



The recovery of the prophetic voice of the church: The adoption of a 'missional church' imagination



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The social context of church members spawns different ecclesial imaginations of the nature of the church. Those different ecclesial imaginations often function within one particular church. It interacts with each other – in isolation, competition or hostility – to ultimately shape the life of that church. This article discusses the result of a historical study in which the authors dissected the primary ecclesial imaginations of members of churches in South Africa. The authors, therefore, discuss three of the ecclesial imaginations that emanated from the research, which can be observed within the sampled congregations. The authors argue that because the congregants of the churches have such 'ecclesiological imaginations', the prophetic voice of the church in South Africa has become silent. Therefore, the authors suggest that the members of the churches in South Africa should re-imagine the nature of the church in terms of the *missio Dei* if it wants to recover the prophetic voice of the church. The authors conclude that the missional church discourse provides specific conceptual tools to assist congregations to recover the prophetic voice of the church in South Africa.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article demonstrates the relationship between societal context and its influence and impact on the emergence of ecclesial imaginations. There is an interaction between the discipline of social science, humanities, theology and missiological discourses in terms of the challenge that the authors address in this article.

Keywords: missional church; theatrical ecclesiology; stokvel ecclesiology; business ecclesiology; prophetic voice; ecclesial imagination; prosperity gospel.

Introduction

The prophetic voice of the church in South Africa has often been muted because of the pervasiveness of ecclesial imaginations that is far removed from God's intention of the church. It is not only official church documents and statements that conceptualise the nature of the church but also the ecclesial imaginations of church members that need to be addressed for transformation in the church and society.

The authors argue that although the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) was addressing the concerns in the North American context, the basic tenets and discourse provide certain conceptual tools to re-imagine the nature of the church in South Africa. Therefore, they state that the South African church should be God's witness in its specific context. This notion is captured in the notion of *missio Dei*. The authors then discuss three primary ecclesial imaginations that emanated from a research project. The authors then bring these 'functional ecclesiologies' in conversation with the basic tenets of a 'missional church' to argue that if the church is not serving God's intention, it will not have a prophetic voice in South Africa.

De Gruchy (1979) provides a well-documented account of the unity of the churches against apartheid in his book, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*. It is evident not only from his account but also from the work of Allan Boesak (Black & Reformed) (1984) that the church has been engaged in fighting the apartheid system, policies and structures because the church regarded such actions (marches and protests) to be sanctioned by God. The response from the church was biblical (and in line with Christian or religious traditions), and the church became a place and space for those who were oppressed through societal structures to foster and nurture agency. The church often functioned beyond the boundaries of church buildings, in the streets, and often found amongst the 'voiceless'.

When apartheid was abolished, the church was no longer as vocal and prophetic as it was during the years of apartheid. Nonetheless, there could be myriad of reasons for this. The authors believe that this has to do with the loss of the ecclesial imagination amongst average members within the

congregation, that they are 'sent by God' (witnesses), and that this is the core and primary purpose and existence of the church. The reluctance from the average congregant was also a direct result of their perception that only the prominent 'prophetic' leaders at the time should fulfil the prophetic role. Therefore, they did not perceive and regard themselves as part of the 'prophetic' voice of the church. The congregants perceive the term 'prophetic' mostly to be an act done by selected 'prophetic' leaders to act and speak prophetically than being fundamentally a reaction, and 'ecclesial imagination' of the members in the pews of the congregation.

Smith (2002:16–17) was able to articulate this quite well in one of his observations in the township of Mamelodi. He argues that he 'converted' from an old paradigm of mission, and therefore saw mission as a fight against injustice, even if it would mean that they should move to the streets and participate in the marches against the brutal policies of apartheid. However, he had a solid sense that some church members were not comfortable with such an idea that the church's mission would also be to participate in those activities but should reserve itself to the 'salvation of souls' (Smith 2002:16–17). The idea that members in the reformed tradition do not perceive their mission as a public witness whom Smith is referring to is much more unsettling because the reformed tradition has enough historical sources within its tradition to 'imagine' the church much broader than it did (active citizenry). Smith (2002:4–21) regarded the reluctance of some lay congregation members as problematic because they did not 'imagine' themselves as part of the church that would protest openly in marches against apartheid. They did not imagine social transformation as God's mission for the church in the world. Therefore, the authors argue that the notion of 'prophetic' was mostly understood by ordinary members to be embodied through prominent and elective 'church leaders' who have been tasked with such an 'office of responsibility'. They do not imagine it as the 'being' and nature of the church irrespective of prominence, class or status. Therefore, Baron (2019:1–19) refers to a 'missional consciousness' that should also be nurtured and encouraged on the grassroots level in congregations.

