

J. Meyer

Prof. J. Meyer, Department
Practical and Missional
Theology, University of the Free
State, South Africa.
E-mail: Meyerj1@ufs.ac.za
ORCID: [https://orcid.org/
0000-0002-6363-5332](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6363-5332)

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.38140/
at.v44i1.8304](https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v44i1.8304)

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2024
44(1):3-12

Date received:
6 June 2024

Date published:
28 June 2024

Interview with Prof. Julian Müller: Reflections on a career in Practical Theology



1. INTRODUCTION

Emeritus Prof. Julian Müller is a distinguished practical and pastoral theological scholar celebrated for his contributions to interdisciplinary and postfoundational studies, a narrative approach towards pastoral theological practices, and research on pastoral care and *Ubuntu*. This interview delves into Prof. Müller's journey from ministry to academia, the evolution of his research interests, and his insights on the future of practical and pastoral theology in South Africa. Prof. Müller's reflections offer valuable perspectives on the dynamic nature of practical theology and its relevance in addressing contemporary challenges.



Published by the UFS
<http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at>

© Creative Commons
With Attribution (CC-BY)



2. INTERVIEW

Juanita Meyer (JM): If I understand correctly, you initially served as a minister in three different congregations for nearly 20 years before transitioning to academia in the 1990s. Could you share with us what prompted this transition to academia and how your extensive experience as a minister, working closely with congregants, shaped your academic persona and skills? How did your experience as a minister inform your approach to practical theology and pastoral care in academia?

Julian Müller (JM1): My ministry commenced in 1971 in Johannesburg's diverse and vibrant city centre in a congregation formally known as Johannesburg-Oos but referred to as the Irene Church. At that point, Johannesburg was the only cosmopolitan city in South Africa, consisting of congregants from various socio-economic backgrounds and differing perspectives on the Christian faith. It was both a tremendous privilege and a challenge to minister at a church in the urban centre – a stark contrast to the traditional farm setting in Nigel, where I was raised. I remember the feeling of adventure my wife and I experienced walking the streets of Hillbrow, Berea, and Joubert Park. We were simultaneously fascinated and challenged by this strange environment.

The church's diverse members ranged from wealthy retirees in high-rise suburbs, clinging to traditional Afrikaner lifestyles, to those barely surviving in the old city centre. Despite their differences, the church remained central for most. The younger generation, however, led far more liberal and secular lives. Being a multifaceted community – it was said that Johannesburg's urban centre was 20 years ahead of the rest of South Africa. For instance, upon arriving, I was oblivious to issues surrounding homosexuality. Yet, I soon discovered a thriving community nearby, with one building near Joubert Park occupied mainly by homosexual men. Surprisingly, many were eager to participate in church activities, with one young man even chairing the youth association. Through him, I initiated a Bible Study group for homosexual people. Initially well-attended, it faltered, due to my faulty interpretations. I didn't understand then that sexual orientation isn't a choice. I believed I could help them change through prayer and guidance, enabling a shift to heterosexuality. Unsurprisingly, the group dissolved after a few months.

Our second congregation, just 15 kilometres away, was a so-called "normal" neighbourhood church in a rural-like urban setting. Primrose Heuwel's residents were traditional, middle- to upper-class churchgoers who wholeheartedly welcomed our family into their community. We spent three happy years there. This initial exposure to a multicultural and multilayered community profoundly influenced my understanding of pastoral care and my decision to specialise in practical theology and, later on, pastoral therapy.

At my third and final congregation, Universiteitsoord, I served students at the University of Pretoria. Working with creative, lovable, yet challenging students was “never a dull moment”. I thoroughly enjoyed being their pastor, filled with laughter and jokes about everything and everyone. My doctoral thesis in Homiletics also stemmed from my ministerial experiences, and preaching has always been my favourite activity, especially at Universiteitsoord, where Sunday night sermons in the astonishing church building for 2,000 students were incredible. During this time, I wrote my thesis, naturally choosing homiletics as the theme.

Upon becoming a lecturer in Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria, I was offered a choice between Ecclesiastics (church organisation) or Pastoral Care. The choice was easy, as I was always more interested in people and their needs than in church as an organisation. This interest led me to the rewarding field of pastoral care and therapy, a choice undoubtedly influenced by my exposure to both suburban and student congregations, which broadened my understanding of individuals’ diverse needs and challenges within different faith communities. These experiences solidified my passion for pastoral care and my belief in tailoring theological approaches to meet the unique needs of specific contexts.

These ministerial experiences also highlighted the value of interdisciplinary collaboration. Working with individuals from diverse backgrounds and facing complex social issues, I realised that practical theology must engage with insights from other disciplines like psychology, sociology, and anthropology to address human needs and promote holistic well-being effectively.

