

Believing in the future

Missiology's future prospects

Nelus Niemandt¹

Abstract

This research attends to David Bosch's (1995) last publication, *Believing in the future: Towards a missiology of Western culture*, and uses the work as a guide to formulate prospects for missiology as a theological discipline. Following Bosch, it uses an exploration of current events as a heuristic semiotic to discern the future of the church and to develop prospects for missiology.

The 'post-world' we currently find ourselves in is described in the following terms: Post-COVID but pre-disaster; a Volatile, Unstable, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) – a Post-stable world; Post-industrial revolutions – the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR); Post-stable climate.

This is followed by the construction of missiology's prospects, missiology for the "new normal", suggesting several contours that may constitute the future of missiology. These include mission as theology and an expansion of the *missio Dei*; The ecclesiological contour; The ecological contour; The 4IR as a new founding narrative; Public theology and faithful presence – the worthy walk of the missional community; Anticipatory leadership; Missional spirituality; and The rediscovery of joy.

Key words: Anticipatory Leadership, David Bosch, Climate Change, Faithful Presence, Fourth Industrial Revolution, Joy, Missiology, Missional Ecclesiology, Missional Spirituality, Post-COVID, Theology of Mission, VUCA

1. Introduction

If one considers the times we are living in and the opportunity to honour David Bosch, a great theologian of the previous century, a small publication of his springs to mind as a particularly appropriate point of departure for the SAMS 2022 Bosch Memorial Lecture —*Believing in the future: Towards a missiology of Western culture* (Bosch, 1995). The aim of attending to this book is to introduce this specific approach of Bosch, namely to suggest several issues that will demand the attention of Missiology, presented as "contours of a missiology", and to develop prospects for the discipline, using this publication as template and guide. Sweet

¹ Professor Nelus (C.J.P.) Niemandt is the Rector and Chief Executive Officer of Hugenote Kollege, a private tertiary educational institution, in South Africa. He has been a visiting academic and scholar at world renowned universities, including Princeton Theological Seminary, Edinburg University and Radboud University (The Netherlands). He is currently Research associate and emeritus professor Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, He can be contacted at nelusn@gmail.com

(2021) follows the same methodology in constructing a heuristic semiotic, and this publication of Bosch seems to be an ideal accompaniment to do something similar. As the publication is not widely available, a summary of *Believing in the future* might be useful as an orientation in terms of the particular context of Bosch's work. It is impossible to summarise Bosch's contribution to missiology, and also not the aim of this research. The aim is to present a summary of the book and use his contextual awareness and sensitivity as an example and exercise of possible areas of interest to missiology. Kritzinger and Saayman (2011) provide a more comprehensive description of the context and missiological contribution of Bosch, and many others also recognise the importance of his work.²

2. Bosch's post-era

His book starts with a compelling opening sentence, "We live in a 'post-'era." Bosch preceded Sweet, but followed the same heuristic semiotic, namely to explore current events as a heuristic semiotic to discern the future of the church (Sweet, 2021:1).

2.1 The Postmodern world

Bosch acted as a semiotician and described the postmodern world with its secular nature and radical anthropology, a world in which, according to him, the West calls the shots. It is a kind of subversive totalitarian society run by "giant industrial corporations under the direction of teams of technocrats" (Bosch, 1995:2). If we replace 'giant industrial' with 'giant digital' it sounds chillingly familiar.

- Many of his descriptions (1995:2) still ring true:
- It is a world of ecological damage.
- A world of manipulation and exploitation of human beings.
- Characterised by 'relentless consumerism' where people seek instant gratification.
- A world saturated by a deluge of information and entertainment.

2.2 The Enlightenment

Bosch is well known for his critique of the Enlightenment, and it is no surprise that he argued that much of what we experience is the "inescapable legacy" (1995:7) of the Enlightenment. He further noted that the fathers of the Enlightenment were all Christians who saw their work as a service to God (although many would differ from his appropriation in this regard). The relevance of his attention to the Enlightenment is because of the profound influence of this movement on Western theologi-

² Bevans and Schroeder (2004); Phan (2022) in the Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies; Goheen (2014).

cal thinking and particularly the missionary enterprise, which was "...predicated on Enlightenment assumptions" (Bosch, 1995:6). He mentioned seven cardinal convictions of the Enlightenment, and also criticised the movement in terms of the disproportionate attention to these convictions: the emphasis on reason; the division of all reality into thinking subjects, and objects that could be analysed and exploited; the focus on cause and effect; the premium on progress; the assumption that all problems can be solved; and the understanding of human beings as emancipated autonomous individuals.

2.3 ecularisation

Bosch warned about the secularisation that followed in the wake of the Enlightenment and the impact of this on theology, particularly Protestant theology, with its efforts to make faith rationally plausible (1995:17). The problem was that Protestantism followed an antithetical approach and saw an incompatibility between church and world. This led to a dichotomy and the relegation of religion to the private sphere and a diminished "...place in the sun" (1995:18).