Nonetheless, when the 'Boesaks' and the 'Tutus' (with reference to all the prominent 'prophetic' leaders) were no longer leading the masses, the members within the churches did not imagine themselves as agents of social transformation and to be prophets. Therefore, in the post-apartheid context, people are still calling for another 'Boesak' (a prominent prophetic leader) to stand up. Allan Boesak (2019) in a personal meeting expressed his account of the United Democratic Front (UDF). He stated that the movement was a multi-religious response against apartheid. He recalled that during apartheid it was different communities and people on the ground – who imagined themselves as agents of change – and then only invited him to come and voice those issues that they regarded as crucial and that needed to be addressed. His voice as a prophet was, therefore, indeed the voice of the people who suffered and were oppressed. It was not about

what he imagined for the community in a silo, rather what the religious communities 'imagined'. The discourse on the 'missional church' provides a framework to conceptualise the whole body of believers within the church, and the nature of the church to be 'prophetic'. Nonetheless, the emergence of Boesaks and Tutus can only be the result of the empowerment of the 'body of Christ' and the realisation of grassroots communities that they are God's change agents in the world.

However, people do not imagine themselves as such and do not imagine the church to be such, they do not arrange and structure the church as such, and therefore the church has lost its core function – being 'prophetic'. A large percentage of church members do not see 'prophetic' as a disposition of God for all members of the church but rather an extended 'function' bestowed on a selected ecclesial leader corps. The authors do not ignore the role of the distinguished 'prophets', but that the lay members are part of the prophetic voice of the church and is often not imagined by ordinary congregants.

In the meanwhile, there is an increase in the levels of corruption, violence and all forms of oppression in South Africa, while ordinary church members are spectators. The church members are waiting in the meantime for the Boesaks and Tutus that are 'feasting' from another Table (?), and members perceive themselves only as 'containers' but not as part of the 'prophetic voice'. Nevertheless, should an ordinary church member stand up and speak up, he or she is criticised by their fellow church members because he or she is not a 'Boesak' or 'Tutu'. The church of God (in terms of missional discourse) has a continuous and ongoing task to be 'prophetic' and be the 'sent ones'. Therefore, the authors would briefly discuss what the basic tenets are of being a missional church, which will be the basis to discuss the emerging and prevalent 'ecclesial imaginations' of pew church members in South Africa.

The missional church movement

In the past two decades, the discourse in theology was introduced with a missiological concept called 'missional church'.¹ This missional church 'think tank' was to explore the patterns and life of the church (though specifically in North America) and it persuaded the churches to re-imagine themselves in light of the *missio Dei*. In this article, *missio Dei* should be understood as articulated by Bosch (1991):

[M]ission is to be understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. He further stated that the classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another movement: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. (p. 390)

The term 'missional' although was first introduced by GOCN in North America, it has also found its way in the

1. See the work done by The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN), in the book edited by Darrell L. Guder in 1998 called *Missional Church: The Calling of the Vision of the Church in North America*.

Southern African context, and it has become a buzzword, as many congregations and church leaders are talking about going missional (Pillay 2015:1). McNeal (2009:xiii) states that '[t]he rise of the missional church is the single biggest development in Christianity since the Reformation'. He further points out that this is not about 'doing church-as-usual'. McNeal (2009: xiv) argues that for congregations to become missional requires three shifts: (1) from internal to external in terms of ministry focus, (2) from programme development to people development in terms of core activity and (3) from church-based to kingdom-based in terms of the leadership agenda. He asserts that this is changing the way people of God think about God and the world, about what God is doing in the world and his role. His argument demonstrates that the church has a role to play in the world, that is, to participate in what God is already doing in the world.

The missional church movement in the Southern African context

In the South African context, the 'missional' discourse has also received much attention and reflection. The South African theologians Niemandt and Pillay have provided some responses. Niemandt (2012) argues that:

[S]tudies in missional ecclesiology emerged as one of the significant trends in mission studies in the last number of years. For him, 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. (p. 1)

Pillay (2015) also emphasises that a:

[M]issional understanding of the church is not about making the church attractive, or bringing people into the church, but it is being missional and taking the church into the world to transform the world and reflect the glory of God. (p. 1)

The voices that the three South African missiologists are bringing in the continuous conversation of the missional church clearly state or compel the church to imagine itself not merely as a community that focuses on its personal business (inward looking), but rather as a community formed and equipped by God to participate in what God is doing in the world.

