

2008

- Missional Encounter of the Gospel Engaging Cultural Edges as Agents of Adaptive Change. *Practical Theology in South Africa*. Vol 23(1).

MISSIONAL ENCOUNTER OF THE GOSPEL ENGAGING CULTURAL EDGES AS AGENTS OF ADAPTIVE CHANGE¹

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ABSTRACT

The significance of Newbigin's question on Gospel and culture has not changed the traditional church's maintenance-based ministry. The church is captured in a self-centred and self-serving methodology. This article reviews the work of Newbigin and its implications for the South African context. The proposed missional-practical theological methodology employed is functional and contextual. A critique on the church's role and identity will be developed. The church's vocation is to be missional in its calling and response. The applied case study illustrates how the church could become a contributing factor touching upon human dignity on the fringes of society. Cultural shifts manifesting themselves in today's world create a glocal culture of discontinuous change. The church finds itself in unfamiliar territory and may lack the necessary skills and knowledge to deal with these new challenges. This causes edge-issues, and the church, more often than not, is unable to deal with the accompanying challenges. The need for a re-reading of Newbigin and Bosch is of paramount importance. Three adaptive agents of change can assist in the re-intervention and innovation of the present day church. This means that churches should unlearn and relearn the missional implications for its existence and work. The need for research and experiments on how to be missional in the local church should not be underestimated.

1. INTRODUCTION

What would be involved in a missionary encounter between the Gospel and this new way of perceiving, thinking, and living what we call 'modern Western culture'?

This question posed by Newbigin² (1986) ignited numerous and ongoing discussions and research, as well as the establishment of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in Europe, North

¹ The author of this article was the director of PMCSA from 2004 until 2006.

² Newbigin and David Bosch (2005) influenced the 20th century church with missional integrity. They inspired churches to analyse their relationship with regards to glocal (global and local) cultures. After forty years in India, Newbigin returned to Britain and viewed the Western church through a different set of hermeneutical lenses. The church had become marginal to public life, and characterised the lifeless nature of the Western church, referred to as "Christendom". The historic church-state relation caused churches to serve Western culture passively, "baptizing the culture's agenda". The church lost its capacity

America and South Africa, etc. Newbigin's main objective was to refocus the question of missionary enterprises amidst modern Western culture. The problem with the pre- and post-Newbigin era is the fact that his contribution may have remained an academic and abstract exercise (Avram et al. 2006). The modern West, in retrospect, faces greater transformation in the new millennium than in the time of Newbigin twenty years ago (Roxburgh 2006). Roxburgh's view is alarming, especially in the light of the Missional Think Tank Consultation's (MTT hereafter) observation that exponents of Newbigin contributed little and even no practical application of his innovative work in the church's life and work (Avram et al. 2006) The diffusion³ of the "Newbigin-vacuum" is crucial for the "post-modern" (coinciding with the post-Apartheid) era that confronts the South African church with exceptional new and unfamiliar challenges

This article aims to re-engage in action and reflection practices on the Gospel and culture question, specifically within the African⁴ context, in the ambit of a missional-practical theological methodology that is both functional and contextual, specifically with a missional⁵ focus. We argue for a functional missional-practical theological and contextual methodology that challenges local churches to refocus and redesign their basic assumptions, views, practices in doing and being church⁶ (Dames 1998:166-193).

Two different consultations (long-term research teams) which took place on two continents will be discussed in respect of what both may have said and failed to say about the engagement of Gospel and culture. The first theme relates to the issue of Gospel and culture, while the second topic focuses on the edges of human dignity. Living at the edges defines for example

and energy to respond against Western culture (Bolger 2006). Bosch, on the African continent, lived through the Apartheid era of political turmoil and wrote his global reclaim book, *Transforming Mission*, without any acknowledgement from his own church. His work, however, could prove to be the most significant contribution and answer for the challenges of postmodern, post-colonial South Africa.

³ See Rogers and Scott (1997).

⁴ "Most of the reflections on Newbigin's contribution have basically been from "inside" the Western culture and worldview. In doing so we sadly neglected Newbigin's conviction that the 'west can only be converted', and discover its own 'syncretistic' attitudes and beliefs in dialogue with a true other. 'Ubuntu' theology and philosophy is formative and unique to the theological and cultural landscape of Southern and Sub-Saharan Africa and therefore adequate for our task to create dialogue across cultural boundaries" (Marais 2006).

⁵ The concept "missional" refers to the shift from a cultural church to a church that reflects and engages actively with its immediate community (Wepener 2003:8). "A Missional church is a church that is shaped by participating in God's mission, which is to set things right in a broken, sinful world, to redeem it, and to restore it to what God has always intended for the world. Missional churches see themselves not so much sending, as being sent. A missional congregation lets God's mission permeate everything that the congregation does – from worship to witness, to training members for discipleship. It bridges the gap between outreach and congregational life, since, in its life together, the church is to embody God's mission" (Barret 2004:x). Compare Hendriks (2004).