2.4 Contours of missiology of Western culture

A fascinating section follows on Bosch's description of society and postmodern culture. He described the contours of a 'missiology of Western culture'. In this, he provided the foundational arguments for the current missional movement and many of the ecumenical policy documents formulated in the last decade. His statements are, by now, familiar:

- The church is a missionary Church (1995:31) — "...mission refers to a permanent and intrinsic dimension of the church's life (1995:32)."
- God is a missionary God, and God's people are missionary people (1995:32).
- The church exists in being sent and building itself for its mission. Missiology precedes ecclesiology (1995:32).
- We need a missionary theology (1995:32).

In terms of the SAMS 2022 theme – *Reimagining a new social contract in the public space: Missiological contributions to the discourse* — Bosch described his understanding of mission as social ethics (1995:33) as "how do we relate to the society in which we find ourselves" (1995:32). He stated that we become Christians "...in order to be enlisted into God's ministry of reconciliation, peace, and justice on earth" (1995:34). We do not build or inaugurate God's kingdom, but help to make it more visible and tangible.

In the subsection on the Western mission and the Third World, he emphasised the important role of the 'Third World' in mission. He attended to issues of social justice and reminded the church to bring the gospel of hope; side with the victims;

find ways to comfort, influence, and make responsible the powers around us; suggest structures of greater justice and human compassion; and let others know who the Lord of the struggle is (1995:40).

In the contour described as ‘God talk in an age of reason’, he attended to the influence of the charismatic movement. He recognised that religion has once again become presentable and fit for society, a remark that also plays into the SAMS theme of the church playing a role in the social contract. The human being is *homo religiosus*. Christians can be bolder and more confident (1995:44), but he reminded (in 1995!) mainline churches that the revival of religion is “. . . not evident in the mainline churches and their Sunday services” (1995:45). It is more evident in the margins.

2.5 The impossibility of not believing

In this section, Bosch attended to the hermeneutic of suspicion of modernism and the Enlightenment. He acknowledged the role of plausibility structures — “or, rather, worldviews” (1995:48) — in people’s lives. Worldviews are integrative and interpretive frameworks by which order and disorder are judged — the standards by which reality is managed and pursued (1995:49). Worldviews are our points of departure. Drawing on Polanyi, he argued that Christian theology could only be pursued from a faith commitment by professing knowingly and openly our beliefs. In this endeavour, theology acts as a critical instrument helping us to cleanse the fountains of our faith (1995:51).

3. Yet again, a post-world

In this section, *Believing in the future* will be used as inspiration to contribute towards a description of the world in which we practise theology and to construct missiology’s prospects. The point of departure is to share Bosch’s belief in the future, his deep conviction that God’s preferred future draws us into everyday life and fills us with hope and possibilities. In constructing this contribution, the semiotic point of departure is to read the signs of the times in order to describe the ‘post-era’ we find ourselves. The incarnation, as well as the theological necessity of contextualisation and inculturation, provides the *raison d’être* for attending to the prospects of missiology as a theological discipline (Niemandt, 2014:38-39). Bosch (1991:497) argued that missiology will always be concerned with a “contextual elucidation of the relationship between God, God’s world, and God’s church.”

3.1 Post-COVID but pre-disaster

The COVID-19 pandemic will, for many years, be a point of reference and a significant descriptor of the current decade. Veldsman explains that the COVID-19 pandemic is leaving scars, wounds, and socio-economic destruction in its wake and over and above deep existing scars (HIV/AIDS pandemic, poverty, oppressive inequalities, etc.)

(Veldsman, 2021:375). The metaphor developed by Crouch, Keilhacker and Blanchard (2020), namely “Blizzard, winter, little ice-age”, is an appropriate description precisely because it suggests much of the long-term impact of the pandemic.

“Blizzard” refers to the short term impact, the intense storm that struck all of the world and impacted all facets of life, especially church life. COVID, at least initially, represented a severe and life-threatening storm, a crisis, but surmountable. “Winter” refers to the understanding that we are facing a long season of crisis. COVID-19 does not represent a singular event, but a season of turmoil. The effects and aftermath will be with humanity for a significant time, and much will never be the same again. The COVID-19 pandemic will become a universal marker, an infliction point where much changed. “Little ice age” refers to a large-scale event that “. . . that reshape the climate through countless successive seasons” (Crouch et al., 2020). COVID-19 is a significant interruption that inaugurates years-long disruption, changes and even permanent restructuring in society, government and education.

The COVID pandemic had a considerable impact on many aspects of society. This is especially true of the church and Christian life. The underlying assumptions that sustained churches and related organisations are no longer true. The priority must be to replace the current playbook with a new one (Crouch et al., 2020). We are catapulted into a “new normal”, where the world is not the same anymore (Siaki, 2021:xi), and there is no reset to pre-COVID times.

No one can escape the serious questions, enormous challenges and life-changing impact of the pandemic. However, the impact is even more significant – the pandemic accelerated other major change events. It compressed the far-reaching changes brought on by globalisation, the 4IR, and other major social changes, sometimes described as a VUCA world (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) (Siaki, 2021:7). Veldsman (2021:375) refers to a “complex, extreme fluid, and in many ways wounded African context.” We live in an age of acceleration, in a hyper-connected world. Niemandt (2019a:152) describes it as a world:

“Where the flow of information and knowledge leads to a hyperconnected world; where the acceleration in climate change leads to biodiversity loss and the restructuring of mother nature; and the acceleration in computing power and smart technology to seamless complexity. These accelerations combine to form the ‘Great Acceleration’, transforming almost every single aspect of modern life.” (Niemandt 2019a:152)

Sweet (2019: 173) talks about ‘rapidification’ and argues that technology is moving too fast for our moral, social, and political systems to keep up with or make sense of.

