

3. *Dwelling in the Word*

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Note: this is a draft version of a chapter that I am reviewing at present.

‘All of creation dwells within the Word of God, the Word who created us, the Word who redeems us’ (Ellison, 2009: 91).

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the influence that the communal spiritual practice of dwelling in the Word has had on the missional transformation of local churches. *Dwelling in the Word* is a practice developed by *Church Innovations* that entails the repeated communal listening to a passage of Scripture over long periods of time to enable a Christian community to undertake its decisions and actions in line with the biblical meta-narrative (Keifert, 2006: 163). The methodology of Dwelling in the Word consists of reading a chosen text¹ aloud in a group. After the initial reading of the text, time is given for silent reflection on its meaning. Every group member is then instructed to find a ‘reasonably friendly-looking stranger’ with whom to share what has been gleaned in their personal reflection on the text. After sharing in pairs, members give feedback to the group on what they have heard from their respective partners. The group is then invited to discover the meaning of the text for their specific context by asking: ‘What is God up to here?’ and ‘What is the Word of God for us in this place and time?’ (Keifert, 2009: 21). These two questions reflect the specific theological aim of dwelling in the Word as to invite the participants thereof into the world of the text, and in so doing to join in the mission of God (the *missio Dei*) to the world (Keifert, 2006: 36–37). As such, it is part of a journey to discern to whom God is specifically sending the participants as individuals and as a faith community. The expressed aim of the process of corporate spiritual discernment through dwelling in the Word is to discover the preferred and promised future of God for a specific faith community (Keifert, 2006: 64).

¹ *Church Innovations* (CI) has always read Luke 10:1–12 since a planning weekend of the Minnesota Council of Indian Work of the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota in 1995 (Keifert, 2006: 69).

The importance of dwelling in the Word

The importance of the practice of dwelling in the Word in the transformation of maintenance-orientated churches into missional churches is clear from the experience and research of both the Partnership for Missional Churches (PMC) in the USA and the SAPMC in Southern Africa (Mouton, 2009).

Reflecting on the work of CI after more than two decades in the USA, Pat Keifert, CI's founder and president, considers the various ways that his institute has enhanced the capacity of churches to dwell in the Word to be its most significant innovation for building local churches' missional capacity (Keifert, 2006: 69). The reason for Keifert's conclusion is that the practice of dwelling in the Word stimulates the ability of church leaders to imagine their everyday life within the narrative of Scripture,² which in turn is a key commonality of flourishing missional congregations in the USA, according to research undertaken by CI.

Given the stated importance of the practice of dwelling in the Word for the missional transformation of congregations in the PMC and the SAPMC (the importance of dwelling in the Word), it is important to understand and evaluate its underlying hermeneutic and methodology (the hermeneutic and methodology of the practice of dwelling in the Word) as well as the way in which it has transformed missiological practices of congregations.

The hermeneutic and methodology of the practice of dwelling in the Word

To be able to understand the theological influence of the practice of dwelling in the Word it is important to understand the metaphor governing its use of Scripture as an exercise in communal spiritual discernment before asking whether it applies Scripture in a hermeneutically responsible manner.

Dwelling in the Word as metaphor for the role of Scripture

The work of Lesslie Newbigin – a major influence on the theology of the PMC (Keifert, 2006: 18) – provides a key for understanding the role of Word-dwelling in the PMC, even though Newbigin did not explicitly use the phrase dwelling in the Word, nor develop a specific methodology for indwelling in the Word like the one that the PMC utilises.

² In this regard it links to the important role the Christian metanarrative plays in shaping Christian identity and mission discussed in chapter 2.