In the Southern African context, the missional church conversation was formally initiated by the Southern African Partnership for Missional Churches (SAPMC). This structure was initiated by 10 Dutch Reformed congregations after 6 years of the publication of *Missional Church* (ed. Guder 1998), and they had formed five clusters in South Africa and Namibia (Marais 2017:65). It should also be noted that all this happened a decade after South Africa had its first democratic election, Nelson Mandela became its first black president and the African National Congress (ANC) was banned for many years to only become the ruling party later. All this brought

about many changes – socially, politically and economically. This change that affected the whole country affected the life of the church. Hence, the church had to go through some transformation. Because of this transformation that the entire country was going through, the leaders and congregations participating in this structure knew that they needed a change in how they view the church and mission rather than a programme or activity that can keep them going (Marais 2017:66). After half a decade, a survey was conducted and the congregations that participated reported that 'they experience a new presence of God, a new focus on the work of the Holy Spirit, moving from the attractional to an incarnational model of church' (Marais 2017:67). They further reported that:

[T]he transformation in attitude that brought about a listening attitude of discernment, in listening to strangers, those in need and the community, a shift to an attitude of inclusivity, especially crossing culture boundaries, a positive attitude and openness towards change, and the ability to take the risk to welcome disruptive innovation [*were observed*].

In the following years, this ongoing conversation has already reached other denominations, such as the Evangelical Lutherans Church in Southern Africa, the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa and the (Marais 2017:68). These denominations held conferences on missional theology.

In order for one to be able to grasp the fast-growing missional movement in the Southern African context, the work of Willem Saayman also needs attention. In his book, *Being Missionary, Being Human, Veteran Missiologist*, he identifies four waves in the development of mission in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) (Saayman 2007:15–44). It was missiologists such as Nelus Niemandt, Van Der Watt and Van Niekerk who, according to Marais (2017:70), 'used this framework to describe the missional movement as a possible fifth wave in the development of mission in South Africa'. According to Marais (2017), Van Niekerk suggests that:

[S]ince the millennium there are clear signs of an emerging fifth movement – the missional movement. In contrast to the fourth wave movement, the missional movement seems to be interested in the local community. (p. 70)

Van Niekerk (2014) states:

[T]he missional approach forms part of this renewed emphasis on the church's calling in the local context which can be seen, in the broader sense, as Southern Africa. In this respect too, it is different from Saayman's Fourth Wave and must be seen as an aspect of an emerging Fifth Wave, where congregations are not primarily sending missionaries to some or other mission field, but where the congregation itself is sent to its local context, where its members live and work from day-to-day. That is a continuation of the focus on the African context of the first three waves, but it is also a paradigm shift to a new understanding of the content and character of mission. (p. 4)

Although there are various other responses on what missional church² is, the contributions of the voices above provide a

2. See Saayman (2010) in which he argued that the root meaning of the concepts missional and missionary are the same: contextually relevance.

gist of what it means for a church to be missional – it will require the church to ‘re-imagine’ itself.

In his book *Missional Leadership*, Niemandt (2019:145–146) refers to the social imaginary and language house where he states that ‘the importance of language and narrative can be explained in terms of the function of social imaginary in congregation and church life’. He argues that for Taylor ‘social imaginary is about the way people see their lives in relation to others’ (Taylor 2004:23). The way the church imagines itself at this present moment is shaped by what is happening around its context, and how it reacts to what is happening as a way of creating the meaning of fulfilling what is required of them. Niemandt elaborates that according to Scheg and Shaw (2018:274), ‘social imaginary is how a particular social system makes sense of life and values, institutions, laws, and symbols through which people imagine their social whole’. That is, in its re-imagination, the church needs to adopt models that will not hinder it from its mission. It will need to organise itself in such a way that it will discern what God is already doing in a particular context, and how it ought to respond to what God is already doing. Whatever imaginary concept it adopts, it should not be the one that mutes the prophetic voice of the church. The authors will now provide a more elaborative discussion on the notion of ‘missional church’.

The basic tenets of being a missional church

The contributions of Pillay (2015) and McNeal (2009) as well as the work done by GOCN (1998) are important. It is through a close reading of the proponents of the movement and their contributions that the current authors present in this section three basic tenets that the missional church movement underlines. It requires firstly to ‘re-imagine the church, then to re-structure the church to reflect a ‘missional’ identity, and as an outflow of these two, the church would be ‘prophetic’ in nature. The authors would discuss this in relation to the South African context.