A sombre note is sounded by many virologists, ecologists and public health officials: COVID was no singular event or disaster. It merely inaugurated a season of

disasters that will, with increased frequency, shake and shape the world. As Sweet (2021:2) states, "... in the future, there will be new plagues and new pandemics, more viruses and more outbreaks. We may become COVID-proof, but we will never be pandemic-proof." Gregersen (2017:362) warns that we will experience an increase in disasters and pleads for developing a "Phenomenologically Sensitive Theology of Disaster." In summary, humanity and the world may be on the edge of a phase in history where human flourishing may diminish.

3.2 VUCA – a post-stable world

Recent references to the current situation as a VUCA-world are appropriate and descriptive. For example, Siaki (2021:7) describes VUCA as follows:

- Volatile: the speed of change intensified, and we are in an era of massive fluctuations — "the more volatile the world is, the more and faster things change."
- Uncertain: refers to the extent to which we can confidently predict the future — "the more uncertain the world is, the harder it is to predict."
- Complex: refers to the number of factors that we need to consider, their variety and the relationship between them — "the more complex the world is, the harder it is to analyse."
- Ambiguous: refers to the lack of clarity about how to interpret something. It refers to fuzziness and vagueness — "the more ambiguous the world is, the harder it is to interpret" (Siaki, 2021:7). Harari refers to a post-truth world (2018:236).

The VUCA-world is a world of super-diversity and super mobility, and growing differentiation. The more globalisation forces and forges things together to be the same, the more determined people hold onto the few things that still differentiate them. Volf (2015:35) refers to globalisation as something that creates an interdependence that is planetary in scope, with a few, quickly vanishing independent localities.

This interplay between super-diversity and super mobility is evident in the following:

- Growing nationalism, as in Spain, Scotland, Ukraine, and Kurds (to mention but a few...). Sweet (2019:30-31) warns, "The more global we become in our consciousness and citizenship, the more every country is undergoing a surge of nationalist fever and even tribal fervor".
- This is perhaps the explanation for phenomena such as Brexit, Trumpism (America First!), and the war in Ukraine.
- Growing racism, the growth of far-right political parties in Europe and other places and the anxious efforts to cling to racial identities.
- Fundamentalism and the growth in cultural and religious extremism and fundamentalism.

- Religious persecution. It is paradoxical that the age of the open, global and mobile society also witnesses the most significant displacement of Christians in history and the worst persecution in a long time. The recent 2022 World Watch list reports:

“The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says about 84 million people were forcibly displaced in 2021 within their own country, with 26 million across borders. Many of them are Christians fleeing persecution. In addition, hundreds of thousands are affected by Islamist violence. Most Christians affected by this violence remain in their region, displaced in-country or as refugees (World Watch, 2022:n.p.).”

- “A contraction of social space, such that the whole planet is becoming ‘a new locality’ and individuals in it “disembedded cosmopolitans” (Volf & Blair, 2015:35).
- Harari, chillingly, talks about the end of any defining narrative and sense-making identity and the resultant disorientation (2018:5-6).

3.3 Post-industrial revolutions – the 4IR

We are witnessing the 4IR. Klaus Schwab, initiator of the annual Davos meetings, explains:

“We stand on the brink of a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope, and complexity, the transformation will be unlike anything humankind has experienced before (Schwab, 2016).

The previous industrial revolutions in the way mankind organised labour and life were:

- 1: 1784 – Steam, water and mechanical production
- 2: 1870 – Division and organisation of labour, electricity and mass-production
- 3: 1969 – Electronics, information technology and automated production
- 4 – Current situation

The Presidential Commission of the South African government defined a human-centric description of this concept of Schwab:

“The 4th Industrial Revolution is an era where people are using smart, connected and converged Cyber, Physical and Biological systems and smart business models to define and reshape the social, economic and political spheres” (Presidential Commission, 2020:2).

The 4IR is a new epoch in social and economic life. It is driven by technological advancements that will deepen the connections between the biological, physical, and digital worlds, blurring or merging capabilities among these domains. The

unfolding of the 4IR is changing some of the defining characteristics of what we regarded, up to now, as the human story:

- We see the disappearance of labour.
- We witness the disappearance of small-scale farming.
- We notice the disappearance of artisanal arts. Volf (2015:36) laments that cherished ways of living are lost in the wake of cultural homogenisation — the demise of a village or trade, or the disappearance of a language and a whole culture with it.
- We must calculate the cost of the disappearance of the small entrepreneur.
- The explosion in Artificial Intelligence and technological over-optimism.
- Technology offers opportunities for extreme ideas and ideologies to spread.
- Sweet (2019:141) describes it as a GRAIN world (genetic engineering, robotics, artificial intelligence, information technology and nanotechnology).
- The impact of infotech and biotech can eventually restructure economies, societies and our very bodies and minds (Harari, 2018:7).

