Religion is a multidimensional phenomenon, and it is possible to identify different dimensions or facets of religion. For example, a distinction can be made between beliefs, practices (or behaviour), and affiliation (or identification) (Saroglou 2011:1321). The interaction and relationship between religion and identity is an important theme for congregations and their members. The provision of meaning and belonging are two important functions of religion and, therefore, also for the formation of people's identity. Identity helps describe who a person is, and religion is part of this defining process (Greil & Davidman 2007:549). In addition, religious identity has a social dimension; religious institutions help shape the social identity, membership and belief systems of a group (Ysseldyk *et al.* 2010:61). As a

social group, a congregation plays an important role in the formation of the religious identity of its members. Congregations create spaces for the formation and development of religious identities.

The *concept of identity* refers to a person's self-conception, social presentation and, more generally, the aspects of a person that make him/her unique, or qualitatively different from others. "As a very basic starting point, identity is the human capacity – rooted in language – to know who's who (and hence what's what)." (Jenkins 2014:6). Identity is the construction of meaning through the actions of social actors and it makes use of the materials of experience, experience that is both historical and collective and/or individual (Castells 2000b:6-7). This identifies 'me' and the 'other' not in a simplistic, but in a multidimensional manner. Identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group (Johnson *et al.* 2010:149-150). Personal and communal identity is thus best described both relationally and contextually. Identity matters, "… because it is the basic cognitive mechanism that humans use to sort out themselves and their fellows, individually and collectively" (Jenkins 2014:14). Identity is also formed within a social context.

Social identity can be regarded as part of an individual's self-image, and stems from belonging to a particular group. Social identity has three facets: cognitive (recognition of belonging to a group), evaluative (the value attached to belonging to the group), and emotional (attitudes towards insiders and outsiders) (Baker 2012:130). From a social perspective, the formation of an identity is part of a social construction process. The different roles that a person plays contribute to the development of a social and religious identity. Individuals are seeking individualized meaning and are, therefore, working with shifting and multiple identities (Greil & Davidman 2007:551-558). They are constructing their own identity as part of a personal narrative within a social environment.

In the formation of an identity, *social groups* play a significant role and, for the same reason, a congregation should play a notable role in the formation of its members' religious identities. In the formation of a social identity, it is important to find a balance between motivation for individual uniqueness and belonging to a group (Ysseldyk *et al.* 2010:62). As a belief system, religion helps individuals identify with a religious group. Consequently, religion has cognitive and emotional value for the membership of the group or congregation (Ysseldyk *et al.* 2010:68). The interaction between the members and the congregation helps construct a religious identity of both the individual and the congregation.

Religious identity formation takes place within a specific *context* and, in this regard, the congregation is part of this context. Different aspects may be identified to describe a congregational identity: it is explicit and shared; it enhances loyalty and commitment; it gives direction to action, and it provides certain boundaries. It includes values, a shared history and heritage, and is part of a congregational culture (Woolever *et al.* 2006:53). Congregational identity is contextual:

> Not only are congregations and their memberships clearly located within social structure, they are also dynamic entities within it, operating within the processes of social and system integration and differentiation (Stringer 2013:29).

The social networks, relationships and interaction within a community impact on the way in which a congregation is functioning. This makes a congregation part of the local environment. The social structure of a community lies at the heart of the congregational dynamics (Stringer 2013:34; Brouwer 2008:50). The degree of interaction between the community and the congregation affects the contextual presence of the congregation and, consequently, the formation of its members' religious identities.

Although different concepts may be used to describe the religious identity of the congregational membership, three of these concepts, namely believe, belong and engage, are relevant to this research. The element of *believing* implies specific religious beliefs and are mostly based on a cognitive meaning-making process (Saroglou 2011:1326). This element is characterized by religious ideas, beliefs, norms and symbols.

Belonging may be described as an element of bonding to a group, an emotional aspect of religion that facilitates experience and rituals. It may occur in private (prayer and meditation) or in public (worship and religious ceremonies) (Saroglou 2011:1326). Belonging includes "… authority, narratives and symbols to maintain cohesiveness and enhance a positive social identity and collective self-esteem" (Saroglou 2011:1327). Belonging to a congregation provides safety, security and stability to its members (Ysseldyk *et al.* 2010:62). Religion binds people together in cooperative communities (Graham & Haidt 2010:140), and it is important not only to scrutinise the belief system, but also to strengthen a community, in this case a congregation.

