



Evangelism as an invitation to missional discipleship in the kingdom of God



Authors:

Frederik R.L. Coetzee¹ 

Malan Nel¹ 

Johannes J. Knoetze¹ 

Affiliations:

¹Department of Practical Theology and Mission Studies, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Malan Nel,
malan.nel@up.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 25 Aug. 2022

Accepted: 19 Nov. 2022

Published: 27 Feb. 2023

How to cite this article:

Coetzee, F.R.L., Nel, M. & Knoetze, J.J., 2023, 'Evangelism as an invitation to missional discipleship in the kingdom of God', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44(1), a2708. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2708>

Copyright:

© 2023. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Evangelism, for various reasons, is once again back on the agenda of the church and theology. As a result of negative experiences and practices of evangelism in the past, it is now necessary to rediscover evangelism in a post-Christendom context to enable the theological recovery of evangelism. This new understanding of evangelism can then contribute to the recovery of authentic practices in spreading the good news. To achieve this, evangelism must be rediscovered as essential to mission (participation in the *missio Dei*). Further to this, evangelism is rediscovered as an invitation to missional discipleship in the coming of the kingdom of God (missional discipleship as participation in the coming of the kingdom). This research was based on the starting point that evangelism takes place through an integrated missional congregation as the evangelist. This implies that evangelism is not an additional extra practice by a few members but an integral part of congregational ministry. Evangelism is then understood and integrated holistically as *martyria* by the entire faith community. The gospel of the kingdom is then embodied in their faithful presence (being), loving service (deeds) and words of hope at appropriate times (speaking). This holistic approach will free evangelism from reductionisms and dichotomies that have added to the fact that evangelism has fallen out of favour. These practices of evangelism are determined by the theology (content) and serviceable style of Jesus and contextually discerned in faith as participating in God's mission. The empirical research was based on 49 questionnaires received from 43 Dutch Reformed (DR) congregations from the Northern Synods and 6 other churches. The qualitative research comprised structured interviews with 10 pastors from participating DR congregations. Simple random sampling was used to select the participants of the study.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research was conducted from the perspectives of practical theology and missiology. However, it also leaned into systematic theology (dogmatics) about missional ecclesiology and the identity of the church. The understanding of the integrated missional congregation (faith community) made use of systems theory, which is an interdisciplinary approach. The ethics of the practices of evangelism have points of contact with ethics.

Keywords: Evangelism; discipleship; missional (mission of God); kingdom; integrated congregation (faith community); holistic evangelism; invitation.

Introduction

Evangelism has once again been placed on the church agenda for various reasons, including the move from Christianity to post-Christendom, secularisation, church alienation and the resulting decrease in the numbers of congregants. Osmer (2021:22) mentions that the secularisation and 'de-Christianisation' of the West has created new mission fields, especially in Europe and North America. Already in 1935, Barth wrote that Christianity in its current form has come to an end (Guder 2015:17). Therefore, according to Osmer (2021:22), Newbigin, Bosch, Guder and other theologians started describing the West as a post-Christendom context. They were challenging the Western church to start thinking about mission work and evangelism differently.

Paas (2017:39) mentions that the building blocks of post-Christendom, namely the split between the church and state, and the acceptance of religious pluralism, can be observed in various ways throughout most of the Western modern world. Stone (2007:10–11) contends that the church can therefore no longer assume that the surrounding culture will help with the task of creating Christians and that the church will just join in, like before (cf. Guder 2015:71). It is especially from this marginalised position that the church is best equipped to witness about God's reign (cf. Stone 2007:11). Often, churches fear this marginal position. Should the church want to return to the centre of the culture and want to return to the Christendom phase, it would be fundamentally

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

misleading. Evangelisation that avoids fragility and marginalisation evades the road of the cross (cf. Stone 2007:11).