Schwab is optimistic about the possibilities opened up by the 4IR. He talks about the potential to raise global income levels and improve the quality of life for populations around the world. He promises, “In the future, technological innovation will also lead to a supply-side miracle, with long-term gains in efficiency and productivity.” One of the problems of growing waste, overproduction, and perhaps the whole 4th Industrial Revolution is that it does not deliver on the promise of efficiency and effective management of resources, and will lead to wasting everything that grows. Harari is even more sceptical and warns that the 4IR might disrupt human society. It might even challenge the meaning of human life, create a global useless class and bring about ‘data colonialism’ and ‘digital dictatorships’ (Harari, 2020:n.p.).

Reading the signs of the times, one must be acutely aware of the digitalisation of faith. Joubert and Van der Watt (2021:7) say that the new reality is one where people are embracing new identities — ‘that is, new biological selves and digital selves.’

Joubert (2020:2) explains:

“The basic claim of this new foundation narrative is that technology profoundly impacts on all aspects of reality in all countries, societies, economies and industries across the globe, including the church, while challenging all the existing ideas about what it means to be a human being.” (Joubert 2020:2)

The 4IR compels us to develop a digital ecclesiology that acknowledges ‘digital dignity’, but also a posture that engages with the trans-human existence that is becoming increasingly more at odds with human flourishing (Joubert, 2020:6). The church will need to keep a missional focus, a missional posture where the default setting is more digital and online.

3.4 Post-stable climate

In this post-normal world, the greatest risk is now the risk of climate change. We face extreme existential dangers and natural extinction, and facing the future entails engaging in ecological destruction and environmental injustices. “Disruption is the new status that is never quo; stability is the new abnormality and global cataclysm is the ever-present peril” (Sweet, 2021:2). The world is fluctuating between ecological stability and an ecological crash. The 4IR might even aggravate climate change with its hyperefficiencies. The South African Faith Communities’ Environment Institute (SAFCEI) mentions increasingly intense tornadoes, cyclones, ocean damage, flooding, drought and fire. Climate change refers to destructive weather patterns and the impact of consumerism on the planet (SAFCEI, 2022:n.p.).

Life as we know it is at risk; global warming could risk the flooding of significant parts of major cities, an entirely new dynamic regarding food production and security, and even life as we know it. Recent research (Sweet, 2019:122) concluded that three critical planetary thresholds—climate, the nitrogen cycle, and biodiversity loss—had already been crossed and is causing irreversible damage. To this, Sweet (2019:122) adds, “Land-use change, the phosphorus cycle, ocean acidification, and freshwater use are emerging problems that had not yet been breached but could be soon if nothing is done.” Historian Rutger Bregman (2020:134) says, “There’s no doubt in my mind that this is the greatest challenge of our time – and that time is running out.” From a theological perspective, it is a question of doing justice to creation and salvation. Conradie (2013:1) calls on theologians to do ecotheology as a response to environmental concerns, but also in an attempt to formulate new ideas and participate in a movement of renewal and reformation. Everything is at stake!

3.5 Conclusion

One can add many important characteristics to this semiotic exercise. Sweet (2019) uses the metaphor of volcanoes and explains that the world is one global ring of fire (2019:vii), with many hot zones and volcanoes threatening the planet. Some of the issues he mentions include: A pedagogical and andrological revolution; global refugees and migrants; Chinafication; conflict between world religions, and especially with Islam; tolerance (or the lack thereof) of diversity; genders and gendering; ecological extinctions; dataism, scientism; and genetic engineering, robotics, and AI.

4. Missiology for the “new normal” – Missiology’s prospects in a VUCA/Post-COVID world

We need to face the future, to believe in the future. As Sweet (2019:viii) states, “Jesus calls his disciples to be first responders, those who run toward, not away from,

the future.” Bosch (1995:32) responded to his analysis of the future by developing a missiological agenda for theology in a critical accompaniment of the *missio Dei*. He called it the contours of missiology of Western culture. In the new *Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies*, this is called ‘Missiology’s future prospects’ (Kim & Fitchett-Climenhaga, 2022:3). In SAMS’ venture to reimagine a new social contract in the public space, this contribution ventures to propose a revision of those contours as a missiological foundation when missiologists engage with society in the quest to construct a social contract. This is done by embracing the focus suggested by Bosch, namely believing in the future, thus with hope. Our reflection on a social contract in the public space must be hopeful by nature. The proposal of these contours/prospects also recognises that there is no separation between the holy and the profane, and the inner life and the public forum. We must consciously resist the Enlightenment paradigm of the privatisation of faith and witness our faith and beliefs when we engage in the participation of constructing social contracts. Participation in developing a social contract entails a particular kind of public theology, described by Van der Watt and Joubert (2021:5) as a kind of posture where “...public theologians intentionally endeavour to embody, understand and communicate the bible in hermeneutically responsible ways here and now.”³

4.1 Mission as theology and an expansion of the *missio Dei*

The growth in secularisation and the privatisation of faith, combined with the rise in the ‘God question’ in the aftermath of the COVID-pandemic, catapulted the issue of ideas about God and theology to the forefront.