‘Missional’ as an imaginative response

During the early church, and all subsequent periods of the existence and history of the institutional church, there has been particular understanding regarding the nature of the church. In South Africa, churches have adopted their church dogma; whether it is a Reformed, Pentecostal or Catholic church, there are clear positions taken with various traditions on the nature of the church in the world. Ordinary members will find such positions not only embodied within the praxis of the church, but also articulated within its constitution, polity and official church statements.

Nowadays one will also find it displayed on a banner with the mission and vision statements, as one would enter a building of a congregation in South Africa. There is also currently the emergence of social media profiles of the churches and congregations, where the vision and mission statements of the churches are articulated. Therefore, it is not

always needed to visit a church physically to solicit information about the church and the mission and vision of the church. Nonetheless, it does not ensure that the members of the congregation itself adopt the positions taken by the official bodies and leaders of the churches and denominations to which they belong.

Although the authors argue that the official documents of churches are important and display how the church understands itself to be, they also argue that this does not mean that people in the benches of the church and congregations necessarily embrace it. There are at times, especially in most mainline, reformed churches, individual members who do not in terms of their ‘ecclesial imagination’ agree with the official statements of the church to which they belong. For instance, people would normally consult their constitution in search of the rules and regulations and not for the ‘pre-amble’ – which would mainly deal with the understanding of the church concerning the ‘nature of the church’.

The process of re-imagining the nature of the church is not a novice phenomenon. Guder (1998:13) argue that even the New Testament church imagined itself as ‘the body of Christ, the household of God, and the temple of the Spirit’. During the Constantine and Christendom ecclesial periods, the church was imagined as primarily an institute of salvation, and outside the church salvation is not possible. For instance, the Catholic Church focused on the ordained ministry, where the clergy were the only ones responsible for the discharge of the means of salvation (sacraments). Luther, Calvin and other Reformers ‘re-imagined’ the church. Luther posited the ‘priesthood of all believers’ and Calvin argued that forgiveness and sanctification are intertwined with our public witness (ed. Guder 1998:71).

The Gospel and Our Culture Network argues that for them (in North America) it was also important that the church should continuously re-imagine itself. When we reflect on the South African context, the church has gone through a ‘re-imagining’ process to perceive itself differently in the various milieu (apartheid and post-apartheid). Although much has been made of in the GOCN about context and localities, much is also made of the fact that contexts also change and are fluid, and therefore the church and congregations must go through a process of ‘re-imagination’ on a continuous basis. The church is to be understood as ‘incarnate’ (Bosch 1991:456).

In certain churches in South Africa, there has been a formal process of ‘re-imagining’. For instance, the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (URCSA), which as part of the Dutch Reformed Church family only imagines itself to be reformed, has quite recently started the process of imagining itself to be an African and a black church. Guder (1998:12) assert that ‘[n]either the church nor its interpretive doctrine may be static’. An example includes the URCSA, one of the Reformed churches. This church had a meeting in Pretoria

during 25–26 June 1996 where it imagined itself to be missional and committed to the biblical demands of love, reconciliation, justice, and peace’.

Guder (2015:17) argues that ‘[o]ur ecclesiologies of institutional maintenance and the tending of savedness are not adequate to the task that faces us now’. He (Guder 2015:74) further argues that the church should not centre around itself but should act as part of the broader mission of God.

The URCSA further imagines itself to be a unified church. However, what is more salient is that the church allows for a continuous ‘re-imagining’ to take place, especially in light of the changing of the context. Although there seems to be a call for continuous renewal and re-imagination within churches like URCSA, it is not certain whether this is the perception of the average church member in the various congregations of this particular denomination or only adopted by the leaders of this church.

The members of the church often regard the church order and polity as ‘static’ and ‘an end in itself’ (ed. Guder 1998:213). The missional church discourse, therefore, questions this and calls for a re-imagination. Nevertheless, it is calling for the members to re-imagine the church not as ‘an end in itself’ or befalling in the ‘true church’ syndrome, but to imagine the church as God’s witness in the world. There seems to be a lack of re-imagination of being the church in South Africa, particularly from those that would for decades envisage the church as being preoccupied with itself. Therefore, the authors argue that for the church to become more ‘prophetic’, church members need to be encouraged to ‘re-imagine’ the nature of the church. When this will be done, the church should subsequently move to its process of re-imagination and structure itself in different shapes and forms.