Unfortunately, the 'e'-word, notes Stone (2007:10), has become a difficult one for the church to swallow. This is because of harmful practices and the doubtful history of evangelisation; it is therefore currently not a popular concept at all (cf. Nel 2007:1). It is also regrettable that most people avoid bringers of the good news instead of welcoming the sweet sound of it (cf. Is 52:7; Stone 2007:9). Nel (2007:2) opines that one of the problems with evangelism is that its theological underpinning is poor.

In this research, the principle of Nel (2007:2–3) is used to rediscover the theology of evangelism, with the purpose of recovering it, to enable believers to become involved in the world in a new way, as the address for God's love. *Rediscover* means 'to recover or to repair'. With this, Nel joins Osmer (1990:141) in connection with the teaching task of the church.

The problem this article seeks to address is that evangelism in congregational ministry is not seriously considered essential to the missionality of the church, and people are not invited to missional discipleship as part of the coming of the kingdom of God. This leads the main researcher to the following question: 'How is evangelism in missional theology, and in congregations, rediscovered theologically, in terms of missional discipleship, and in terms of the theology of the kingdom of God?'

This study comprised a quantitative and a qualitative part. A mixed-methods approach was used. The data source for the quantitative (empirical) research consisted of 49 questionnaires: 43 from Dutch Reformed (DR) congregations of the four Northern Synods and 6 from other churches (not DR). For the qualitative study, 10 structured interviews were conducted with pastors from participating DR congregations. This data source was randomly chosen under the auspices of the Department of Statistics at the University of Pretoria under the leadership of Joyce Jordaan.

Missionality and evangelism

The relationship between missionality and evangelism is important to enable the rediscovery of evangelism. According to Bosch (2008:8–9; cf. Niemandt 2016:3; cf. also Paas 2019:11, 19), it is the 'core', 'heart' and 'centre' of the church's mission and an essential part of the *missio Dei* (cf. Bosch 1991:412). In Guder's (2000:27) view, the theology of evangelism should be rooted firmly in the biblical theology of mission and shaped by the gospel it is proclaiming. Evangelism cannot be managed with theological integrity if it is not handled missionally within the mission of the church as the sent people of God (cf. Guder 2000:x).

Chilcote and Warner (eds. 2008:xxvi–xxvii) consider evangelism as an essential part of something much larger, namely the *missio Dei*. It is the central aspect of the mission of

God to a broken and lost world (cf. Franke 2020:50). Evangelism as the heartbeat of the missional church implies that the health of a church depends on mission and evangelism (cf. Reppenhagen 2017:68). Paas (2018:29, 33) describes evangelism as the heart of the magnetic pool of mission. Niemandt (2016:3) adds to the discussion by describing evangelism as an essential part of God's mission and the calling of the church to tell God's story. In other words, the calling to evangelise is 'part and parcel' of the mission; 'it belongs to the very being of the church' (Niemandt 2016:3). From the literature study, evangelism is seen as essential to missionality. This implies that congregations that take missionality seriously should also focus on evangelism. In the same breath, congregations that focus on evangelism should practise it from the principles of missionality.

The missional identity of a congregation is understood as taking part in the mission of God, as shown by 79% of the DR respondents in the quantitative research of this study. Reaching out to church-alienated individuals is seen as part of the missional calling by 65% of the respondents. This could be an indication that fewer respondents see evangelism as an integral part of the missional calling of their congregation. ATLAS.ti, a software programme used for qualitative data analysis, was used to interpret the qualitative data. The words 'mission' and 'missionally' appeared in the 'word cloud' 16 times during the 10 interviews. The word 'evangelism' occurred 132 times and the word 'evangelistic' 13 times. In addition, the word 'gospel' was mentioned a total of 68 times. This led the main researcher to question the extent to which evangelism is understood to be the heart of missionality and the being of a missional congregation.