Although the concept of the ‘secular’ is developed within a Euro-Western-Christian frame of mind, secularisation became part and parcel of the South African landscape. Taylor (2007:542-557) describes unbelief as the condition of modern man. Man has overcome the irrationality of belief. People live as if God does not exist. Faith in transcendence is no longer logical and uncontested, even in Africa. Those members of society who still believe realise their choice is just one choice among many, including the choice not to believe. In many Western nations, secularity has become the default option. The question is about the state of affairs in South Africa. This is also true for a section of urban South Africa, and perhaps more so in the more affluent communities. The constitutional situation also reflects something of the retreat of religion from the public sphere, serving a neutral identity.

In terms of developing a contour of missiology, Veldsman makes a strong case that the world and theology need a different image of God, “...namely a dynamic

³ Allow me a brief caveat: the comprehensive nature of missiology challenges one to keep these contours focused and to presuppose the many paradigms of mission already developed (see Bosch’s, 1991:368-510 thirteen paradigms of mission).

image of God framed and informed by theology-science discourses that has to replace a static image of God” (Veldsman, 2021:3). Veldsman researched the response of South African theologians to the COVID-pandemic and found that the ‘God question’ is one of the main *foci* in South African academic publications.

Constructing contours for relevant missiology starts with a reorientation in terms of God and how we think about God. We need to re-discover the grammar of Trinitarian theology and discern the radical presence of God in the discomfort of disasters. This is echoed by Van der Watt (2021:8) when he argues that the disruption of COVID-19 moves missional transformation away from ‘strategic planning or endless new models’ to renewal and reform that finds its fulfilment in the Triune God.

Kim and Fitchett-Climenhaga (2022:11) regard the critical extension, reframing, or transcending of the *missio Dei* as one of the most important prospects of missiology.

Southgate (2021:26) approaches the theological challenge presented by the COVID-pandemic by suggesting a “Three-Lensed Christian Contemplation.”

4.1.1 Protological creation

The first lens is “the protological creation, which sets the ‘ground-rules’ for creaturely existence; these ground-rules are characterized by a world governed by physical laws and the constraint of limited resources, and also by the emerging of freedom of choices within the unfolding of the biosphere” (Southgate, 2021:26). Where then do we find hope in this first lens? God is the source of all creative existence and, therefore, a God of unimaginable power and ingenuity. God is faithful to the laws and processes by which the universe unfolded.

4.1.2 Christ’s passion and death

The second lens is “Christ’s passion and death. Reality contemplated through this lens means that no abyss of suffering, no extent of impotence before the wicked and torturing powers of the world, is a place absent of the presence of Christ.” God is involved in and with his creation, in and through the incarnation, because of God’s love for God’s creatures. Veldsman (2021:375) reminds us that Christianity recognises vulnerability, but we must always remember that God is present amid vulnerability, “Moreover, as Christian communities, we do not only speak about God but also to God to find and show new ways out of dark situations and to restore community” (Veldsman, 2021:375). Rohr (2016) provides important insights into the relational nature of the Trinity and vulnerability in the inner relationship between Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. The radical relatedness and perfect communion in the Trinitarian flow provide for “dusting off a daring doctrine” (Rohr, 2016:42). The inner relationship is one of *kenosis* and self-sacrifice, thus, vulnerability. Vulnerability is a core concept of the inner relationship in the Trinity.

4.1.3 Eschatological perspective

The third lens represents an eschatological perspective. God's involvement is borne out by love and compassion, but has a transformational intent. Nothing can withstand the power of the resurrection. The resurrection inaugurates transformation and leads to a condition "...of creatures in which there is no more crying or pain" (Southgate, 2021:26). This echoes Bosch (1991:428), "We need an eschatology for mission which is both future-directed and oriented to the here and now. It must be an eschatology that holds in creative and redemptive tension the already and the not yet..." This supports the approach of this research to construct missiology's prospects.

In conclusion, this challenge to develop a broader and multifocal understanding of God is a necessary result of our semiotics and the recognition that we find ourselves deeper and deeper in a post-world. At the core of the sensemaking engagement with this post-world lies a different image of God. This will assist in answering not only the question of *why* God is busy in disasters, but also *how* God is busy.

4.2 Ecclesiological contour

In his formulation of a theology of disaster, Gregersen (2017:369) stated that God is community, and that the eternal community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit hosts and upholds the trans-historical community of the living and the dead. He argues that the problem of disaster and tragedy is ultimately about community and the disruption of community, and concludes that "... the only possible redemption is to restore the sense of community" (Gregersen, 2017:369). Veldsman also underscored the importance of communities and the imperative to restore community in the wake of disasters (Veldsman, 2021:375). The local congregation is more important than ever.

This is an alternative community — a community of equality, kenosis, service, mutual respect, and a community of downward mobility. This challenges the familiar institutional understanding of the church with its hierarchy of powers that protects territory and excludes those on the margins.