⁶ We do not make a distinction between practical theology and missiology/missional. This view is grounded in Bosch's (2005:492-496) theory that a "theology of mission" is in essence "missionary theology". Bosch (2005:16;370) cited Martin Kähler [1908] (1971:190) who defined mission as "the Mother of the theology". Newbigin also argued that "The Church is the mission". The theory and praxis of a practical theology is in its nature and purpose instruments of God's mission; missional practices for the edifying and equipping of the church to be missional communities called, equipped and sent into this world to bring reconciliation, peace and healing.

the dispositions and contexts of people living in and with poverty, disease, marginalization and oppression. Any theological reflection and action on issues of Gospel and culture must be concerned about human actions or lives on the periphery. The acknowledgement of and engagement with a concrete context or practice, specifically regarding the question of human lives on the fringes, is essential for any contemporary theological activity. The premise of this article is that there can be no true discussion on the subject of Gospel and culture without paying due attention to the question of human dignity on the edges⁷.

The first consultation involved a gathering of international, intergenerational missional leaders from across the world in McCall, Idaho. The objective was to reflect on Newbigin's question on the dynamic between Gospel and culture and to launch the MTT action research project for the next 10 years. Newbigin's question on Gospel and culture could form the focus theme for discussions and reflections on what its implications for intercontinental and multi-cultural contexts could be.

The second consultation, the Kampen-Stellenbosch consultation (2006), took place during August 2006 with its focus on the theme 'Human dignity at the edges of life'. The respective academia from the Netherlands and South Africa made insightful contributions, ranging from "*Covenantal Anthropology; Ethics and dignity; Respect, Protection and Promotion of Human Dignity; HIV/AIDS and Human dignity; Preaching as language of hope in a context of HIV/AIDS; and Human dignity at the edges of life: Gangsterism on the Cape Flats; to Human dignity and Moral Renewal*". The Kampen-Stellenbosch consultation focused on the core issue of humanity, with specific reference to vulnerable people's lives at the edges of society.

The consultation seemingly engaged in an 'abstract' theological reflection exercise, it succeeded however, to highlight the importance of human dignity at the fringes of society. The focus of human dignity at the fringes of society is essential for the purpose of this article, especially pertaining to the dynamic relationship between Gospel and culture. No other question could or should be of more crucial importance for the church today.

The consultations' respective contributions provide an instructive roadmap for today's church. This article's basic thesis is that the answer to the question on Gospel and culture at the edges of life/society cannot be answered by the traditional church or Christendom alone. Gospel and culture is first and foremost a (practical) theological methodological question with a functional, contextual, missional-ecumenical scope. The edges of life are basically culturally coded and embodied in and through human lives. Edges will thus be defined as cultural edges, the sum total of everything we perceive, think and do that generally relates to people and society. Cultural edges are rich educative and transformative agents for a missional-practical theology and praxis that could have a positive impact on the institutional-maintenance church, with its traditional Christendom ministry structures and practices.

⁷ Hospitality to strangers (Keifert) creates a de-centred act that motivates understanding and ubuntu "through the eyes and experiences of others" (Marais 2006).

Jesus' earthly ministry and context is a good illustration of such a missional-practical 'edge' theology and praxis. He did not come to heal the healthy, but the sick! He did not minister within the walls of the temple, but in the streets and on the fringes of society. Cultural edges can thus be described as situations of poverty; the marginalized, strangers, people living with HIV/Aids, violence, and disruptive, fragmented and island-style lives (compare Taylor 2005:1380). These edges constitute the agenda of the Kingdom of God (Matt 5; 25). Edges are thus the focus, content and praxis of missional-practical theology. Edges may instil meaning and may adapt systems within a specific cultural context. Edges may bring theological, socio-economic, political change and ongoing cultural transformation and is functional, contextual and missional. The example of Jesus' earthly ministry serves as a missional-practical challenge for the church, which is to be church at the very edges of common human life. Viewing the Kingdom through this lens can help Christendom to think out-of-the-box, from an angle, presenting a picture of the other side! A re-focus and a re-approach to the dichotomy of traditional Christendom maintenance ministry are required.

The following outline will be followed, namely 1) definitions of key concepts; 2) the Church on the edges; 3) the context; 4) cultural shifts; 5) a case study; 6) adaptive agents of change at the edges; and 7) the conclusion.

1.1. Defining the Key Concepts

The following concepts form the building blocks of this article to delineate its meaning and contribution as an innovation of tangible change in the church and world.

Missional encounter basically refers to the primary vocation of the church as being called and sent by God into a world that needs healing, reconciliation and restitution. A missional focus hints at "... being the church in, with, and under the friends, neighbours, colleagues, and strangers of people's everyday lives" (Guder 1998; Keifert 2006:18).

The concept of Gospel and culture, according to Newbiggin (1986:3-4) relates to the fact that the Gospel is a series of events that centre in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospel calls every human culture into question.

Edges, fringes or periphery are descriptive of human beings, actions and practices that do not function in the centres, but on the fringes of society, institutions and relationships, for example marginalized, HIV/Aids patients and poverty stricken people.