Evangelism and discipleship

On the one side, the relationship between evangelism and discipleship is seen as respective, even separate, in some of the literature. Evangelism takes a new believer to the point of accepting faith, and then, according to Reppenhagen (2017:63–64), the practices of discipleship take over in the second phase of repentance, as part of a follow-up ministry in evangelism (cf. Nel & Schoeman 2019:2; Ott & Wilson 2011:223). On the other side, evangelism and discipleship are seen as inseparable and even indistinguishable from each other. Evangelism is discipleship or faith-sharing in a relationship of trust (Nel & Schoeman 2019:4), so even if one could distinguish between evangelism and discipleship, they are so interwoven that they cannot be separated (cf. Reppenhagen 2017:64).

Schoon (2018:177) points out that discipleship starts even before repentance (cf. Bowen 2002:76–86; Hirsch & Hirsch 2010:150–151) and that to 'belong' is not only an evangelism methodology but also integrally part of a praxis-orientated discipleship of the people of God (cf. Schoon 2018:177). Evangelism should lead to discipleship, and separating these, remark Ott and Wilson (2011:231), would be superficial. Receiving the gospel, and reacting to it, should lead to a life of discipleship (cf. Reppenhagen 2017:64–65). Essentially,

evangelism in the paradigm of discipleship would be individuals sharing the joy of the journey and not only the joy of the destination (Nel & Schoeman 2019:3–4). Discipleship is then essentially an invitation to a ‘flourishing life’ and partaking in God’s life-giving mission (cf. Niemandt 2016:3). Niemandt (2016:3) describes this concept of the interwovenness of discipleship and evangelism as follows: ‘One of the core practices of evangelism is disciple-making – evangelism is the invitation to personal conversion and discipleship’.

Maddix (2013:18) uses the term ‘missional discipleship’ to holistically include both participation in God’s mission and faithful discipleship (cf. Bosch 1991:73–83; Breen 2016:7). Thus, based on the literature study, evangelism can be understood as an invitation to missional discipleship. Evangelism and discipleship can be differentiated but are inextricably linked and intertwined. Schoon (2018:49), Hirsch and Hirsch (2010:166, 173) and Gibbs (2013:181) confirm this relation and terminology.

From the quantitative research, it seems that church members are seen as disciples (people following Jesus) and that evangelism is an invitation to follow Jesus. The critical connection between discipleship and evangelism can, however, be better understood if disciples are seen as people who share their faith spontaneously – as disciple-making disciples (missional discipleship). All of the participants in the qualitative research, albeit using different phraseology, acknowledged the critical connection between discipleship and evangelism. However, from the interviews, it seems that some clarity is needed on the relation between evangelism and discipleship and what it entails.

Evangelism and the kingdom of God

Nel (2007:98) points out that one of the problems in evangelism is that the theology and practices have flattened. Guder (2000:97–141) calls this phenomenon ‘reductionism’ (cf. Nel 2007:98). Reductionism of the gospel, according to Guder (2000:132), is not that the gospel is not being heard but that what is left is not enough (cf. Gibbs 2013:11). In this way, the range of the gospel – namely, the radical and transformative power of God’s love – is deprived. The impact of the kingdom becomes watered down to suit individual human agendas (cf. Gibbs 2013:11; Guder 2000:132). In Guder’s (2000:189–190) view, the gospel is greater, more cosmic, transformative and revolutionary in its scope than the individualised and privatised reduction thereof.

The salvation of the gospel, explains Arias (1984:xv), has been separated from the gospel message of the kingdom of God because of reductionism (cf. Guder 2000:190). Tragically, as a result of this, evangelism in a large number of cases separates Jesus as Saviour from Jesus as Lord. The salvation work of Jesus and his reign also becomes separated. Jesus, as the only source of personal salvation, becomes reduced to the level of personal need of salvation. This shift already took place during the process of ‘Constantinisation’ and, as a

result, the calling to witness for the kingdom of God (Arias 1984:xv) became reduced merely to personal salvation (cf. Gibbs 2013:11; Guder 2000:109). Guder (2000:113–114) points out that the concern regarding personal salvation developed into the dominant understanding of the church’s mission during the Reformation.