In missiology, the church has been seen as an extension of the mission of Jesus and the *missio Dei*. Guder (2015:74) explains, "This ecclesiology understands the church as Christ's witness, living in continuing community with him in its midst, prepared by his word through Scripture to be sent by him into the world which he loves and for which he died."

The ecclesial challenge does not seek the survival of particular congregations at all costs or a new strategy to serve the church. Instead, it is a challenge to become more resilient in mutual and pastoral care, more grounded in communal life in the Trinity, and more able to bring the good news of life and renewal amid disasters to the world. The church is an embodied missional presence in the world, present in the messiness of human life (Flemming, 2013:115).

4.3 Ecological contour

Missiology in a post-COVID/VUCA world will most certainly attend to ecological issues and the development of an ecotheology. Bosch (1995:55) already laid that groundwork by insisting that missiology must include an ecological dimension. It is helpful to work with Conradie's definition of Christian ecotheology, "Christian ecotheology may be regarded as an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom embedded in the Christian tradition, as a response to ecological destruction and environmental injustices" (Conradie, 2013:1).

The WCC (2013) policy document *Together towards life* affirms the important link between the gospel and creation:

"Rather the gospel is the good news for every part of creation and every aspect of our life and society. It is therefore vital to recognize God's mission in a cosmic sense and to affirm all life, the whole *oikoumene*, as being interconnected in God's web of life" (WCC, 2013:5).

Cilliers eloquently linked the idea of *missio Dei* with ecotheology:

"Is this not a beautiful description of 'Missio Dei'? God's Word is not only about salvation; it is also about creation; in fact, it starts – and continues – with creation, with the soil we stand on" (Cilliers, 2021:22).

Cilliers assists in reflecting on why missiologists will engage in public theology and the formulation of a social contract when he reminds us that ecclesial outreach is not only about soteriology, but about creation as well. We can never bypass creation as the basis on which all of God's mission(s) take place, "On the contrary, creation comes into being through the mission of God's Word so that God's Word can continue its mission" (Cilliers, 2021:22). Any social contract, and theology of mission, ought to include reflection on earthkeeping ethos and praxis. The new Oxford Handbook of Mission Studies also attends to, "Christian mission and ecology amidst global warnings" (Kaoma, 2022:705). The only sustainable way Christians will be able to engage with earth keeping, especially on a congregational level, will be if it is related to the core of Christian faith and mankind's participation in God's life-giving cosmic mission.

4.4 Technological prospect – the 4IR as a new founding narrative

"Reality now plays out on a continuum between virtual and real spaces" (Joubert & van der Watt, 2021:7). In a post-COVID world, one of the visible changes has been the move to digital gatherings of faith communities and more comprehensive exploration of digital expressions of faith. It is evident that digital faith communities are now a reality. We are experiencing a new founding narrative that impacts how the gospel

is proclaimed and experienced. If the medium is the message, and if the gospel is inherently translatable and must be contextualised in every new context, technological innovations and transformed reality must receive the attention of a missiologist. Incarnation and contextualisation in a digital culture should embrace technology and the 4IR as much as the church is sensitive to enculturating the gospel in any other culture. The basic claim of this new foundation narrative is that technology profoundly impacts aspects of reality in all countries, societies, economies and industries across the globe, including the church, while challenging existing ideas about what it means to be a human being (Joubert, 2020:1). If Harari is correct in his analyses that narratives help humans to unite and collaborate in huge groups, then virtual reality and the digital media will become one of the most critical narratives that determine society. The acceleration effect of the COVID pandemic catapulted the church into a new digital reality changing the very understanding of being church. Church analyst Nieuwhof states (2020:n.p.), “Growing churches in the future will become digital organisations with physical expressions, not physical organisations with a digital presence.”

Technology and the tools of the 4IR cannot be regarded as opposing reality outside the parameters of the church. On the contrary, it has intrinsically become part and parcel of the translatability of the gospel; thus, gospel and missiologists ought to be crossing borders and be foremost ‘traders’ (Niemandt, 2017) in the new digital economy. We need to become conversant in the new immersive narratives of our day so that the voice and witness of the church can be heard.

As much as theology and missiology cannot divide reality between the world and church, and as much as the church should resist the privatisation of faith, one cannot divide people’s digital presence from other forms of presence elsewhere. Joubert and Van der Watt (2021:7) are adamant, “Believers’ imagination should intentionally be shifted towards a new understanding of their own online activities as being an integral part of their spiritual lives.”

In concluding the 4IR impact, Joubert (2020:4) perhaps says it best when he states, “Believers must be present in this never-ending drama of technological change, culture and human experience without losing their identity.”

4.5 Public theology and faithful presence – the worthy walk of the missional community

The theme of the 2022 SAMS conference and the focus on developing a new social contract in the public space enhances the important contour of public theology and faithful presence. Mission is concerned with the incarnation of Jesus Christ, which reminds us that God came to creation in Jesus Christ, and that he participated in the economic realities, political history, religious differences and social structures of his time. The incarnation is how the church carries forward God’s mission by

embodying and communicating the bible here and now. Joubert and Van der Watt (2021:5) argue that public theology is embodied theology, “It is about shifting from that deeply entrenched critical observer mode to an embodied responsiveness in terms of the core message of the bible and contemporary realities.”