In addition, religion has the function of *engagement* and involvement in the wider community. "Religion is an important source of values of benevolence and civic engagement." (Guo *et al.* 2013:35). The community engagement or lack thereof affects the formation of the religious identity of its membership.

Measuring the above three concepts (believe, belong and engage) is complex, and there is no integrated measure of the religious dimensions available (Saroglou 2011:1334). The Church Life Survey (CLS) results will be used to describe these three concepts as indicators or markers of the religious identity of the members of DRC congregations. This will not give a comprehensive answer, because the formation of a religious identity is a dynamic and complex process.

3. THE METHODOLOGY OF THE 2006 AND 2010 CHURCH LIFE SURVEYS

The first CLS was conducted in 1991 in Australia with the aim to describe congregational life by listening to the voice of worshippers. The success of the survey caused it to be used in New Zeeland, England and the United States. In 2001, approximately 1.2 million worshippers in these four countries participated in the International Congregational Church Life Survey (see Bruce *et al.* 2006). The CLS questionnaire was used in the DRC surveys. In 2006 and 2010, a random sample of 10% was selected from the DRC congregations. The response rate was 81% in 2006 and 75% in 2010.

The aim of this article is to use the three concepts, namely believe, belong and engage, as a lens to scrutinise the data available from the two DRC surveys. The relevant questions selected from the questionnaire will be discussed at the beginning of each of the following sections. The CLSs also categorize the different questions into strengths. In this article, three strengths are selected and used as a lens: growing spiritually, participating in the congregation, and focusing on the community. The findings of the above strengths from the 2006 and 2010 surveys in the DRC are compared with the fastest growing congregations in the Presbyterian Church (USA) 2011 (Bruce *et al.* 2012). This comparison has certain limitations in terms of the contextual and ecclesiological differences between the two denominations, but it is useful as a reference point to identify certain trends by comparing the strengths.

4. BIOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE ATTENDERS

The sample population for the 2006 and 2010 surveys has the following characteristics:

• The worshippers are older: in 2006, 37% were aged over 60 and, in 2010, this increased to 40.2%. In 2010, more members were aged over 60 than members younger than 16 years.

• The majority of the members (58%) are female.

- The majority of the members (53.3%) are employed (part- and full-time).

- Education: 51.7% have a tertiary education (55% in 2006).

- Marital status: First marriage – 60.6% (2006 – 63%). Living in a committed relationship – 2.1% (2006 – 1%); this has doubled in 4 years.

- 99.2% of the members are White.

- Description of the household: Two or more adults with child/children – 44.4%; this could be described as the 'traditional' family. Single persons and couples without children comprise 37.7% of the sample population.

- Although the members' financial contributions came under pressure, those members who give more than 10% of their income increased from 2006 to 2010; the majority of the members give between 5% and 9% of their income (32.6% in 2010 and 34% in 2006).

In summary, the sample population could be described as mostly female, White, married, middle class, employed, and with a good education. The most notable change between 2006 and 2010 was the increase in single members and in those living in a committed relationship.

5. WHAT DO THE ATTENDERS BELIEVE?

The belief system of the attenders is conceptualized in terms of the following aspects:

- Private devotional activities. How often do you spend time in private devotional activities such as prayer, meditation, reading the Bible alone?

- Growth in faith. The role of the congregation, other groups or congregations and private activities are investigated with respect to the attenders' growth in faith.

- View and interpretation of the Bible as the Word of God and the role of the historical context and teachings of the Church in the interpretation of the Bible.

- Current theological approach of the attenders. Conservative or liberal?

- The relationship with God is described in terms of understanding, experience, action, and inner peace.

These aspects are used as markers to describe the belief system of the attenders in terms of this empirical research. This is not a comprehensive list, but it provides a framework to describe what the attenders believe.

Daily private devotional activities such as reading the Bible, prayer and meditation play an important role in die religious life of believers. These private devotional activities are increasingly important for attenders (Table 1).