Culture is about everything that constitutes our perceptions, thinking and living, for example, our beliefs, values, codes of conduct, world view, rituals, ubuntu spirit, language, food, clothing and music (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:47).

Agents in this article refers to the people, practices and actions on the periphery of society, institutions and relationships and to the key role players in the church and world that are "marginalized" to a certain extent, but that have a transformative influence in the Christendom today.

Adaptive change in a culture of change does not refer to the ability to control and dictate the flow of events and its outcomes; instead, it requires skills of anticipation, creativity and revising to be adaptive in order to bring change about (Roxburgh 2005:54).

The abovementioned definitions are descriptive of the contemporary church's missional vocation to be sent and to adapt in unfamiliar glocal⁸ settings. The focus of the church is to be an agent of change in the lives of marginalized people. The cultural edges of society are beacons that can guide the church in its missional vocation to function as a transforming agent in today's world.

The next paragraphs will describe the context, different theories and practices that underpin the church's missional vocation to transform the edges.

2. THE CHURCH ON THE EDGES

The new South African democratic era brought Western cultural influence more predominantly and forcefully to the forefront. As a minister I can still recall how my audience's worldviews changed as a direct consequence of the country's transformation. As "coloured" people, most of them were previously predominantly "public people" living and worshipping as such. This scenario changed and led some of them into private and safe places. The psychological and socio-economic reasons for this shift from "being public" to "being private" should be acknowledged and the theological implications whereof should duly be noted (Newbiggin 1989:132). The growing tendency of contemporary Christians to exist in safe 'private spaces' threatens the Gospel's fabric of compassion for the vulnerable, destitute and poor. Church communities ought to mirror faithfully the Gospel and the costly identification with people in their real situations (Newbiggin 1989:154). Faith communities are hermeneutics of the Gospel, guarding against the domestication of the Gospel (Guder 2000). The Gospel ought thus to confront any human culture with the crucified Christ (Newbiggin 1968:3-4,9). "Contemporary mission is to see Jesus fleshed out in the post-modern neighbourhood. This is the Word made flesh in post-modern culture" (Taylor 2005:138-139).

Christianity should always position itself on the periphery of society and at the side of its victims (Newbiggin 1968:125).⁹ The Confession of Belhar proclaims exactly this: to stand where God stands, at the side of the sufferer, people at the edges of society. The Christian church should thus exist and function on the fringes as a public witness, engaging cultural edges with the Gospel.

3. THE CONTEXT

⁸ Refers to the concepts *local* and *global* (Dames 2007b).

⁹ Newbiggin viewed the church as a function of the apostolate that required an ecclesiological shift from the centre. The true essence of the church is at the fringes of society. Through its response of becoming a servant of God's mission it brings healing, hope and new life to the world (Green 2006).

The historic African context with regards to the Gospel and Western culture can be characterised with the concepts: 'adaptation' and 'resistance'. Many examples of uncritical adaptation into the practices (music, culture, clothes) and ideologies (individualism, democracy, capitalism, etc.) of Western culture can be observed today. Our new democracy, however, is tangible proof of the resistance of a marginalized people against a 'Western-gospel-culture' that enslaved and oppressed millions. Missionaries with a predominantly Western culture have distorted, replaced and even destroyed indigenous African cultures (Bujo & Muya 2003). The impact of this engagement is still playing out and will continue to re-shape Africa cultures. Churches in South Africa today may still be struggling with the legacy of Apartheid. Some church members are still viewing themselves as oppressed in the workplace and as a people without a significant voice (Dames 2007b). The transformative *interfaith solidarity* of diverse religious communities seemed to have dissipated (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation 2004). Churches in disadvantaged communities are still faced with poverty issues; socio-economic challenges have a major impact on civil society and the national budget of South Africa (Dames 2007a; 2007b; www.elp.org.za). The question: what has the church done to engage the Gospel and culture in South Africa, is of paramount importance today. It is therefore necessary to keep track of the current, but also the historical relationship between the Gospel and culture in South Africa (compare Smit 2007).

South African black churches' public engagement during the 1980's and 1990's challenged and transformed the previous "Christian" State and "colonial era of Christendom". The Dutch Reformed Mission Church (hereafter called the DRMC, now known as the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, (URCSA) in its response, declared a *status confessionis* stating that the theological justification of Apartheid was unbiblical (Botha & Naude 1998). The eventual Confession of Belhar was a missional and public witness that helped to transform church and society as just, reconcilable and unified entities. The Confession of Belhar publicly witnessed against an unjust system; cultivating a culture of change and may continue to be instrumental in the transformation of unjust and irreconcilable contemporary practices (like the HIV/Aids scenario) and cultures. This public missional witness, however, has lost its momentum, leaving the church in South Africa in the same disposition as Christendom worldwide ('collapsing into modernity') (compare Smit 2007). A key answer to this dilemma for the church today lies in her "being" missional and in attending to the lives and conditions of the vulnerable, less fortunate and poor on the periphery of society.