In *The gospel in a pluralistic society*, Newbigin (1989) wrestles with the question of how the unique biblical story can engage the prevalent secular worldview. He concludes that it can only do so through the witness of a community that in continuity with the biblical witnesses indwells the story that the Bible tells. *In terms of chapter 2, a community that lives in Act 5*. Utilising the concept ‘indwell’ – a key epistemological concept of Michael Polanyi – Newbigin (1989: 97–99) argues that the important aspect in the use of the Bible by a witnessing community is not to understand the text, but to understand the world through the text. Whilst it is possible to consider the Bible as an object for analysis and interpretation, and to examine it without allowing it to examine its readers, the proper relationship with the Bible for a community of faith is to ‘indwell’ it by allowing it to furnish its readers with a new plausibility structure. This plausibility structure takes the form of a story that is embodied in a historical community called by God in continuity with those who have gone before them from the very beginning of the story the Bible narrates (Newbigin, 1989: 99). *In terms of chapter 4 it is a community that improves of the various prototypes of the kingdom of God that have been undertaken throughout the history of the church (Act 5 according to chapter 2)*.

In terms of Newbigin’s concept of ‘indwelling’, the practice of dwelling in the Word stimulates the imagination of believers to live according to what is plausible according to the Bible. It invites believers to imagine their everyday life within the Biblical narrative of God’s continuing mission to the world by creating analogies between what is described in the biblical text and things elsewhere in the world (Keifert, 2006: 69; Duty, 2009: 133–134). The focus of dwelling in the Word is therefore on awakening the missionary imagination of a congregation and not just on repeating the Biblical missionary imperative (Martin, 2008: 70).

The insight of Newbigin regarding the use of Scripture to challenge the modern secular worldview is an important one for evaluating the practice of dwelling in the Word. It clarifies that dwelling in the Word is not primarily an exercise in the critical scientific exegesis of Scripture, but rather one in communal spiritual discernment. Johnson (1996: 109–110) defines discernment as the habit of faith by which believers are properly disposed to hear God’s Word, and to respond to that Word in the practical circumstances of their lives. Spiritual discernment, as practiced in the SAPMC, attends to three sources for spiritually relevant knowledge: (1) tradition, especially Scripture, (2) culture and society and (3) the experience of the faithful, both personal and communal (Keifert, 2009: 21). It seeks to discern what God is doing in the present, and how the church can participate in God’s mission to the world. Whereas a critical

historical critical reading of a text as practiced in the sphere of the academy, *as indicated in chapter 1*, emphasises the historical and cultural distance between text and contemporary readers (Van Eck, 2008: 1176), dwelling in the Word, as an exercise of spiritual discernment, deliberately eliminates this distance. Its aim is to allow the text to examine its readers and to provide them with a new way of understanding the world and their mission therein.

As a practice of communal spiritual discernment, dwelling in the Word uses Scripture differently than it is usually utilised in many contemporary Western faith communities. Rather than speaking about Scripture, it aims to listen to Scripture. Instead of an expert (the professional minister or academic scholar) reading the text for others to discover the generally accepted meaning of a text, Scripture is repeatedly read with others to discover the variety and richness of its meaning.³ As a communal way of reading Scripture, dwelling in the Word specifically aims to address the individualistic reading of Scripture that characterises much of late modernity's use of Scripture in the West, in that Western Christians have forgotten how to dwell in the Word together and how to share their thoughts about God out loud. If they do dwell in the Word, they do so quietly and alone (Ellison, 2009: 92).

The use of Scripture in dwelling in the Word

In answering the question whether dwelling in the Word is a hermeneutically responsible way of reading Scripture, it is important to clarify just who determines whether Scripture has been read in a theologically responsible manner. *As stated in chapter 1*, David Tracy (1981: 3–46) makes a distinction between three different publics (or 'spheres') in which theologians may function, namely the academy, the church and society. *Since as mentioned in chapter 1 all three publics operate within their own problem-consciousness, their own logic of investigation, their own ethos and highest loyalties, their own mode of argumentation and conception of truth.* A responsible reading by one public need therefore not necessarily be considered a responsible reading by the other two. The church was historically the primary context of Christian theology, whilst society at large was often included in the sphere of the believing community in the time of the corpus christianum. After the Enlightenment the academy, which in many instances had developed within the sphere of the influence of the church, began to occupy an independent

³ Research undertaken by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1997 for instance found that 18% of regular churchgoers (defined as people attending church at least twice a month) had never read anything in the Bible for themselves in their entire lives. Another 14% had not read the Bible for themselves in that particular year (Greene & Robinson, 2008: 89).

position vis-à-vis the church. The result was that within the post-enlightenment world it was academia that determined how Scripture should be read (i.e., historically critically) (Martin, 2008: 3–9). According to this modern view, theology is done primarily within academia and only applied in congregations (Duty, 2009: 15).