JM: You have gained widespread recognition, both nationally and internationally, for your research publications in practical theology, interdisciplinary studies, and narrative. Your research trajectory appears to have evolved from focusing on homiletics and liturgy to pastoral care and related theories, culminating in epistemological developments concerning pastoral care, counselling, narrative, and interdisciplinary studies. Could you elaborate on the progression of your research interests and what sparked your interest in these specific niche areas?

JM1: My journey within practical theology took several enriching turns. The first was towards interdisciplinary systems thinking. Early exposure to the Humanities at a family therapy conference in Broederstroom confirmed my understanding of pastoral counselling as inherently interdisciplinary. Reading Fritjof Capra’s *The turning point* further solidified my stance, opening my eyes to systems thinking and the holistic paradigm.

The second turn was towards the metaphor of narrative, introduced through the Narrative Family Therapy movement. A deep impression was left on me after attending a workshop presented in Pretoria by Michael White, who is internationally regarded as a leader in narrative therapy. Afterwards, I was privileged to attend two additional workshops at the Therapy Centre in Evanston, Chicago, presented by Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, the authors of *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities* (1996). Engaging with the notion of narrative therapy resulted in the publication of *Om tot verhaal te kom*, a book on narrative pastoral family therapy written for the South African context, the development of both a master's course and a PhD programme with specialisation in Narrative Pastoral Therapy, and another book titled *Reisgeselskap*, translated into both Korean and English as *Companions on the journey*.

The third turn was towards the postfoundational paradigm, sparked by interactions with Prof. Wentzel van Huyssteen at Princeton Theological Seminary, with whom I became close friends. Something of this relationship was narrated in an article honouring his work in *The Wentzel van Huyssteen Festschrift*, published in *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42(2), 2021. Ultimately, this engagement led to several publications on my notion of a postfoundational practical theology, thereby deepening the linkage between postfoundational thought, narrative therapy, and theology.

The final turn was towards the theme of “*Ubuntu*”, which was a homecoming of sorts. As an emeritus professor, I was unexpectedly but pleasantly surprised by an invitation by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Pretoria to be part of a team of interdisciplinary researchers to research the theme of “*Ubuntu*” with the possibility of funding from the Templeton Foundation. I was privileged to be the only theologian on the team. This five-year project resulted in eleven master's and doctoral students publishing different perspectives on *Ubuntu*, numerous publications in academic journals, and the book *Unfolding narratives of ubuntu in Southern Africa* (Routledge, 2019).

Throughout this journey, I experienced each turn not as a departure from the previous but instead as a discovery of even more possibilities within the narrative paradigm.

JM: Metaphor plays a significant role in your epistemological ideas surrounding practical theology and pastoral care. Could you delve deeper into the origins of this interest and discuss how it has influenced the trajectory of your epistemological views over time?

JM1: My involvement with narrative therapy created an awareness of the power of metaphorical thinking in therapeutic settings. Metaphors can unlock new possibilities for those feeling stuck. Narrative therapists use

imaginative language to help clients reframe their situations. A person who has experienced trauma would, for example, often mould themselves into the position of a victim, while considering the metaphor “survivor” as a dominant metaphor instead will immediately shift the position of power, empowering, instead of removing a sense of control and agency.

My experience is that replacing ontological thinking with metaphorical thinking opens alternatives. Metaphors revolutionised my theology and biblical understanding. Instead of getting stuck in historical controversies, I could discover new meanings through a metaphorical lens. For instance, seeing resurrection as a metaphor in both biblical and ordinary life experiences reveals new life emerging from destruction and death. In this manner, metaphor transcended mere language – it became a way of thinking and knowing – an epistemology of sorts.

JM: Your publications and research extend beyond pastoral theology and care to encompass the broader field of practical theology and its intersections with related disciplines. While some scholars draw distinct boundaries between practical theological research and pastoral theological research, your work appears to blur these boundaries. How would you respond to this distinction?

JM1: I never intentionally tried to blur disciplinary boundaries, but I don't believe thinking in terms of separate categories is useful. Capra's *The turning point* helped me see connections and think more holistically. Debates about disciplinary boundaries seem pointless to me. My exposure to African thinking, especially notions around *Ubuntu*, reinforced this holistic mindset by emphasising the interconnectedness between all living beings – humans, plants, animals, and the universe. It prioritises seeing the whole over focusing on differences, seeing comparisons and similarities instead of boundaries and differences.