I would like to suggest that we consider our way of doing public theology, and our approach to developing a social contract in terms of *faithful presence*. This refers to the theological conviction that God is present in the world, busy with God’s mission, and that God uses people faithful to his presence to make himself concrete and real in the world (Niemandt, 2017b:4). Being faithfully present means that missional disciples attend to their embodiment within the different habitats within their contexts. It challenges Christians to act in a way that affirms the integrity of the Christian faith. Guder (2015:129) refers to the worthy walk of the missional community. Referring to *Believing in the future*, it is to be “...enlisted into God’s ministry of reconciliation, peace, and justice on earth” (Bosch, 1995:34). The church is hermeneutic of the gospel – it brings the gospel story but is also, in its life and witness, the gospel (Newbigin, 1989:222–233). It is a presence that serves places and people, and looks after the interests of others (Phlp 2:4). It is also the kind of presence that shows Christian faith can be trusted and valued (Niemandt, 2017b:4). It is a communal reality to bring Christ’s kingdom into the spaces of our lives (Fitsch, 2016:13). Faithful presence respect the commons — the space where life is shared with others. Faithful presence considers neighbours and the common interest. Bregman (2020:314) attends to the restoration of the commons as one of the hopeful signs of a new dawn for humanity. The work of Nobel prize-winner Elinor Ostrom stresses the importance of sharing resources and community authority because “History teaches us that man is essentially a cooperative being, a *homo cooperans*” (Bregman, 2020:314).

The goal of faithful presence, and by implication, the goal we would like to see served by a social contract, will be to participate in a process that serves flourishing life. The WCC (2013:9) stated that mission is about the flourishing of creation. This includes individual thriving and global common good, thus helping others to thrive and lead meaningful lives (Volf & Blair 2015:2). The Trinitarian life and economy fosters sharing, justice and fairness, thus fullness of life for all (Niemandt 2015:344). Interestingly, Bosch (1991:453) also took this approach in *Transforming mission*; “As ‘public companion’, the missional church is part of civil society ‘to create and strengthen the fabrics that fashion a life-giving and life-accountable world’.”

Faithful presence is also about the restoration of flourishing life and, thus, healing and restoration. The abundance of biblical narratives about healing and recovery and the burgeoning health industry reminds us that the world is desperately looking for healing and restoration.

4.6 Missional spirituality

Bosch was aware of the close relationship between spirituality and being engaged in the world and that being in the world leads to a deepening of spirituality (1979: 13). Mission is supported by a “transformative spirituality.” The challenge is to nurture a missional spirituality — an awareness of God’s living presence, even in the face of and in disasters. It attends to the formation, thus, to give meaning to a person’s life – it stimulates and emboldens believers with everything needed for the journey God sends them on. The World Council of Churches argues, “Spirituality gives the deepest meaning to our lives and motivates our actions” (WCC, 2013:4–5). Spirituality is about becoming whole and living a flourishing life (Niemandt & Niemandt, 2021:2).

Much has been and can still be said about spirituality and missional spirituality. However, in terms of challenging missiologists to attend to the broadening of contours of missional theology, the following deserve attention:

4.6.1 The importance of rituals

Rituals flourish in local congregations where faith communities gather, celebrate, inspire, and are inspired. Rituals are important in discerning God’s preferred future and in ‘refiguration’. Rituals are a crucial component of liturgy and worship and serve as an invitation to see the world differently (refigure) and to act on the *missio Dei* (Flynn & Mathee, 2021:39). Rituals are about the Lord’s presence, and the transformational effect of God’s presence, because his presence reorders our lives and communities. Gregersen (2017:370) remarks that rituals are crucial for religious resilience. He concludes, “The rituals themselves express how the religious traditions mix sturdiness and flexibility — and this mixture transmits resilience to those who participate in them.” We need liturgies and rituals of love and life with a vision of flourishing life formed by God’s kingdom.

4.6.2 Synchronicity between mission and discipleship

Synchronicity between mission and discipleship, and the development of a missional pedagogy is crucial for the cultivation of transforming discipleship. To be a Christian is to be a disciple, which implies participation in the mission of the church. Missional discipleship is a lifelong, communal process of being immersed in the *missio Dei* for the sake of the world. Smith (2021) pleads for the recovery of the link between mission and discipleship and, thus, attention to missional discipleship and the cultivation of this discipleship as a missional pedagogy built on pedagogical elements of *habitus*, habitats, habituation, and habits. This includes attention to the link between theological education and missional spirituality. Niemandt and Niemandt (2021) found little formal attention to spiritual and missional formation in formal theological education. This does not serve the relation and interdependence

between theology and spirituality. The goal of formation and theological education is also to foster a spirituality that aligns missional leaders in a missional hermeneutic so that spiritual practices can lead to a way of interacting with Scriptures, inspiring the church for its missionary praxis and discipleship (Niemandt, 2019c:5, 9).

4.6.3 The intrinsic relation between spirituality and vocation

Vocation is one of the critical shaping themes of New Testament scriptures. According to Guder (2015:132), vocation reflects the “central thrust of the apostolic mission and the purpose of Jesus’ own formation of the disciples.” When God’s people are faithfully present and walking worthy of the calling, it brings spirituality and empowered obedience together.