Utilising Tracey's distinction one could argue that the believing community can determine its own rules for the reading of Scripture for its unique purposes (such as spiritual discernment). There is no doubt that reading the Bible from the perspective of a believing community that is focused on theological concerns is serious reading (Martin, 2008: 71–91). It can even be considered 'ultimate reading' in the words of Van Zyl (2008: 137). Conversely, if a theological reading of a text was undertaken by the church only for its own edification according to its own exegetical rules, it would negate the missional aspect of the practice of dwelling in the Word. The way Scripture is read would become a boundary-marking instead of a boundary-crossing exercise. As such it would ignore Keifert's (2009: 11–26) plea that congregations should return to the theological conversation with society and academia. For this reason, even though dwelling in the Word is not an exercise in the historical critical exegesis of Scripture (the dominant exegetical approach in academia), but rather an exercise in communal spiritual discernment, it is still important to give an account of the underlying hermeneutic of its reading of the Bible. It is important to note that the reading of the text by dwelling in the Word does engage critical readings of the text by specifically asking what a New Testament scholar would make of certain aspects of the text and incorporating these insights into future readings of the text.

As an exegetical method, dwelling in the Word can be classified as a form of reader-response criticism practised by average, everyday readers (in contrast to informed, 'expert' readers who have received specialised training in reading ancient texts) (Fowler, 1992: 52). Dwelling in the Word can also be considered a conservative reader response approach, in that whilst acknowledging the role of the reader in the process of making meaning, it focuses on the various ways the text itself invites the reader into the production of meaning (Vanhoozer, 1995: 307). In terms of the distinction that Steiner (1979: 423–452) makes between 'readers' and 'critics', dwelling in the Word is practised by 'readers'. Whereas a critic is someone who probes, questions, challenges and 'masters' the text, a reader honours, reveres, and 'serves' the text that he or she is reading.

Whilst dwelling in the Word actively encourages multiple readings of a text, in practice it regards the meaning of a given text as polyvalent, but not omnivalent, in that the participants of Word-dwelling, as a communal reader-response reading of a text, have their individual readings shaped by the community of which they are members. This is not unique to the practice of dwelling in the Word, as readings of texts by both readers and critics are governed by the rules of their respective communities (Fowler, 1992: 52). It is precisely this communal reading of Scripture, as practiced through dwelling in the Word, which is of great importance in evaluating its use of Scripture. In dwelling in the Word, every reader's understanding of a text is shaped by both their initial partner's understanding of what had been related to them and by the communal discussion of all the readings by the group. In practice, this tends to eliminate most esoteric and out of context readings of texts. This meaning forming process is furthermore not a once-off occurrence, but rather one repeated in different groups, times, and spaces to facilitate a more refined reading of Scripture.

One aspect of the practice of dwelling in the Word that deserves greater attention is the explicit incorporation of the biblical meta-narrative of God's mission to redeem the entire world in its reading of a given text. The practice of dwelling in the Word presuppose a high level of biblical literacy. It is, however, questionable how many modern readers in an increasingly late-modernistic South Africa are truly familiar with the biblical meta-narrative of God's mission to redeem all of creation. Projects that focus on reading entire Bible books and specific topics within the scope of the entire biblical narrative are therefore crucially important since they incorporate the complex intratextual and intertextual relationships of biblical texts (even though they do not necessarily incorporate the extrabiblical intertexture of a text). The deliberate incorporation of the intratextual (the entire book of which a text is part) and intertextual relationships (the entire canon) of the texts read in dwelling in the Word would act as an additional interpretative safeguard in the reading process.

The influence of the practice of dwelling in the Word

It is clear from the 2009 evaluation of congregations that have been part of the SAPMC since 2004 that the practice of dwelling in the Word, as a key aspect of the SAPMC journey, has had a profound effect on the missional identity and practice of participating congregations (Mouton, 2009).