Table 1: Private devotional activities (%)

How often do you spend time in private devotional activities such as prayer, meditation, and reading the Bible alone?	2006	2010
Daily or most days	78	81
Weekly	7	12
Occasionally	8	7

The majority of the attenders (81%) reported that they had experienced much growth in their faith over the past year (Table 2). This growth happened mostly through the activities of the congregation (40%) and their own private activities (29%). Private devotional activities are important, but the role of the congregation in the growth of the members cannot be ignored.

Table 2: Grown in faith (%)

Over the past year, how much have you grown in your faith?	2006	2010
No or some growth	20	20
Much growth, mainly through this congregation	39	40
Much growth, mainly through other groups or congregations	12	12
Much growth, mainly through my own private activities	28	29

The majority of the believers regard the Bible literally (Table 3). The second and third statements leave room for interpretation in terms of historical context and the Church's teachings/cultural context. From 2006 to 2010, the increase in terms of the second statement point to an increase in the role played by the teachings of the Church. The critical question in this regard would be: Is there room for a discernment process in the understanding of the Bible?

Table 3: View of the Bible (%)

Which statement comes closest to your view of the Bible?	2006	2010
The Bible is the Word of God, to be taken literally word-for-word	38	40
The Bible is the Word of God, to be interpreted in the light of its historical context and the Church's teachings	28	36
The Bible is the Word of God, to be interpreted in light of its historical and cultural context	29	18
The Bible is not the Word of God, or of little value	5	6

Most of the attenders are in the middle or tend to be more conservative in terms of their current opinion on theological issues (Table 4). The concepts 'conservative' and 'liberal' are not defined, and only reflect the self-understanding of the attender.

Table 4: Point of view on theological issues (%)

Which of the following terms best describes your current view on theological issues?	2010
Conservative	39
Right in the middle	42
Liberal	19

In describing their relationship with God, the attenders emphasise 'experience the presence of God' (Table 5). The second most important focus is on 'inner peace and silence before God'. This could be considered part of an individual devotional ritual.

Table 5: Relationship with God (%)

Reflecting on your relationship with God, which focus best describes this relationship?	2006	2010
Understanding God	6	9
Experience the presence of God	53	49
Witness and action in God's service	7	10
Inner peace and silence before God	34	33

The Bible plays an important role in the belief system of attenders who read it on a weekly basis, and understand it literally, probably from a more conservative perspective. The changes from 2006 to 2010 indicate a more private expression of the attenders' religious life. Belief is about a regular engagement with the Bible where the experience of God and inner peace and silence play a distinctive role. On the other hand, the role of the congregation in the growth of the faith of attenders cannot be disregarded. This is an indication not only of a vertical expression of faith, but also of the social dimension of faith.

6. HOW DO THE ATTENDERS BELONG TO THE CONGREGATION?

There is a social aspect to religion that finds expression for attenders in their relationship with the community of believers or the congregation. Belonging to the congregation is described in terms of the following aspects:

• Frequency of attendance of worship services.

• Involvement in the congregation's group activities

• Spiritual needs of the attenders are met in the congregation.

• Involvement in the decision-making process of the congregation.

• The strength of the bond between congregation and attender.

These variables give an indication of the relationship between attender and congregation and do not claim to be an exclusive list of all the variables in this regard.

In comparing the attendance patterns between 2006 and 2010, there is an increase in the attendance of monthly worship services and a slight decrease in the weekly attendance (Table 6). Over 95% of the attenders attend a worship service on a monthly basis or more.

Table 6: Worship attendance (%)

How often do you go to worship services at this congregation?	2006	2010
Less than once a month	4	4
Once to three times a month	26	31
Usually every week or more	69	65

Small group activities play an important role in the participation of members in the congregation (Table 7); over half of the members are, to some extent, involved in small group activities. This involvement remained approximately the same from 2006 to 2010.

Table 7: Group activities (%)

Are you regularly involved in any group activities here? (Mark all that apply)	2006	2010
Yes, in Sunday school	11	13
Yes, in prayer, discussion, or Bible study groups	31	29
Yes, in fellowships, clubs, or other social groups	23	24
No, we have no group activities	5	4
No, I am not regularly involved in group activities	42	42

Over 80% of the attenders agree or strongly agree that the congregation meets their spiritual needs (Table 8). There is a slight increase from 2006. The role played by the congregation cannot be ignored, but the attender's personal and spiritual needs are paramount.