‘Missional’ is reshaping and restructuring

The authors argue that the church itself has become a mission field (ed. Guder 1998:5), a context in which God is working towards equipping, shaping people towards the coming reign of God. The missional church movement calls for a radical restructuring of the congregations and churches. Guder (1998:5) argue that their (GOCN) observations and study of the congregations in North America show that things have changed in their context, and the Reformed church cannot function and operate the same way as it was doing in the past if it wants to be ‘incarnate’ and relevant for its context. This, although not on the same scale, is also repeatedly manifesting in the South African landscape and the Reformed Church’s structures are in need of re-structuring if it still wants to be contextually relevant.

Guder (1998:11) state that ‘[w]hen we shape our ecclesiology for a particular culture, we must take into consideration the historical development of other ecclesiologies’. They insist that we should be guided by the Christian church in ‘all its

cultural expressions’ (Guder 1998:11). The ‘re-imagination’ process that the missional church movement envisages requires the churches and congregations to structure themselves in such a way that it breaks away from being ‘an end in itself’ and to be a ‘maintenance’ church. The church’s praxis and worship should all be re-structured so that it would allow the church not to be inward looking. Guder (1998:229) state that ‘[t]he reign of Christ is jeopardised when any organisational structure becomes an end in itself ... this happens whenever the institution places all its energy in its maintenance’.

In order to assess if the structure of the church and its ‘missional’ nature are crucial, we at all times should have a description of the imagination of communion at the back of our minds. It would mean that congregants imagine the church to be a place (Niemandt 2019):

[T]o live, understand and describe God’s preferred future, the kind of imagination that enables a leader to tell an alternative story about the new possibilities already present where the spirit is working (p. 155).

We should then ask the following questions: is the local congregation structurally open for other ‘cultures’ and ‘ethnicities’? Is the church structured around certain few ‘prophets’ or are the pew ‘imagining’ themselves to fulfil the prophetic role? The challenge of different languages of members within churches in South Africa remains a significant challenge but could become an enriching prospect. It concerns that particular churches have not provided enough room for various cultural traditions and expressions within the local church and that the church remains in most cases ‘lifeless’ and ‘irrelevant’ for various members of the church. Although there are various charismatic and neo-Pentecostal churches that would celebrate their diversity, there seem to be clear cultural barriers that still need to be removed. The amalgamation of the churches (between previously race-based churches) towards unity should not suppress any cultural expression but allow all cultures and ethnicities to enrich the church in its mandate to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in a form that is not alien to its members. Although there seem to be clear signs of missional ‘ideas’ and expressions in the official documents of some of the churches, there often seems to be a lack of praxis, and therefore the need for re-structuring of congregations.

Nevertheless, in most cases, the churches have been strategically positioned along geographical lines that influenced the demographics of a congregation and consequently attracted certain classes, racial groups and ethnic groups in terms of its location. Guder (ed. 1998:224) states that the New Testament church also had its dynamics and context and was often in houses, kitchens, etc. Nevertheless, it is not sure how far the church in South Africa has re-imagined itself to re-structure in terms of its current ‘geographical’ positioning.

Finally, the missional church movement calls for the active participation of members in the congregations and their

contribution. Although there seems to be ample feedback on social media, in taverns, and in social clubs, where there are honest conversations, the same cannot be said of the church. It is not often possible for ordinary members to contribute meaningfully and constructively towards the 're-structuring' of the church. Various church traditions have a considerable amount of 'inclusion' symbols and narratives, but in most cases, the leadership of the church select aspects in their traditions that create further exclusion and alienation. According to Niemandt (2019:156):

[M]issional authority does not focus on the individual, but on the faith community and their collective participation in the process of faithful distinction, or to put it better 'to be a Christian is to be a disciple', and that implies participating in the mission of the church. (p. 156)

The authors conclusively argue that the re-structuring of the churches in South Africa should take place in order for the church to become missional, and at the same time become 'prophetic'. The church would be what it was intended to be, a place where God is sending the members of the church, but also where members perceive themselves as the sent people of God (Baron 2019:1–19).

'Missional' as prophetic

The authors argue that if the church members perceived themselves as being 'sent by God' (*missio Dei*) as their disposition, they would act 'prophetically' through life and worship in the church. There would be no 'gap' between what happens on Sunday in the confines of the church building and societal life. Therefore, the church would be prophetic by nature. It will be what God intended them to be naturally, without distinction between lay and clergy, as Bosch argues in his discussion as 'Mission as a ministry by the whole people of God' (Bosch 1991:467). The church is communicating God through its 'being' (nature), and its positioning as God's sent ones. This would translate into not only a humble but also a bold witness of the churches (Bosch 1991:467).