Although the URCSA's missional witness helped to transform the previous oppressive regime, it however, has lost its public stance and witness as the South African society became more democratized and secular (compare Smit 2007). This resulted in the widening of the gap between the Gospel and culture. The question whether the Belhar-witness has lost its impetus because of cultural domestication, is a pertinent challenge. If the answer is in the affirmative, then the Confession of Belhar should be contextualised in, and embodied through the lives of

its bearers (Newbigin 1989:144). The reasons for the aforementioned scenario and the continued impact of Western culture in Africa, as well as the historic-theological justification of Apartheid by the DRC can be viewed through the Newbigin (1986; 1989) hermeneutic lens. The Enlightenment (18th century) brought with it the conviction that Europeans could master scientific knowledge and world control; creating the distinctions fact/value, spiritual/material, individual/communal and private/public (Newbigin 1968:23). The consequent dichotomy between the private and the public¹⁰ world was instrumental to the development of the ideology of a fragmented African spirituality and culture (1968:132). The public world refers to the world of facts or general norms which applies to everyone. The private¹¹ world is the world of values of free choice and the pursuit of personal gain. The application of these dichotomies is the root cause of individualism today. The fragmentation of community life in Africa is a direct result of an imposed individualised worldview. The church may consequently live and worship within private cultures with “Christian-like” values, while simultaneously discriminating against people on the periphery (compare Van der Walt 2007:2). The new democratic South Africa reveals effects of the same historical dichotomy that led to social and cultural fragmentation. The impact of Western culture on the African traditional villages is a telling example. Holistic traditional African values and practices are being lost at the expense of Western economic, technology and media dominance (Bujo & Muya 2003; Bediako 1999). The intention and will of the church in Africa to encounter the Newbigin question on Gospel and culture will empower the African church to liberate itself as well as its public communities from the Western cultural influence.

The impact of the global cultural scenario will be discussed next to obtain a clearer picture of the background against which we have to read our own culture.

4. A NEW CULTURAL¹² SETTING¹³

The concept: “culture” in this article defines the shifts from the centres to the edges. Robson in Steve Taylor (2005:19) aptly depicts the situation and challenges we are faced with today:

The culture has moved under society’s feet, under the church’s foundations.

We’re in a whole new place, from the ground up and even deeper. The

¹⁰ For Newbigin the whole world is the arena of God’s creative and redemptive purposes. Christendom’s understanding of mission and a withdrawal from public life do not suffice. Our world is broken by poverty, wars, ineradicably diseases and enslaved by multinational corporations. It is thus a betrayal of the Gospel if the church should privatize and individualize its Narrative (Green 2006; Dames 2007b).

¹¹ Newbigin’s identification of the dualism between the objective (facts and public) and subjective (private and values) realms is characteristic of our lives today. “In response to this, Newbigin was clear about the claim that the Gospel has over the public as well as the private, and his contribution was for a holism that is still rarely expressed in much of theological thinking and mission today” (Menzies 2006).

¹² Most literature in practical theology clings to a static, *hermeneutic*, notion of “culture”. A more *rhetorical* view of culture, as a complicated matrix of communication that is far more fluid, is proposed. Change is less about discernible, progressive, development. It is about **rearrangement and contest** in which ideas do not appear even as they are eclipsed in certain ways (Avram 2006).

¹³ Lonergan’s description of the situation we all live in is not a crisis of faith but of culture.

There is bound to be formed a scattered left, captivated by now this, now that new development, exploring now this and now that new possibility. Manageable and diverse centres will no longer work to accommodate the old and the new, or know the next steps to be taken (Burrows 2006).

realisation must surely be that the church can no longer do church 'as business as usual'.

The shift (like tectonic plates deep under the surface) from the centre to the edges of our contemporary culture is descriptive of glocal changes (Taylor 2005:9). We are now living on the "fault lines of widespread cultural change". The role and power of traditional institutions are being questioned and limited (Taylor 2005:116). Today it seems as if the centres look out to the edges for answers, or it should at least do so (Taylor 2005:9). The same can be said of cultural changes in the new South African context. The moral dilemma the country experience is one stark reality of what can happen if traditional cultural boundaries shift from their centres to the edges (www.elp.org.za). The answers to these issues may no longer be found only between the walls of the church; they may, however, be found on the fringes of this world (Van der Walt 2007). The question must be asked whether the church really understands that it exists in a totally new world today; and that it does not know how to deal with this uncertainty? "The church is a modern institution in a postmodern world, a fact that is often widely overlooked. The church must embody the gospel within the culture of postmodernity for the Western church to survive the twenty-first century" (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:17).¹⁴

The 21st century context changes continuously and is complex in nature. Bosch (2005) describes one of the biggest changes for Christians as a shift from Christendom to Post-Christendom. The implications of this shift are big. Traditional assumptions and the focus of local congregations' ministries must adhere to this reality. The church should not change its Story (the Gospel),¹⁵ but rather the setting of its Story. Taylor illustrates cultural change with two different films about the same story of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* by Franco Ziffarelli in 1968 and Baz Luhrmann's version in 1996. The essence of the comparison is that Shakespeare's ancient text did not change. The reading and the audiences changed during two distinctly different periods. The setting in which the story was told changed, but not the ancient text itself. The 1996 version illustrates that the "post-modern" culture is characteristic of fragmentation; individual pick-and-mix lifestyles; tribalism and the ethnic edge (Taylor 2005:20-29). This is the world and the culture the church is ministering to. Its ministry should engage its audience and context in their "settings" and "ways" of living. There is thus a break between "the way things used to be" and "the way it is today".