4.7 Anticipatory leadership

Mission studies must attend to missional leadership, particularly anticipatory leadership. This is a radical departure from reactive responses to proactive leadership from the future. It is a change from the propositional ‘here we stand’ to a relational ‘there we go’. Anticipatory leaders believe in the future and dare to align themselves and faith communities with it. It is a process of adaptive meaning-making, appreciating the possible self and future possibilities.

Anticipatory leadership exemplifies the missional dictum — to discern God’s present and preferred future. It is a shift from decision-making to constant discernment — seeking God’s presence and action in your community and congregation. It is a well-known approach in missional theology — the understanding that *missio Dei* expresses hope for God’s future actions, based on God’s covenant faithfulness, trustworthiness, and loyalty to what God created. God was busy, is still involved and will be active in his creation, and constantly invites his people to participate in what he is up to and what might flow from the future (Niemandt, 2019d:136). Therefore, there are two guiding questions; “What is God doing?” and “What does God want to do?”

Anticipatory leadership values innovation, but then a specific innovation focused on adaptability, flexibility and a deep understanding that complexity demands novelty. To mention a few practical ideas, innovation demands as few rules as possible, flat open structures, emotional connections and swarm behaviour (Niemandt, 2019d:156). Leaders should create a culture of innovation and biblical imagination with few or no hierarchal limitations and where input is not evaluated in terms of position or power. Swarm behaviour values diversity and focuses on getting the team or system to work and play in concert. It appreciates the collective wisdom of participants and the organic formation of consensus (Niemandt, 2019d:195).

Anticipatory leaders attend to the spirituality of anticipation and eschatological participation in the mission of the Triune God. They can discern the plethora of im-

agitative narratives in Scripture and re-interpret these stories into an eschatological narrative where God's preferred future draws congregations into and towards God's future.

There is an important connection between resilient leadership and anticipatory leadership — resilient leaders build awareness and anticipation. The adaptive challenges and prospect of more disasters demand resilient leadership. Resilient leaders demonstrate the ability to have a positive outlook about the future in the face of adversity; they understand reality and can envision the future (Patterson, Goens & Reed, 2009:9). Resilience is the ability to bounce back after setbacks and amid crises. Resilient leaders embrace difficult circumstances and setbacks; they keep a positive attitude and bounce back in the face of adversity. These leaders demonstrate the ability to recover, learn from, and be developmentally mature when confronted by chronic or crisis adversity (Patterson, Goens & Reed, 2009:8). Resilient leaders show perseverance and refuse to let adversity prevail. They are relational leaders, focused on forming strong personal bonds or ecclesial language; they guard the importance of *koinonia*.

4.8 Rediscovering joy

Exploring possible contours of post-era missiology is concluded with attention to the rediscovery of joy. Joy stands at the very core of Christian faith, life and practice. The very reference to the gospel infers ideas of joy and good news, and that mission is sharing joyful news and the promise of flourishing life with everyone. Christianity is a religion of joy. Discipleship is an invitation to a joyful and flourishing life. Sweet (2019:14) reminds us that joy is one of the ways God measures faithfulness; 'God lives in laughter, lightness, loyalty, love, spontaneity. Life is not a joke, and yet life is jovial, joyful, playful — full of beauty, wonder, oddness, and sadness' (Sweet, 2019:64).

This joy is not an individualistic endeavour or the result of consumerism. On the contrary, the joy of flourishing life can only be celebrated in *koinonia*. The WCC (2013:38) states, "Mission spirituality . . . reconnects us with one another and with the wider creation."

We live in a world filled with liturgies of the good life. The best strategy to follow is Christian worship, as joyful worship is a counter-formation to all the rival liturgies of consumerism and individualism. Discipleship is characterised by a spirituality that distinguishes between needs and wants. It is a spirituality that nourishes downward mobility instead of the upgrading lifestyles of the accumulative logic of the market system. We need liturgies of love and life with a vision of flourishing life formed by God's kingdom (Niemandt, 2016:6).

When we participate in the public formulation of social contact, it must be done with the inner strength brought about by the deep joy of the gospel. It is a message

worth proclaiming because it is a message of joy, good news and life in fullness. It is also a life of generosity and service, where the true disciple delights in justice, gives generously and cares for the weak (Niemandt, 2016:7).

5. Conclusion

David Bosch was indeed a prophetic theologian. His *Believing in the future* is still as relevant in semiotic prowess and missional eloquence as it was a quarter of a century ago. His post-Enlightenment analyses still carry weight, and many of the trends he identified thickened. His contours of missiology were well received and informed the ecumenical community in formulating ecumenical policy and missional insight. In the South African context, it is still hugely influential in the self-understanding of many denominations as missional churches.

The changes Bosch discerned accelerated, and we live in a post-era VUCA world where the differentiation from the previous eras is becoming alarmingly clear. Missiology can discern prospects and develop new contours. In this process, it can add particular perspectives in the efforts to formulate a new social contract for South Africa so that life can flourish and the gospel can ring in shalom.

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