The result of this epistemological development is a series of articles on the unique contribution of the interplay between interdisciplinary thought and practical theology through the development of a seven-movement structure for research based on postfoundational philosophy and practical framework for doing practical theology, which includes (1) describing a specific context from a personal perspective; (2) listening to and describing in-context experiences; (3) collaboratively interpreting these experiences with “co-researchers”, (4) continually informing experiential descriptions with traditions of interpretation; (5) reflecting on God's presence/absence as understood and experienced in the situation; (6) thickening experiential descriptions through interdisciplinary investigation, based on transversal rationality, and (7) developing alternative interpretations that extend beyond the local community.

Practical theology's inherent interdisciplinary nature is demonstrated through these seven movements, while the fifth movement carves out a specific niche for the discipline by focusing on the experience of God's presence or absence. Although this phenomenon can be studied from various disciplinary perspectives, practical theology should contribute uniquely to these questions.

JM: Throughout your career, you have been involved in several major international projects, including studies on HIV/AIDS and the pastoral response to the pandemic, post- traumatic spirituality, and interdisciplinary projects on *Ubuntu*. How do these projects intersect with one another, and how have they contributed to the development of a novel perspective on practical and pastoral theology in South Africa? How do these perspectives benefit theological research and their contributions to these focus areas, in your opinion?

JM1: My understanding of the practical theologian's role is to tell and retell people's stories. We encounter stories of both joy and sorrow when we focus on people in the unique contexts of their lives. People need to tell their stories, as it's through the telling and retelling of stories through which interpretation takes place – an understanding and sense-making of their unique and diverse experiences. These diverse research projects, therefore, have in common the facilitation of the telling of life stories through reflection on individual experiences of God's presence or absence.

True practical theologians don't research phenomena in isolation. Instead, they should reflect on people's individual and unique experiences of life situations. Practical theologians similarly shouldn't reach definitive conclusions but instead facilitate questions about life, particularly from the perspective of God's presence or absence. The question isn't how contexts intersect but what stories can be told about those intersections. This process is never-ending, hence the title of our *Ubuntu* book *Unfolding narratives*. With a narrative understanding of practical theology, conclusions are elusive. Thus, the results of our research always only unfolded narratives, and new questions – like your own – have the potential to unfold even more.

The introduction of *Unfolding narratives* discusses the interplay of enthusiasm and scepticism, ultimately concluding that researchers can, at best, express both their admiration and confusion. At the end of the research project, "The meaning and value of *Ubuntu* in human and social development in Africa", we could not but agree that *Ubuntu* is indeed the *summum bonum*, but also far more than that.

Research in the social and human sciences tends to reveal the complexities of the human condition and is rarely satisfied with simple answers. This research project also travelled from enthusiasm to scepticism and back to enthusiasm. The journey started with thoughts similar to Tutu's, but I discovered that *Ubuntu* is not a fixed concept that can be taken from the past and polished for the current generation. Instead, it is a dynamic value that finds new embodiment in each new and unfolding context. Such a dynamic understanding implies that enthusiasm and scepticism are continuously and equally part of the journey. At times, enthusiasm and nostalgia reigned, while at other times, discouragement and scepticism set in. Ultimately, fictionalisation emerged as a credible way of talking and writing about this beautiful but fluent concept. By sharing stories intrinsic to the myriad research projects and developing them as fictionalised representations, we could formulate both amazement and confusion about the multilevelled notion of *Ubuntu* in the current Southern African context.

JM: As one of your students, I've been introduced to the postfoundational views of Van Huyssteen through your guidance, leading to the development of a postfoundational notion of practical theology. Could you reflect on some highlights of your engagement with Prof. Van Huyssteen and how this engagement enriched your work within practical and pastoral theology?

JM1: In an auto-ethnographic article, "Together in the world! Postfoundationalism re-discovered in *Ubuntu*" (in *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 42(2):104-109), I have reflected on the story of my relationship with Wentzel van Huyssteen. In the article, I have written as follows:

The journey started during the last quarter of 2002 when my wife and I had the opportunity to spend two months on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary. We were accommodated in Payne Hall, situated right next to the seminary house where Wentzel and Hester van Huyssteen then lived.

We were overwhelmed by the hospitality and were warmly welcomed on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary. As an international research scholar, I was received with openness and warmth. Easy access to all the facilities of the seminary was immediately arranged, and I was invited to attend meetings, lectures, and seminars. I was privileged to meet colleagues within my discipline (practical theology), but the big surprise was the opportunity to get to know the Van Huyssteens as our next-door neighbours. I was aware that Wentzel was a renowned international academic, but I also discovered him to be an approachable and humble colleague. He and Hester welcomed us with open arms as their friends, marking the start of a precious and lasting friendship.