The authors wish to refer to two discourses that might provide a solution to the notion of 'prophetic' in the 21st century. Bevans and Schroeder (2004) refer to the posture of the church in the future. The interesting underlying notion of 'prophetic' is crucial for re-imagining the church in an age where the notions of 'prophetic' have also become synonymous with 'exploitation', 'self-enrichment', 'abuse', 'violence', etc. These catholic scholars (Bevans and Schroeder) would see 'prophetic' as the 'proclamation' of the gospel (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:357–360). Nevertheless, more so they annex it with the notion of dialogue (*prophetic dialogue*). Therefore, they argue that to be prophetic is about being and serving the interest of God. Secondly, it is to be in 'dialogue' – to become involved and explore, to be enriched by the context and the 'other', and to become vulnerable to the vulnerable. It is based on a kind of spirituality in which congregants and the people of God would affirm their universal and core beliefs

(constants) and also would be in communion and conversation with the changing context.

Hunsberger (2011) states:

[H]ow should we imagine the way of the church with the world? How do we? What do our ambiances, our style tend to be concerning the world of people among whom we live? Are we fearful of it, covered by it, uneasy with it, and perhaps, then socially reluctant? Or are we more testy towards it, even feisty, aggressively taking it on, and eager to urge it to do the right thing? Or are we merely cavalier about it, mixing it up socially, going with a flow? Alternatively, perhaps we are not sure just plain confused by the zigzag of voices and models out that tug us in different ways. (p. 7)

The above statement of Hunsberger shows that the church is becoming too casual in dealing with the affairs of the communities it finds itself in. This statement, although directed towards the church in North America, in fact, is the observation that one also notes about the state of affairs that the church in South Africa finds itself in. It seems as if the church is not finding itself evolving with the system in that it does not appear to seek the face of God in its worship in order to capacitate and position itself to be a true representative of Christ in the society's real-life situations; hence, one sees the church as being detached from the world and failing to take responsibility that is obliged on it.

In relation to the above discussion, we observed that the church does not re-imagine itself differently, and therefore the structure has not changed, and the church has become silent in terms of its prophetic voice. Currently, there exist many other reasons why people argue that the church exists. This makes the prophetic role that the church should be ineffective. We will, however, focus in this regard on at least three (there might be more) such notions that are evident through our analysis of newspaper reports, church's social media profiles, and face-to-face discussions and unstructured interviews with ordinary church members that provide clarity on the kind of 'ecclesial imaginations' that exist in the South African church.

Methodology

The researchers conducted a rhetorical analysis of the church's online documents, correspondences and social media profiles of the churches in the City of Tshwane (Pretoria). This also included various church services. However, the focus was on *what* and *how* the members responded to church engagements, services and activities and not necessarily the official positions and articulations of those denominations. There is an emerging trend towards online church profiles and presentations and activities in terms of church events by various church denominations. Nevertheless, social media platforms also allow for responses from its members and regular guests. The researchers, therefore, were able to analyse those comments and responses from the members and guests of those churches. They were able to dissect three fundamental 'ecclesial' imaginations.

We will briefly discuss each and how members within each category would understand the nature of the church. The data provide at least three functional ecclesiologies: (1) theatre, (2) stokvel and (3) business. We will discuss these and subsequently bring it into dialogue with the 'missional church' discourse.

A theatrical ecclesiology

South Africa has the highest rate of unemployment and inequality in the world. There are various challenges that people are faced with, which make them vulnerable to theology and a church that would entertain them. They only attend a particular church for the purpose of being entertained and a moment of euphoria. These people imagine the nature of the church as being a place where they would be motivated and encouraged. This kind of church is structured to attract people through a form of entertainment. It is often the case that the official documents do not express such a view, but the church praxis is one in which people are entertained. However, in such a church, 'discipleship' becomes an almost impossible task because as soon as individuals are convinced that they are not receiving the entertainment that they needed, they simply 'hop' around to the nearest 'theatre' (church) where their 'entertainment' needs are met. The members reduce the church to a mere entertainment site, and the church that succumbs to it structures itself in such a way that it would 'attract' and further 'retain' such members. The church is therefore imagined as a 'vendor of religious goods and services in a competitive religious marketplace' (Hunsberger 1998:5). The members that fall within this category argue that just as the theatre is a place where people go to be de-stressed, where they need a time out of the busyness of this world to relax and be given a time of their lives by receiving an entertainment, the church has become such a place for them. However, within such an 'ecclesial imagination' it is the members that would have the upper hand and dictate the liturgy and the worship as well as the structure and priorities of the church, and the leadership often find it difficult to move away from 'entertainment' to 'discipleship'. In a theatrical ecclesiology, people who have been entertained 'call the shots'. However, if members who joined the congregation do not get what they want, they will simply withhold their resources (financial and human) because they did not receive the entertainment that they anticipated. As the religious marketplace is highly competitive,³ it is only apparent that a theatre kind of church will be employed to attract as many people as possible so that a particular church will not lose its members.