Table 8: Spiritual needs (%)

Do you agree or disagree: "My spiritual needs are being met in this congregation or parish"?	2006	2010
Strongly agree	33	33
Agree	47	49
Neutral or unsure	11	11
Disagree	8	7
Strongly disagree	2	1

Over half of the worshippers do not get involved in the decision-making process of the congregation, but are also satisfied therewith (Table 9). Given the opportunity (75%), they only get occasionally (25%) involved in the decision-making process of the congregation. A critical question could be: Does this imply that it is not important to be involved in the processes or that there is no trust in the leadership of the congregation? Only 6% are not given the opportunity and are not satisfied therewith.

Table 9: Involvement in decisions (%)

Which one statement best describes your involvement in the making of important decisions in this congregation?	2006	2010
I have been given the opportunity and often participate in decision-making	19	20
I have been given the opportunity and occasionally get involved in decision-making	28	25
I have been given the opportunity, but do not usually get involved in decision-making	28	32
I have not been given an opportunity to be involved and this is fine with me	16	18
I have been given an opportunity to be involved and I am not happy about this	9	6

The majority of the worshippers (80%) report a strong bond with the congregation, and 43% report that this sense of belonging is also growing (Table 10). The growing sense of belonging is better in 2010 than in 2006.

Table 10: Sense of belonging (%)

Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation?	2006	2010
Yes, a strong sense of belonging that is growing	40	43
Yes, a strong sense - about the same as last year	30	29
Yes, but perhaps not as strong as in the past	11	11
No, but I am new here	5	4
No, and I wish I did by now	6	5
No, but I am happy as I am	5	6
Not applicable	2	2

What conclusions can be drawn on the relationship between attender and congregation? Between 2006 and 2010, the extent of the relationship between attender and congregation remained, to some extent, the same. There is a strong bond between attender and congregation, as the congregation plays an important role in the religious life of attenders. The key to understanding this relationship may be in the role that the congregation plays to meet the personal spiritual needs of the attender. If this is considered in conjunction with their private devotional life, it may

point to a more personal and private expression of religion. The involvement of attenders in the decision-making processes of congregations indicates a preference for a more passive rather than active involvement. Are attenders involved in the community, or does this trend point towards a private expression of the individual religion and the congregation's role therein?

7. ATTENDERS' ENGAGEMENT WITH THE COMMUNITY

In light of the previous section, it is thus necessary to enquire about the engagement of attenders in the local community. This can be described in terms of the following aspects:

• Activities of the congregation in order to reach out to the wider community.

• Involvement of attenders in community service or advocacy groups.

• Different activities in which attenders may be involved.

• The value placed by the attenders on outreach activities.

These aspects are only a selection to give an indication of the community engagement of attenders; it is not a comprehensive list.

Are attenders involved in activities of the congregation in the wider community? In 2010, they were more regularly involved in service/social justice/advocacy than evangelism or outreach activities if compared to the data for 2006 (Table 11). On the other hand, approximately two-thirds of the attenders are not regularly involved in these types of activities.

Table 11: Outreach activities to the community (%)

Do you regularly take part in any activities of this congregation that reach out to the wider community?	2006	2010
Yes, in evangelism or outreach activities	8	10
Yes, in community service, social justice, or advocacy activities of this congregation	22	25
No, we do not have such activities	7	7
No, I am not regularly involved	65	62

It may be that attenders are engaging with the community outside the normal activities of the congregation. Seventy-two per cent are not involved in such activities (Table 12). In 2010, more were involved in social service or charity groups than in advocacy, justice and lobbying groups. There is less involvement in more activist activities.

Table 12: Community service not connected to the congregation (%)

Are you involved in any community service, social service, or advocacy groups not connected to this congregation?	2006	2010
Yes, social service or charity groups	30	24
Yes, advocacy, justice, or lobbying groups		4
No	70	72

Where are the attenders involved in the community or what are they doing in the community? The five most reported outreach activities are, in order of preference, (Table 13):

1. Voted in the recent election.
2. Donated or prepared food for someone outside their family or congregation.
3. Donated money to a charitable organisation other than this congregation.
4. Loaned money to someone outside their family.
5. Cared for a very ill person outside their family.