Roxburgh's (2005) definition of the current cultural shifts as discontinuous change is helpful in this regard. Discontinuous change can be characterized as if there is no discernible pattern and a sense that 'the sky is falling'. Nothing is the same and everything around us is changing. There are few or no truth claims and we are confronted with diverse choices of what to do,

¹⁴ "Gospel and culture lie at the core of the emerging church. ... The world we live in is inviting us to find fresh ways of thinking about the relationship between gospel and culture". Jesus routinely used the common, the familiar - the cultural to help the gospel connect with those who listened to him (Taylor 2005:138).

¹⁵ The Gospel frames every structure and practice. "The Gospel can handle pluralism, provided the Gospel is located at the centre. The church, not the culture, sets the agenda, speaking from within the biblical narratives to the wider world" (Bolger 2006).

where to go and who to be! Many Christians, especially ministers, may feel that the 'sky is falling' (Roxburgh 2005:29). This picture is a telling and challenging reality for the institutionalized church today (compare Van der Walt 2007 and Smit 2007).

There is tangible proof that the edges have an immense impact in the traditional centres (church, government, institutions, etc) of our existence. Taylor declares that this impact causes firstly the growth of fundamentalism as these changes impact on traditions, religions, cultures and societies. Secondly a new exploitation is evident as the edges are being commercialized. The meaning and depth of the life of non-Western individuals and societies are being destroyed (Taylor 2005:30). Taylor's remark merits serious consideration. Any reflection and action regarding the Gospel and culture in the West should not use non-Western cultural edges as theological ethnic chic or empty symbols to legitimize its own claims. White churches in South Africa should consequently be aware of a new kind of mission-diaconate, just in order to "make things of the past right", without seeking an ecclesiology of belonging through otherness (*Ubuntu*) (Swart 2007).

Emerging Christian groups and churches are predominantly reflecting on the post-modern missional edges to create an ecclesiology of belonging through otherness (Taylor 2005:31). Emerging churches function as communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultural edges (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:44). This is where and what the church's present focus and vocation should be, in other words, being missional. Taylor's (2005:39) illustration of the innovative potential of 'missional' edges by means of two examples is informative and crucial for the contemporary church:

Firstly, the French Jesuit, Michel de Certeau, taught that the seventeenth-century mystics lived in times of cultural change while they functioned on the edges of the church. They understood edges as opportunities rather than as crisis objectives. Today's reality of cultural fragmentation provides the church with numerous opportunities of new and creative life as it emerges on the edges (Taylor 2005:35). Secondly, Israel was a community born on the margins of the desert where they received a new code (The Torah) of living. The Bible is witness to the profound missional impact this desert community had and continue to have on the contemporary church.

The emerging church of the 21 century is a new 'mystic' community born on the edges of post-modern society. The innovative value that emerging churches provide is that they challenge and even remove modern¹⁶ practices (not faith) of Christianity that are no longer culturally relevant (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:46). This innovative critique is of significance to move the church from maintenance to missional practices.¹⁷ Gibbs and Bolger's (2005:28-29) observation that the emerging church is a fragile movement and that it is threatened and marginalized by Christendom leaders calls for caution. This is due to the fact that, since the

¹⁶ Western Christianity is synonymous with a declining modern culture and has to 'dismantle' the practices and epistemology of a Gospel that was "translated for and embodied in twenty-first century Western culture" (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:28-29).

¹⁷ The Kingdom of God offers a reference point for emerging churches (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:46).

Constantine era, Christendom has aligned itself too closely to the state. The result was that the power of control and authority within the Christendom church replaced the early church's public, prophetic, emerging and even marginalized vocation and identity. The following case study illustrates the reality of this fact, but calls for due caution within Christendom not to discredit the missional intent of new missional-practical forms of being and doing church in a postmodern world.