A stokvel ecclesiology

There are also a considerable number of people who would mainly argue that the church is only for the group of people who have all contributed equally to the 'well-being' of the

3.A research project (Religious innovation and Competition in the City of Tshwane) conducted by the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Theology and Religion focused on the churches within the city centre of Tshwane and found that there is almost a church housed on every corner, and there exists competition amongst the churches that lead to innovation and strategies to attract and retain members in the city centre.

church – we wish to refer to this idea of the church as a 'stokvel' ecclesiology. Lukhele (1990, cited in Matuku & Kaseke 2014) defines a 'stokvel' as:

[A]n informal group savings scheme in which members voluntarily agree to contribute a fixed amount to a common pool regularly. This could be on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis. (p. 504)

Matuku and Kaseke (2014:504) note that '[s]tokvels are amongst the key poverty-alleviation strategies which have been practised for many years by the majority of black South Africans'. Members often adopt the same practice and imagine the church as a 'stokvel'.

The church that follows the pattern of a 'stokvel' is inward looking because a stokvel is a system that is used by a particular group of people for a specific purpose. In most instances, people involved in a 'stokvel' trade with money. If you are not a member of that particular 'stokvel', it will be impossible for you to withdraw (money, etc.) from the scheme because it exists for a particular group. As mentioned above, this kind of arrangement is meant for a particular group that has affiliated with a particular 'stokvel', and serves only them. It is also only those belonging to that particular 'stokvel' who will benefit at the end of the day. Triegaardt (2005:7, cited in 2014:505) observes that '[s]tokvels are an example of mutual aid arrangements designed to provide mutual assistance to the members'. Therefore, another function of a 'stokvel' is to provide aid to its members. The church that is a 'stokvel' caters to the needs and wants of its registered members. Therefore, if you are not in that *kraal*, you will not be counted as part of it. At times, even if you are a member but do not perform certain responsibilities, you will be excluded and not receive the (material) 'benefits' of that church. Hendriks (2007) warns against this when he defines what a missional church should be. He (Hendriks 2007) states:

[T]he church that is missional define [sic] all that the church is and does, as opposed to expecting the church to be the ultimate self-help group for meeting its needs and finding fulfilment in its own individual lives. (p. 106)

To imagine the church as a 'stokvel' is to imagine the church to be 'inward' looking and that it only cares for the needs of the members who have 'contributed' towards it, and often the 'contributions' are so clearly defined that when others fail in this regard they would automatically be excluded from the church. A 'stokvel' church does not care about what is happening beyond the proverbial walls of the church; it is only concerned about those who 'contribute'. Furthermore, such a church is mainly concerned with its business, and it fails to see itself as a 'part' of a body, a community that is sent to transform the world.

A business ecclesiology

It is interesting to note that various church leaders urge the church to adopt a business model. For instance, George

Barna (cited in Gulan 2005) appeals to the church to 'adopt a whole new paradigm for understanding itself, a model borrowed from the contemporary business world'. The other church leader who has adopted this mentality of a church as a centre of creating wealth is A.A Allen, 'who has turned the healing ministry into a fundraising mechanism' (Gbote & Kgatla 2014:4). According to Horn (1989, as cited in Gbote & Kgatle 2014), 'Allen view [*sic*] prosperity not as part of God's blessings to all believers, but as a charismatic gift given to him to bestow upon his followers'. Horn 1989 (cited in Gbote & Kgatle 2014:4) further stated that 'Allen announced that he had received a new anointing and a new power to lay hands on the believers who would give \$100 towards the support of his outreach and he will bestow upon each of them the power to get wealth'. This kind of teaching encourages members of the church to adopt a business mentality when they are members of a particular faith community. They are driven by this thought of being wealthy because of the condition of living they find themselves in. In their rationality, to cope with the demand of life, and to escape from the poverty condition of living, one has to follow in these teachings that the church can create wealth for committed members.