For McKnight (2016:37), this reduction of the gospel to only personal salvation deals with three things, namely admitting that one is a sinner, understanding Jesus as the Saviour on the cross and believing in this by accepting Jesus as one’s Saviour. The understanding of the gospel now becomes reduced to an individual, existential and private sin problem, known as a ‘gospel of sin management’ (Willard 1998:43, 49; cf. Hirsch & Nelson 2019: location 2455–2458).

For Nel and Schoeman (2019:4), evangelism concerns the sharing of the good news about the kingdom of God. When the gospel becomes stuck and focuses purely on sin and salvation by Jesus as Saviour, it becomes evangelism by the redemption approach (‘soterian approach’) (McKnight 2016:149–150), and Jesus as Messiah and Lord is completely missed. Based on the apostolic testimony, the content of Jesus’s message was understood to be the reign of God (cf. Stone 2007:76, 98–99). Evangelism becomes orientated from within the reign of God. The end goal then, note Chilcote and Warner (eds. 2008:xxvi–xxvii), is the realisation of God’s reign in the lives of people, which results in creating an alternative community with a holistic view of evangelism. Evangelism from within a kingdom perspective includes life in totality because it relates to the total realm of God (cf. Nel 2011:5; Verkuyl 1978:19).

Stetzer (2016:99–100) asserts that a kingdom cannot exist without a king. God’s kingdom was inaugurated by a King; it came closer in the life, ministry and messianic reign of Jesus, and was realised by his life, death and resurrection. God’s kingdom is expanding under his rule and will be completed when every knee shall bow before Christ and confess that he is the Lord. This is how he accomplished redemption, overcame dark forces and enabled restoration (cf. Nikolajsen 2015:50–51; Verkuyl 1978:17). The new era, as promised in the Old Testament (Nikolajsen 2015:56–57), is thus inaugurated with the kingdom of God, as a messianic kingdom, by Christ (cf. Verkuyl 1978:16).

A theology of the kingdom is constantly challenged by the Constantinian temptation of church and state to combine their powers to attain a godly goal, to institutionalise and to legalise (McKnight 2014:209). It is essential to look at evangelism from a post-Christendom perspective to prevent it from becoming a repeat of previous mistakes that were historically made.

Wright (2012:139, 195, 205) states that Jesus redefined ‘power’ in the kingdom by pointing out that ‘for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, to give His life as a ransom for many’ (Mk 10:45, NIV). In the kingdom, it is not about the love of power but rather about the power of love

and the power of service, specifically by self-sacrifice. Wright (2012:176, 184, 195, 211) asserts that the kingdom and the cross belong together and may never be separated from each other. Louw (2017:14) suggests that a shift is made from imperialistic categories to theopaschitic categories (cf. Louw 2018:3) because of the danger of control and power in thinking about the kingdom. This requires a shift from the dominant God images of power to co-suffering passion categories of the *passio Dei*. This shift can restore hope and trust, have self-sacrificing outreach to others in distress as a result and make compassionate solidarity and sympathetic dialogue possible in a postcolonial context. These perspectives also cut triumphalism to the root.

Our 'big story' is not a power story. It is a love story – God's love story, operating through Jesus and then, by the Spirit, through Jesus followers. Martyrdom of one sort or another, suffering of one sort or another, is what kingdom-bringers must expect. (Wright 2012:241)

From the quantitative study, most of the DR respondents understood evangelism from within the gospel of the kingdom. It implies being part of a faith community where the reign of God is celebrated and expressed as a way of life. The gospel as the good news of the kingdom was only mentioned explicitly in two cases during the qualitative research and implicitly only by one participant. The other participants made no mention of the gospel as a gospel of the kingdom. From these data, it can be deduced that the reduction of the gospel to personal salvation still exists among these participants. It may be possible to confirm the research problem that missional theology and congregations do not take evangelism as part of the coming of the kingdom seriously enough. This leads to an invitation to rediscover the gospel from within the gospel of the kingdom of God.