Before that visit to Princeton, I was aware of “Wentzel van Huyssteen”, the scholar. He was, and still is, a well-known and respected South African theologian who achieved international recognition and was appointed to the prestigious James I. McCord Professor of Theology and Science position at Princeton Theological Seminary. Before this visit, I had read his book *Teologie as kritiese geloofsverantwoording*, a fresh and alternative voice in the conservative Afrikaans theological literature of the time. I already had a high regard for this famous theologian before I arrived at Princeton, though I had never met him.

At Princeton, I was exposed to Van Huyssteen’s theology. Although his writings were not specifically in practical theology, I immediately started reading his latest books, which inspired numerous discussions about post-foundationalist theology. During that time, he was invited to present the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh. It was a special time in his life, and we were fortunate to share it with him. The honour of being the first Princeton Seminary professor to deliver the Gifford Lectures was well celebrated together. His enthusiastic preparation for the lectures provided further impetus to our discussions on theology and postfoundationalism, and my interest in the meaning of the postfoundationalist paradigm for practical theology grew.

JM: Let’s discuss the relationship between student engagement and involvement and the development of relevant research in practical theology in South Africa. You are known for engaging numerous postgraduate students in your research projects and have delivered many postgraduate students in theology. How do you perceive the impact of student engagement on the development of practical theological research?

JM1: I am convinced that practical theological research cannot be conducted in a laboratory or a library. It is, in essence, the type of research that should only be undertaken within the field, within a specific local context. Therefore, I believe that students’ contributions are of utmost importance. Unfortunately, as teachers, we still have a long way to go in helping students reflect on their life stories as practical theologians. Teachers still suffer from modern linear thinking, where emphasis is placed on drawing conclusions from so-called authoritative books. They are instructed to study outdated theories and apply them without thought rather than practising the bottom-up research methods with, for example, a narrative approach to research. Students need to be empowered to take their own stories and the stories of their contexts seriously. They should spend time carefully listening to and recording these experiences and stories and only then reflect responsibly in a practical theological manner.

JM: Considering the changing landscape of practical and pastoral theology in South Africa, what do you consider to be the most significant current trends in research and practice? What insights have you gleaned from your research findings regarding the direction practical and pastoral theology should pursue in the future?

JM1: Earlier, you referred to the blurring of boundaries and the development of a multidisciplinary approach. In most cases, theological faculties have been enriched with the perspective of religious studies, which includes perspectives on interfaith and multi-religious aspects. When I entered the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria in 1990, theological studies were reserved for Dutch Reformed students only. These students were only White, Afrikaans speaking. Fortunately, the student and staff profile has changed dramatically, where different denominations engage with theological faculties in developing curricula that collaborate with multi-church and multicultural perspectives on religion, providing students with solid and comprehensive education and training.

In the past, practical theology had to fight for its place among the other theological disciplines, as it was regarded as solely an applied science. The task of the practical theologian was to apply the insights and theories of biblical and systematic disciplines to the practice of the church and the minister. Today, practical theology evolved into a scientific discipline in its own right, becoming an integral part of the theological curriculum. The starting point for theological thinking is no longer ancient texts but the contemporary context. The linear top-down way of doing theology has been replaced by a more circular and bottom-up approach. The task of the practical theologian has become to inform colleagues in other theological disciplines about the latest trends in the humanities and social sciences and inform them of ways to engage in inter- and transdisciplinary conversation. Narrative and art-based research methods are gaining ground in the humanities and social sciences, and practical theology aligns with these developments, informing other theologians about these trends and ensuring that these new paradigms are absorbed and implemented in theological thinking.

JM: In your opinion, who is the greatest practical or pastoral theologian of all time, and why?

JM1: After formulating a list of scholars whom I regard as leading figures, I reconsidered this question and concluded that it would be presumptuous to generate such a list. Practical theology, as an upcoming and growing discipline, continues to produce scholars globally who contribute immensely to the continuous evolution and renewal of the field.

JM: What would you identify as the highlight of your academic career?

JM1: A career in academia simultaneously contains highlights and, unfortunately, humiliating events, infused with several subjective paradoxical experiences, ultimately different from those of others. If I could highlight one culminating event in my career, it would be the honour and privilege of being invited by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Pretoria, Prof. Cheryl de la Rey, to present the 8th Expert Lecture as part of the University of Pretoria's Expert Series of Lectures, on 5 September 2012. Fittingly, it took place at the end of my academic career, being the first and, at that point, the only theologian to be invited to lecture in that series. The lecture was titled "(Practical) Theology: A story of doubt and imagination", later published in *Verbum et Ecclesia*. I felt incredibly honoured.