5. A "CASE STUDY" AS AN EXAMPLE OF CHRISTENDOM'S CONTROL AND DEFAULT

The impact that Christendom has on the fringes will be illustrated. The effect that control and authority has, within Christendom, was exposed in research done by Mayhew (2006). He asked how local congregations in the early church had spent their money and the implications it had for the modern church. Mayhew researched patristic material which led to the discovery that: (1) The bulk of the revenue collected by local churches belonged by right to the poor; large percentages of what was collected by local churches were not used for maintenance and ministry. In fact, to do so would have been viewed as a misappropriation of funds. The fact is that the twenty-first century church is very rich — not necessarily my church or your church, but the global Church; (2) We live in a world where 2 billion people somehow manage to live, or die, on less than \$2 per day. It is necessary to use statistics to set the context for any contemporary conversation on the appropriate use of church finances; (3) Basic social services could be provided to all the poorest people on the planet, for \$35–\$40 billion per year. Some of the Protestant churches in Chicago receive an annual income of 75 million dollars. Less than 6 million dollars was spent outside the local congregations where the money was raised; and (4) 17 million people die every year from infectious diseases and inadequate nutrition. Priorities such as the above are difficult to justify. Biblically speaking, all people are our neighbours — and many of them are our brothers and sisters. "Our commitment to alleviate their suffering is of highest priority if we are to effectively incarnate the message we are called to proclaim. In the face of this, a re-examination of how we spend our money in the light of the Scriptures and the practice of the early church is long overdue".

Mayhew (2006) continues to say that "we should also not miss the obvious; when the Old Testament tithe was given; it was given away to others. It was given to the Levites, a tribe to which those doing the giving did not belong; in contrast, when I give to the church, it is not 'given away' at all. I am the church!" This discovery makes for a lot of critical and honest reflection and action. The saying goes that "one can do nothing without money today". This is true, especially when one looks at the challenges posed by poverty and HIV/Aids on the African continent. Mayhew makes one thing clear, namely the fact that the church is ideally positioned to engage meaningfully with poverty. Reality, however, teaches that this is mostly not the case. Christendom churches are predominantly maintenance institutions concerned with the maintenance of their church structures, ministries and ideals. This scenario directly

undermines the Biblical principle and call that the church ought to care for the poor and destitute people on the edges of society.

Julio De SantaAna's (1981:101) call emphasises this fact and lies at the root of what this article views to be the cause of the problems we are faced with today:

This implies the attempt to transform the structures which institutionalize oppression at the world level instead of helping to extend justice. We must not forget that, for the Christian, poverty and the existence of the poor in this world are a scandal, which is why the Kingdom is promised to them, to change their condition.

The transformation of contemporary church structures that may unintentionally institutionalize oppression and poverty should be sought. In the nineteen eighties the black church in South Africa played a prophetic and transformative role to put an end to theological, socio-political and economic injustices. Today it is once again called upon to transform its own practices, structures and policies that might be the root cause of recurring poverty in its own constituencies. The church ought to be the sign and foretaste of what the Kingdom of God promised – a restored, redeemed and reconciled people and world. De SantaAna (1981:102) calls for sustained change in systems across several generations which may result in the emergence of “new ways of living poverty”; which are different from the classic “renunciation of the goods of this world”. Governments and churches more specifically, lack this ability of being sustained agents of change (Dames 2007a; 2007b). De SantaAna's notion is exactly what is called for to transform the shocking scenario Mayhew described. The following paragraph will focus on the role of the church and the impact it ought to have to respond to these challenges. The question that ought to be answered is: What role could the church play in the matrix of cultural changes, probable embezzlement tendencies and the edge challenges the church is facing today?

6. ADAPTIVE AGENTS OF CHANGE ON THE EDGES¹⁸

The things that had worked yesterday do not necessarily work today. Ancient and classical texts remained unchanged, but its audiences and its cultural settings, our contexts, have changed exponentially. Uncertainty, strangeness, plurality and diversity of choices and cultures typify contemporary society. The practical theological knowledge, skills and techniques the church employed 20-600 years ago do not apply anymore.

Roxburgh (2005) helps us to understand that we need to be adaptive in the face of diverse cultural change. This calls for a new way of being church without being in control, dictating the flow of events and their outcomes. Adaptive change agents are needed to engage with the current tectonic shifts we are experiencing and the challenges that the edges of life are

¹⁸ The church should embody a public witness (Newbigin) in the marketplace, in neighbourhoods, in arts, science, politics and economics (Bolger 2006). Bolger's argument that the church should not “accept life on the margins”, but to serve as pointer to the coming reign of God, is unacceptable. His view may unintentionally align with the Christendom's mission paradigm. The Christendom mission was the root cause of Apartheid in South Africa!

providing. These adaptive agents have to unlearn old methodologies, and relearn to innovate new (missional) practical theological lenses, skills and capacities. Practical theological knowledge and technical skills and practices that worked well in the past may not necessarily apply to the challenges on the fringes or in the centres of the post-modern reality. The current cultural scene is foreign for the leadership of Christendom (Roxburgh 2005:50-54). The following three models or agents can help the institutionalized church to free itself from its maintenance paradigm to become missional adaptive agents of change.