Table 13: Community involvement (%)

Have you done any of the following in the past 12 months?	2006	2010
Loaned money to someone outside your family	38	41
Cared for a very ill person outside your family	28	31
Helped someone outside your family find a job	-	19
Donated or prepared food for someone outside your family or congregation	56	55
Voted in the recent (2009) election	63	73
Donated money to a charitable organization other than this congregation	52	52
Worked with others to try and solve a community problem	17	17
Contacted an elected official about a public issue	-	6
Contributed money to a political party or candidate	-	3
Spoken at a decision-making meeting of this congregation	-	5
Went on a mission or service trip	-	13

There is a tendency to value more the involvement of the congregation in the community. This increased from 41% in 2006 to 56% in 2010 (Table 14). Attenders value the congregation's emphasis on care and social justice more than reaching out to those who do not attend church.

Table 14: Activities of congregations (%)

Which of the following aspects of this congregation do you personally most value?	2006	2010
Wider community care or social justice emphasis	28	40
Reaching those who do not attend church	13	16

A few concluding remarks can be made regarding the attenders' community engagement. The most important observation is that two thirds of them are not involved in the community. Those involved consider the following to be the most important activities: to vote in an election; to donate something, or to lend money. Attenders value what congregations do in terms of community involvement, but personal involvement is not a high priority for attenders.

8. COMPARING THE THREE STRENGTHS

The three strengths (growing spiritually, participating in the congregation, and focusing on the community) help one understand and evaluate the attenders' belief, belonging and engagement.

8.1 Strength: Growing spiritually (Table 15)

There is a slight increase, for most of the aspects, from 2006 to 2010. This trend emphasises the growing importance of private devotional activities for attenders. For both 2006 and 2010, the strength scores for growing spirituality are slightly better for the DRC than for the PC (USA). A growing spirituality is important for the membership of the DRC.

Table 15: Growing spiritually

		DRC 2006	DRC 2010	PC (USA) 2011
a	Worshippers who are growing in their faith through participation in activities of their congregation	38	40	38
b	Worshippers who spend time at least a few times a week in private devotional activities	90	91	69
c	Worshippers who feel their spiritual needs are being met in their congregation	79	81	86
d	Worshippers who report Bible study and prayer groups as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation	15	13	20
e	Worshippers who report the prayer ministry of the congregation as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation	7	11	12
Strengths score: Growing spiritually		46	47	45

8.2 Strength: Participating in the congregation (Table 16)

There was an increase in the attenders' participation in the congregation from 53 to 65 in the involvement of small groups from 2006 to 2010. Therewas also an increased leadership role for the attenders. The scores for the fastest growing congregations in the PC (USA) are, in most instances, better than those of the DRC. Participation in the congregation (belonging) is not a strength, to the same extent, for the DRC as is growing spiritually.

Table 16: Participating in the congregation

		DRC 2006	DRC 2010	PC (USA) 2011
a	Worshippers who attend worship services usually every week or more than once a week	69	65	78
b	Worshippers who are involved in one or more small groups (for example, Sunday school, prayer or Bible study, discussion groups, fellowships)	53	65	68
c	Worshippers who have one or more leadership roles in the congregation (for example, board member, teacher, leading worship)	42	69	59
d	Worshippers who often participate in important decision-making in the congregation	19	20	23
e	Worshippers who regularly give 5% or more of their net income to the congregation	48	49	54
Strengths score: Participating in the congregation		46	54	57

8.3 Strength: Focusing on the community (Table 17)

In the DRC community, care as congregational emphasis and voting in the past election improved from 2006 to 2010. When comparing the DRC with the PC (USA), the former is doing better in 'community care as congregational emphasis'. The PC (USA) is more engaged in all the other aspects of focusing on the community. In the context of this study, there is a difference of 10 points between the 'focus on the community' score of the DRC and the PC (USA). This could indicate that the focus on the community is not as important for the DRC as it is for the PC (USA).