Integrated congregation as evangelist

The entire understanding of a missional church is based on an understanding of mission and evangelism being inextricably linked with ecclesiology (cf. Reppenhausen 2017:69). According to Schoon (2018:11–12), the argument is not whether evangelism has a place in today's pluralistic context but rather how the embodiment of the gospel can be consistently pursued and also what the broader vision of evangelism in such a context would entail. The famous words of Newbigin (1989:227) express the value of a relation between missionality and ecclesiology for evangelism as follows: 'I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe and live it'. For Nel (2017:4), 'This is indeed the radical essence of developing or building a missional congregation' (cf. Nel 1994a, 2015).

The entire focus of evangelism, as understood by Stone (2007:15), shifts from what Christians do for others to who Christians are for others. Witnessing, then, is not how the gospel can be shared with others through different methods

of communication but rather by embodying the truth of the gospel, in the shape of a holy life (cf. Gehring, Kingsey & Baker 2019:11; cf. Stone 2007:230–255). Stone (2007:314–315) expresses it as: '[T]he evangelistic invitation is, in the first place, a matter of living beautifully and truthfully before a watching world' (cf. Gehring et al. 2019:11). Gehring et al. (2019:12) mention that the emphasis of the embodiment of the kingdom does not take anything away from the personal choice to follow Jesus as a Spirit-filled child of the living God. Evangelism, then, is about an invitation to the community – a community that is witnessing about the reality of God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ and not purely about the individual's personal choice (cf. Osmer 2021:52–53). When seen from this perspective of a holistic approach to evangelism, evangelism can never be allowed a life of its own, in isolation from the rest of life and service in the congregation (Castro 1978:88; cf. Bosch 1991:412; Spong 1982:15). Evangelism is therefore essentially understood from a missional ecclesiology.

The entire service field of the church is divided into modes of ministry, namely *kerugma* [preaching], *leitourgia* [worship], *paraklesis* [care], *didache* [teaching], *koinonia* [community], *diakonia* [service], *marturia* [witness] and *kubernesis* [leading] (cf. Nel 2015:71). Each of these modes stands in service of the communication of the gospel; in other words, it serves the coming of God to his people and through his people. According to Nel (1994b:26–27, 2015:68, 70–71), combined they create three-dimensional service to the triune God, service to one another and service to the world. The execution of the mission of a congregation is then about the complete or comprehensive understanding and description of the activities undertaken by the congregation (cf. Burger 1999:104; Schoeman 2015:366).

Evangelism as *marturia* [witness], which is central to the *missio Dei*, appears in all the modes of ministry as part of the communication of the gospel (Nel 2015:72). In addition to having a corporate nature, the modes of ministry are also integrated. Therefore, all the modes are approached as an opportunity for evangelism. This integrated understanding of evangelism as *marturia* above all modes of ministry is essential for the missional calling of the entire congregation and is very important for this research on evangelism.

Nel (2015:78) affirms that the local missional congregation (cf. Marais 2021:145) is built up by integrating and coordinating all the ministries in service of the gospel. These ministries need each other to function effectively, and in this way, they can become larger (as in a systems approach) than they could individually on their own. The total ministry is then both important and essential for the effective development of a missional congregation. The temptation is to make simplistic or one-sided choices for certain ministries or to function in silos (cf. Osmer 2008:225, 234). Nel (2015:77) points out that by continuous integration and coordination of all ministries in service to God, each other and the world, expression can be given to

what God planned for the congregation and through the congregation to the world.

The one integrated (holistic) understanding of a missional congregation is critical for the understanding of the congregation as an evangelist and for integrated practices of evangelism. Evangelism is not an add-on for only a few but an integrated part of congregational ministry. Research conducted by Marais (2018:1–7, 2021:133–153) confirms the remarks of Osmer (2008:16, 17, 225, 234) regarding the silo effect that is seen in congregational ministry. This phenomenon of a few evangelising in a silo situation is part of the problem of evangelism and, according to Bliese and Van Gelder (eds. 2005:114–115), can be considered the deadly enemy of the evangelising church.