6.1. The emerging church¹⁹

The concept *emerging church* is a way of expressing that we need new forms of church that relate to the emerging culture (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:41). “The emerging church is in reality emerging *churches*, which represent an assortment of redemptive forms: house churches, art collectives, weekly participative communities, incarnational church plants, and postmodern monasteries” (Taylor 2005:115). The emerging church comprises Christians who do not necessarily attend traditional church services and activities. They congregate in their own homes. For some the internet serves as a ‘virtual church’ that connects emerging Christians across the world with each other. The emerging church could be viewed as a critical reflection of the established church. It seeks new forms of church that may relate to the “post-modern” culture. This is a church that exists on the fringes in the emerging context. It constantly explores worship, mission, and community within that context (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:41-42). The emerging church focuses on transformation in light of the Kingdom of God. It is a church always in the process of becoming, a pilgrim community. Nothing is final and fixed, but “emerges” as it engages (with practical theological theory and praxis) with a transformative influence in diverse cultures (Gibbs & Bolger 2005:43). Some of its characteristics is to transform secular space, to overcome all sacred/secular divisions and to welcome strangers in its midst. Boff (1986) made a similar plea almost twenty years ago for a new experience of church. Boff opted for a new ecclesiological experience, a renaissance of the very church. This would help Christendom to overcome “an internal obstacle” which has prevented it from being a missional church (Boff 1986:23-24). The Basic Christian Communities that Boff invented meant reinventing itself in many ways, finding new ways of being church around the world (Boff 1986:32-33). Emerging churches and Boff’s Basic Christian Communities are in principle the formation of new (missional) practical-theological praxes.

Christendom could learn from basic church communities, virtual churches and post-modern monasteries new ways of how to engage and to welcome strangers on the fringes (Taylor 2005:116). In doing so, the church may become reinvented and true to its primary missional vocation:

For those who are living on and looking at the edges, there are labour pangs all around, cries that need to be heeded if we are to follow God’s leading toward new

¹⁹ The emerging church functions as a missional contextualization of faith (Taylor 2006).

life. It is here-in the delivery room on the borderlands that the emerging church is finding its mission (Taylor 2005:50).

Castro (1985:2-3) adds that the oppression of people by political and economic forces is a missional calling making the fate of the poor and the least its own. This is what God's preferred and promised future of the Kingdom is about (Keifert 2006).

6.2. Missional Think Tank

The Allelon International Mission to Western Culture Project²⁰ launched the Missional Think Tank (MTT) during July 2006 in Idaho, McCall. It's African partner, the Southern African Think Tank on Missional Theology and Praxis was launched during November 2007 in Stellenbosch. The MTT is the formation of an international, multi-generational network of missional leaders. Its main objective is to focus on Newbigin's question on Gospel and Culture or mission to the modern Western culture. One of its key proposals is to help local churches across the world to engage the Gospel with their respective cultures. The work of MTT could help churches to get a clearer understanding of glocal and pluralistic cultural edges and how glocal churches should engage with their surrounding cultures. The MTT is a resource for (missional) practical theological reflection and action on issues relating to the church's redefined identity and role for the 21st century and beyond.

6.3. Partnership for Missional Church

The Partnership for Missional Church (PMC) originated in the USA, 20 years ago and was launched in Southern Africa during 2003. PMC in South Africa (PMCSA) consists of a unique blend of diverse denominations that cluster together on a journey of spiritual discernment for three to five years. Some of the objectives and practices of PMCSA are to: participate in God's mission of reconciling, restoring, and redeeming a world in need of God's grace; engage in spiritual discernment to discover specifically how God is sending local congregations; be congregations as mission centres for the Christian church today; and be missional in homes, across the street and all over the world (Keifert 2006). The missional perspective focuses not on institutional and individual needs, but on particular local contexts which are primary "mission fields" (Roxburgh 2005:12). The contemporary church is being called and sent to form new ways of living poverty (De SantaAna) on the fringes of society (Keifert 2006).

The abovementioned three adaptive agents of change propose a new understanding of church and its calling. The shift from being an institutionalized church to become a missional church is due to a new hermeneutical²¹ perspective and a functional action methodology that puts the church on the fringes of the 21st century. Hendriks (2004) rightly states that the church's

²⁰ [http:// www.allelon.org.za](http://www.allelon.org.za)

²¹ Newbigin proposes a congregational hermeneutic that is public with a visible missional identity (participation in human lives). This both refuses a privatized faith live and offers a public place of stance based upon the embodied Gospel (Taylor 2006).

theological reflection and action should lead to active involvement in our different contexts. The emerging church is a re-alignment of established Christendom, in being church on the edges. The MTT offers a resource that may serve as a missional practical theological laboratory and gymnasium for the church today. PMCSA clusters churches from different cultural contexts and denominations together, so that as participants they may jointly learn what and how a missional church should be and function within their respective contexts. All three adaptive agents have one thing in common: a focus on the peripheries of local and worldwide societies.

What would all of the abovementioned arguments mean for Africa today? Castro (1985:9) articulates a potential answer to this question as:

To be authentically Africa, theology must be immersed in our historical-cultural situation and grow out of it. A theology that emerged from the people's struggle for liberation would spontaneously formulate itself in the religio-cultural idioms of the people.