Dwelling in the Word and the emergence of spontaneous missional behaviour

A major trend that has emerged in congregations that participate in the SAPMC and that have prioritised dwelling in the Word, is that a growing number of their members have been empowered to begin their own spontaneous, unstructured ministries. These ministries often function outside of congregational structures. The traditional Christendom understanding of missions as a specialised task organised by a designated committee and performed by an officially sanctioned outreach programme has thus been thoroughly deconstructed in a significant number of congregations that have participated in the SAPMC. It has been replaced by an understanding of mission as being a lifestyle of dwelling in the Word of God (i.e., sharing in God's *missio Dei* in all aspects of life by all Christians). Dwelling in the Word has thus become more than a specific practice with a fixed methodology. It has become a new way of living (dwelling) in that believers enact the mission of God as expressed by the Word in their everyday lives. In the SAPMC, the concept of 'dwelling' of CI has been translated with the Afrikaans for 'walking' (*om te wandel in die Woord*) rather than as 'living' or 'remaining'. This has strengthened the conviction that being missional should be a lifestyle and not a programme or event.

The negation of the clear distinctions between ministers and congregants, and the development of the ability to imagine how God's kingdom can be enacted in their own personal context by dwelling in the Word, have thus had a significant impact on the manner in which congregations structure and fund their ministries. Where believers have had their imaginations shaped by the practice of dwelling in the Word and have been trusted to discern God's will as a group for themselves, they also feel empowered to act accordingly without necessarily seeking the sanctification of a church governing body. Whilst this trend does not mean that all organised outreach programmes have been terminated in participating congregations (the 2009 summary mentions several such programmes), it does reflect a growing realisation that the missional commitment of congregants is shifting from formally organised to informal, spontaneous actions. The critical questions regarding the manner which dwelling in the Word has led to spontaneous, unstructured ministries are how sustainable these ministries will prove to be and whether they will lead to the demise of the organised church, as Barna (2005: 48–49) has suggested.

Dwelling in the Word and participating in the missio Dei

It is clear from the 2009 follow-up study that the SAPMC, with dwelling in the Word as a key aspect of the discerning process, has had a tremendous positive impact on the participating congregations' ability to discern just where God is specifically calling them to participate in his mission to the world. Along with plunging, it has also increased their willingness and ability to cross ethnic, economic, and social boundaries to reach the specific communities to whom they have been sent.

It is interesting that the congregations in the follow-up study did not define their specific missional focus (to whom God is sending them) in terms of a specific action or ministry, but rather in terms of a broad adaptation of the culture of the congregation to reach a specific group that was not previously part of the different congregations. They had discerned that God was not sending some of them, but rather all of them as a faith community to others. In this sense, the Afrikaans translation of Missional Churches as "Gestuurde Gemeentes" (literally 'sent congregations') has proven to be an apt one.

Dwelling in the Word and the formation of new faith communities

An important missional aim of the practice of dwelling in the Word is that it must move through the permeable boundaries of the congregation into the larger community (Ellison, 2009: 94). In practice, other readers from the destination should also be invited to dwell in the Word so that the Word of God can create a new faith community that discerns the will of God together. A missional reading of Scripture is not only determined by why it is read (to discover the nature of the missio Dei) but also by whom and where it is read. A true missional reading is thus one where Scripture is read together with those to whom the church has been sent in their context, to discern God's will together. This approach negates the danger inherent to all discernment processes in that one group, or individual, will coerce others to do their will by invoking the language of 'God told me to ...' The PMC therefore envisages the process of dwelling in the Word not as closed or limited, but rather as open and ever-expanding as it continually invites others into the discerning community that practises the continual communal listening to Scripture. Engaging in Word-dwelling and corporate, meaningful worship with 'strangers' brings strangers from different communities into a shared identity around Christ, which stimulates their Christian imaginations and creates a shared sense of purpose and a willingness to take risks for the sake of their common faith (Ellison, 2009: 98).