The members of congregations are also critiquing the church from the 'lens' of a business model because most of their time is spent in a business environment; it has often become the basis of critique against the structure and function of the church. Therefore, according to the members of the congregations, the church's language has become a 'business' language: it has a product to sell, a relationship with Jesus and others. Its core product is the message of salvation, and each local church is a franchise. In the business model, consumers become sovereign, they are the ones calling the shots and dictating the church, and the church has to do all in its power to appeal to the needs of the consumer. This ecclesiology aligns to the saying 'the customer is always right'. However, when they are not happy with how you service them and when their needs are not met, they move on immediately. This nature of a 'business' church aligns itself with what is understood to be the 'prosperity gospel' churches. In the business imaginary model of being a church, 'members of the church are encouraged to give beyond measure for them to prosper and move out of poverty' (Mashau & Kgatle 2019:1). The business model of being a church as related to the prosperity gospel, as Mashau and Kgatle (2017) state, is associated with the so-called *paparazzi pastors*; it is also coupled with the gullibility of poor people as many people are living in poor conditions and what they are looking for is to escape from these circumstances. When they hear any message that shows that they can be freed from their conditions, they readily participate without being critical of the practices. Mashau and Kgatle (2017:2) further state that such a church is built on the notion of 'name it and claim it'. In this case, the members are the ones who name it whilst the pastors are the ones who claim it. Although the business

model of being a church is also inward, the sad reality about it is that it only benefits a few individuals (in this case, pastors who are also considered the vision bearers). The business imaginary model of being a church relates well with what Methula (2017) states when discussing about the prosperity gospel:

[A]lthough the pastors can inspire and motivate you, the problem is that they leave you without a desire to and passion for social justice, structural transformation and overcoming the evils of capitalism. (p. 6)

When the members and church imagine themselves to be a business, it inspires and motivates their members to contribute to the church and turn a blind eye to the ills of this world. It turns its members to be loyal members of a particular congregation and turn away from the reality of this world. We cannot say that the 'ecclesial imagination' of the past during the Christendom epoch is not haunting us. Members still believe that they should come to church to receive the benefits the church provides (see Guder 2015:73). Guder (2015) states that:

[T]he ecclesiological mindset we inherit tends to define the church in terms of benefits [sacraments, baptism] to provide its members. The church is feeding into the consumerist culture of the day. (p. 73)

A missional ecclesial imagination: Recovering the prophetic voice

The three 'ecclesial imaginations' of ordinary church members are significant. It is our conviction that they are contributing to the silencing of the prophetic voice of the church. If the church does not address these and other 'ecclesial imaginations' that misrepresent the *missio Dei* within its congregations, the 'prophetic' role that the church should fulfil in the world would be compromised. The church will not be the 'prophetic voice' in a corrupted world with all other social ills. The church would also forget its calling and sentness – that the church is to be the conscience of the government and ultimately of society. It is the role of the church to empower its people not to be inward-focused, but outward-focused in participating in the mission of God by bringing about reconciliation and healing. The church that adopts the three models discussed above will focus on maintaining its integrity and character to suit the needs of its members and not necessarily take side with the poor and the marginalised (prophetic tradition). Kritzinger (2014:4) links the prophetic role of the church with the life of Jesus on earth: 'Jesus of Nazareth stood squarely in this prophetic tradition by living in solidarity with people side-lined and stigmatised by the oppressive purity system of second temple Judaism'. Subsequently, Kritzinger (2014) asks the following question:

[C]an we [church] develop liturgies that amount to carefully choreographed street theatre – and nurture in us the courage to stand publicly where God stands, while making a public and prophetic appeal to our communities in God's name? (p. 10)

Kritzinger's perspective on the prophetic role of the church provides a good explanation and missional imagination of what is expected of the church in today's world.

However, the church should imagine itself as a community that is continually sent to do God's work in the world. Even in the Southern African context, the church should recover its voice, re-imagine and align itself as a missional church. The church should be a space in which the formation of members for comprehensive missional witness takes place (Guder 2015:74–75). Church members should become better citizens, carers of the environment, economically intelligent, health-conscious and politically intelligent. The church's comprehensive witness will not be achieved through a narrow few of the church, for instance, individual salvation, but a public witness. The church should not act as an institution that has been complacent and finds glory in its own 'salvation', rather the 'salvation' of the entire cosmos.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the notion of 'prophetic voice' is closely aligned with the 'missional church' discourse and that ordinary members who have understood themselves as part of God's mission would become part of the prophetic voice of the church. This is closely aligned with the perspective of Baron (2019) that a 'missional consciousness' is needed to develop from the pews of the church. This research article focused primarily on congregation members in South Africa, and three 'ecclesial imaginations' that currently function within churches. It suggests that the churches should cultivate and encourage an 'ecclesial imagination' amongst their members that would reflect God's intention for the church, and by so doing would enhance the 'prophetic' nature of the churches in South Africa.

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