Desmond Tutu (in Castro 1985:11) proves Castro's point pertaining to African theology that has "failed to produce a sufficiently sharp cutting edge". He pleads with African theology to adhere to its vocation for the poor and the oppressed and people's needs for liberation. Although Tutu's plea was made during 1979, it resounds again today in the light of the moral and poverty plight of South Africa (Dames 2007a, 2007b, 2007c).

Koopman's (2005) description of a public and prophetic witness in South Africa summarizes the essence of this article eloquently:

Steering our ship between the rocks of sectarianism and Constantinianism, finding the appropriate way of speaking publicly, asking how our involvement impacts on the most vulnerable in society, is motivated by, is based on, and culminates in the fulfilment of the public theological responsibility to participate, by the grace of the triune God, in his work of humanizing and restoring dignity (Koopman 2005).

7. CONCLUSIONS

7.1. Synthesis

Cultural edges as adaptive agents of change provide us with an answer to the opening question of this article. Cultural edges pertain to fringe-scenarios. It provides meaningful and innovative answers to God's mission in this world. Adaptive agents serve as a critical-reflective lens for the practices of Christendom. The church is challenged to break free out of its maintenance mode to become edged in common human life situations. The church should be-and-act as change agents of human lives. The hermeneutical and action role and identity of the church continuously re-invents itself to become culturally undomesticated.

The public Belhar-witness of the URCSA has illustrated the missional act of where God acts at the edges of people's lives and contexts. The URCSA's witness and action became stuck as an indirect result of the influence of Western culture. Private and public spaces grew wider and Christians withdrew increasingly from the public sphere. The same is true about the once prophetic and transformative South African black churches. It lost, as Tutu states, its sharpness

to attend to the poor and oppressed of this country. The dichotomy of private and public plays it out in the manner that Christendom continues to concern itself with its own business. This attitude and habit is discriminative against people, systems and cultures on the peripheries. Africa's unique traditions, values and practices diminish as a direct result of private-based churches.

The cultural shifts of the 21st century resulted in what Bosch (2005) described as a shift from Christendom to post-Christendom. Centres shifted to the fringes. Traditional knowledge- and control-based practices do no longer apply in a culture of discontinuous change. The fact that most of the churches still cling to old methodologies, prove that they do not realise that these shifts occurred and that they themselves are implicated. Some churches may comprehend this reality, but lack the missional-practical theological skills, innovation and knowledge to reinvent the church. In fact, the opposite, is true. Present-day leadership in Christendom tends to kill any innovation from the emerging edges. One should call into remembrance beacons in church history that illustrate examples of edge-agents that emerged in times of cultural change. The seventeenth century mystics and the desert (Israelite) community instilled new and creative life. It proved the argument that re-intervention and meaningful life on the edges are possible.

7.2. Conclusions

The existence of human dignity on the fringes of society is a questionable issue and a scandal (De Santa Ana) for the church. The case study of Mayhew should act as a wakeup call for the institutionalized church. The problem is that churches are predominantly absorbed with maintaining their individual interests and occupied with a Gospel that provides mainly in their own daily bread. Churches should heed God's call to be sending people into their homes, across the street all over the world.

7.3. Recommendations

The church should adopt a missional-practical theology with a functional, action-hermeneutical and contextual/enculturation²² methodology. It should instil an innovative capacity to move from self-serving maintenance to a missional encounter with the cultural edges.

The transformative church movement of the recent past should emerge with a "new way of living poverty". The future role and task of the church will have to acknowledge the challenge of cultural edges and un/intentional embezzlement practices. This challenge calls for the unlearning of old practices and knowledge, and a relearning of new skills and lenses to engage missionally in an unfamiliar culture. The adaptive agents for change serve as proof that this is possible. These agents may assist closed-door churches to shift the focus from their centres to glocal peripheries.

²² Enculturation seek to develop and establish the relation between faith and culture – the church should be grounded in the concrete life and culture of the African-people (Mutiso-Mbinda 1986:81-82 in Dames 1998:237).

7.4. Conclusion

The word is out! There are missional encounters of Gospel and culture on the edges of our cultures waiting to be addressed. Christendom needs to move from the centre and allow itself to be transformed as adaptive agents. The church should instil changes on the peripheries of our society, even starting out from its centres. If it fails to do so, more stories like McLaren's (2001:xi) may ring out:

Sometime in 1994, at the age of thirty-eight, I got sick of being a pastor. Frankly, I was almost sick of being a Christian. ... One year from today I will not be in the ministry. I think that dark sentence was both despairing and hopeful. My prediction was wrong. Now, seven years later, I am still a Christian, still in ministry, and enjoying both more than I ever have.²³

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²³ "Scarcely a day goes by that I do not thank God that my primary ministerial formation was missionary and on the edges of culture, rather than pastorally central" (Taylor 2006). This view is a reinvention of what practical theology ought to be and practise in the first place!

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KEY WORDS

Lesslie Newbigin

Gospel and Culture

Missional Edges

Adaptive Change

Christendom