Table 17: Focusing on the community

		DRC 2006	DRC 2010	PC (USA) 2011
a	Worshippers who are involved in social service or advocacy groups through their congregation	22	25	36
b	Worshippers who are involved in social service or advocacy groups in their community	29	24	46
c	Worshippers who contribute to charitable community organizations	50	52	78
d	Worshippers who report wider community care or social justice emphasis as one of the three most valued aspects of their congregation	27	40	23
e	Worshippers who report openness to social diversity as one of three most valued aspects of their congregation	3	4	13
f	Worked with others to try and solve a community problem	16	17	25
g	Worshippers who voted in the recent (2009) election	60	73	82
Strengths score: Focusing on the community		30	34	44

9. CONCLUSIONS

The two CLSs suggest that attenders prefer to privately express their religion, in which the Bible plays an important role. An emphasis on a growing spirituality is, therefore, part of the attenders' individual and private religious identity. They have a strong bond with the congregation, but the preferred role of the congregation is to provide in their spiritual needs. Participating in the congregation is not as important as a growing spirituality. The engagement with the community is not so important for the attenders. In fact, the majority of them are not involved in the community. They value what the congregation does in the community, but they do not pay a great deal of attention to personal involvement. Some studies found that members of mainline churches are more likely to volunteer for

social change organizations and are more associated with social activism (Guo *et al.* 2013:38, 51). This does not seem to be the case for members of the DRC, because independence and autonomy are important aspects of their religious identity:

> The more that a moral community is based on ideals of interdependence rather than autonomy, we predict, the more that involvement in such communities will lead to a willingness to part with one's own time and money (Graham & Haidt 2010:146).

A predominantly private expression of religion does not hold well for the attenders' involvement in the community. What would the impact of this be on the congregational identity?

Congregational identity is shaped by the attraction and relationship between its members. They have certain shared preferences. "When its context changes, a congregation with an identity based on affinity may be unable to function effectively in those changed environmental conditions." (Nauta 2007:46). Changes in context and leadership lead to changes in congregational identity, belief, belonging and engagement, which, in turn, lead to changes in the identity of the membership and the congregation. This could be viewed as a strength, not a weakness:

> Wherever affinity is expressly understood as the basis of the congregation's own identity, it is easier to openly reflect on what faith means to those who consider themselves part of that congregation (Nauta 2007:51).

The challenge for DRC congregations, in the context of this research, is to use the bonding or affinity within a congregation to move towards greater community involvement.

The ideal may be to have an integrated or uniform identity. However, this is unlikely in an environment where contextualization and inculturation of the gospel is taking place. In this respect, Brouwer uses the concept "hybrid identity" to explain that "identity needs to be negotiated and constructed out of the different parts and those fragments of culture that are still available" (Brouwer 2008:59). Religious identity is, therefore, always under construction and in the process of formation. The concept of *koinonia* challenges the congregation to develop an inclusive identity that includes and benefits the social and cultural environment (Brouwer 2008:60). A missional preference and inclusive understanding of *koinonia* could help congregations develop a new identity. However, is this possible?

The development of this new congregational identity should be understood in relation with the local community and its social structure.

Secularization may be understood in terms of declining attendances as a result of declining beliefs, but Stringer's (2013:34) research suggests that it could also be a consequence of the fracture of many urban and rural communities – and thus the end of the social network sets upon which congregational memberships are built. The South African context suggests that the local communities are, to a great extent, fractured due to the apartheid past and the formation of communities and congregations along ethnic and racial lines.

Punt (2009:268) suggests that the biggest challenge for congregations is to be contextual in the formation of a relevant congregational identity. He explains the role of the New Testament texts in this regard:

> An appeal to Paul but also to other New Testament documents in favour of a Christian identity devoid of racial or ethnic strains has long been part of the socio-political claim of Christian churches regarding a universal identity reaching beyond racism and ethnicity.

This "universal identity" or a-contextual position leads to the avoidance of societal challenges such as racism and xenophobia. This is the danger of a privatized religious identity:

> In the end, and given such considerations about past biblical and current racial stereotyping, it is perhaps not so difficult to understand the troubling paradox that the vast majority of South Africans actively engaging in recent (and current) racist practices and xenophobic attacks, just as readily lay claim to a Christian identity with a strong and avid biblically-based faith (Punt 2009:269).

The biggest challenge for the reformation of a religious identity for both the membership and the congregations of the DRC is to be more contextual and engaged in their social environment and culture. The two CLSs suggest a movement in the opposite direction.

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