In practice, however, none of the congregations that were part of the follow-up study of SAPMC has reported practising dwelling in the Word in this manner. Dwelling in the Word has thus encouraged congregations to cross boundaries, but not necessarily to create new faith communities. It is also disappointing to note that few congregations have succeeded in forming lasting relationships with other faith communities. It is, however, clear that the practice of dwelling in the Word does have tremendous potential for deconstructing the traditional boundaries and power hierarchies that characterise many traditional missional approaches and for creating a new Word-based community with a common identity and purpose. What dwelling in the Word accomplishes within a faith community, it can also accomplish between two different communities. The practice of dwelling in the Word creates an ever-expanding community that shares a common reading of Scripture (i.e., who dwell together in the world according to the Word). It begins with an individual reading, before incorporating a stranger and becoming a shared reading of a group. As more groups are formed in a congregation that dwell in the same text, the community of those dwelling together in the Word (and thus sharing a common mission) is continuously enlarged. For this reason, the practice of plunging should also incorporate communal Word-dwelling opportunities. An important caveat in this regard is that in communities with low literary levels the repeated retelling and enactment of a specific text should replace the individual reading of the text.

The integration of the theory and practice in dwelling in the Word

An important aspect of the practice of dwelling in the Word that came to light in the reflection on its influence during the 2009 conference of participating SAPMC congregations is that it develops the missional skills, attitudes, and behaviours of its practitioners. In other words, dwelling in the Word does not only provide a rationale for a congregation's mission. It also teaches them the necessary skills. Whereas congregations tend to struggle to implement a programme for teaching missional skills after a long discerning phase (Nel, 2006: 40–41, 48), dwelling in the Word addresses this problem by actively developing the required skills to be missional whilst discerning God's will for a specific faith community.

Dwelling in the Word teaches and confirms the following skills, attitudes, and behaviours:

- Group members practice reaching out and sharing their faith with people they do not necessarily know well (the 'reasonably friendly-looking stranger' in the group).

- Interpreting the text becomes the responsibility of all in the community, and not only of those considered experts in exegesis.
- Members practice the skill of listening to others and articulating their partners' insights.
- The communicative playing field is intentionally levelled. Those who are naturally reluctant to speak in groups are helped to do so by not having to share their own personal thoughts, whilst those who tend to dominate discussions are constrained by their having to share the insights of others.
- Strong emotions are negated as all insights are stated in the third person.
- Reading, discussing and reflecting on the Word become more important than concluding the 'business' part of church meetings.
- The repeated reading of a specific text creates a shared sense of purpose and willingness to take risks for the sake of their faith amongst the practitioners of dwelling in the Word. Over time dwelling in the Word shapes a group's collective imagination. It defines who they are in relationship to one another and sometimes who they are over against everyone else in the world (Ellison & Keifert, 2011: 8).
- Word-dwelling develops the skill of interpreting the Word with others and provides a language for sharing thoughts with each other (Ellison, 2009: 92, 98). Although it is a metaphoric dwelling, it manages to create a sense of community and shared culture. Certain words begin to remind the dwellers of certain things and verbal shorthand develops (Ellison & Keifert, 2011: 8).
- The sharing with another is the first filter for esoteric, way-out interpretations of Scripture.
- Honest reporting and fair access to the conversation builds trust in the new community (Ellison & Keifert, 2011: 11).

Conclusion

It is clear from the 2009 follow-up study that the practice of dwelling in the Word has had a profound effect on the theology and missional practice of most of the participating congregations. In comparison to the earlier study by Nel (2006) of 17 congregations implementing a strategic missional planning process, the 12 congregations in this follow-up study revealed that the SAPMC journey has led to several unique outcomes.

In practising dwelling in the Word (preferably with the same text) over long periods of time and diverse moments in the process of spiritual discernment, members of local churches have begun to imagine their lives being lived within the presence of the living, triune God. They

now see and experience the world, especially their immediate community, and those with whom they share their lives, as God does. Within this imagination, they experience both the at-hand-ness of the reign of God and its clear not-in-hand-ness (Keifert, 2006: 70–71; Duty, 2009: 137).

A major strength of the practice of dwelling in the Word is the manner in which it integrates theology and practice. Over time, these attitudes and beliefs, minimum knowledge base, and skills shaped by the habits of dwelling in the Word have transformed a number of churches into missional ones (Keifert, 2006: 70). Whilst the transformation of the institutionalised post-Christendom church in Southern Africa is not yet complete, the process of becoming a truly missional church has made significant strides.

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