The quantitative research showed a lack of integration of the entire congregation being understood to be one integrated missional-evangelising congregation. A void was also noticed around the purposeful integration and coordination of the congregation and ministries to function as an evangelising congregation. The qualitative research, however, showed the use of words such as ‘us’ and ‘each member’ as a possible indication of the understanding of the congregation in its totality as evangelist and witness. The presence of the word ‘our’ in the ‘word cloud’ by ATLAS.ti could possibly confirm this observation.

A holistic understanding of evangelism

Understanding evangelism holistically is emphasised by most modern definitions of evangelism (cf. Reppenhagen 2017:61). Peace (2004) understands holistic evangelism as follows:

Holistic evangelism will invite people into the kingdom of God. It will invite them to turn to Jesus in repentance and faith in the context of the community of God’s people, which has worship and the sacraments at its centre. Such evangelism will invite nominal Christians to become active followers of Jesus. It will engage genuine seekers as they explore the issues that will move them forward in their pilgrimages. It will not settle for cultural faith. (p. 12)

According to Peace (2004), holistic evangelism includes an invitation to the kingdom; repentance and faith in Jesus; the context of the faith community; worship and the sacraments; and the journey to discipleship, as well as that it is not about cultural faith. From the perspective of discipleship and God’s kingdom, evangelism would want to be holistically understood as comprehensive in its approach to helping people find integrated lives and building on it for the rest of their lives (Nel 2007:110; cf. Verkuyl 1978:50). This comprehensive approach is then about the entire gospel for all people – all of humankind (cf. Verkuyl 1978:50).

In Bosch’s (1987:101; cf. 2008:11) view, evangelism is about focusing on God and his works – what he has done, what he is doing and what he will still do. Holistic evangelism takes

place through both words and deeds (cf. Verkuyl 1978:50), proclamation and presence, explanation and example (cf. Reppenhagen 2017:61), publicly and in private, politically and personally, spiritually and socially (cf. Alexander 2014:21), as well as through justice and care of creation (cf. Heath 2017:103–104). In addition, Heath (2017:103–104, 161) also states that evangelism is good news for the entire creation. The biblical concept of *euangelizesthai* [*evangelise*] encompasses much more than the word ‘preach’ (cf. Bosch 2008:12).

Holistic evangelism creates a balance between credible communication of the gospel and living God’s love through practical actions (cf. Alexander 2014:17). Reppenhagen (2017:61) affirms that the sad heritage of separating ‘word’ and ‘action’ can be overcome by a holistic approach to evangelism. It is a dichotomy that often appears in the Western way of thinking. Evangelism is to share the gospel through both words and works, as indicated in *Together Towards Life* (TTL) (ed. Keum 2013:25; Reppenhagen 2017:61). When words are not demonstrated by actions, the gospel becomes ‘inauthentic’. Bosch (1991:420) expresses this inseparable relationship between words and deeds as follows: ‘The deed without the word is dumb; the word without the deed is empty’. Words interpret actions and actions confirm the value of words, notes Newbigin (1982:146–149; cf. Bosch 1991:420). The combination of verbal statement (announcement) and visible actions pronounces the witness of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and his purpose. When the church neglects evangelism – sharing the good news in both words and works – it loses its primary reason for existing in the world (ed. Keum 2013:24).

Schoon (2018:172) suggests an integrated approach that allows discipleship and evangelism to focus on the character of Jesus and repositions the word–works debate on a missional understanding of evangelism. Newbigin (1989:137) offers special insight into this perspective by remarking:

It is clear that to set word and deed, preaching and action, against each other is absurd. The central reality is neither word nor act, but the total life of a community enabled by the Spirit to live in Christ, sharing his passion and the power of his resurrection. (cf. Schoon 2018:172)

Schoon (2018:173–174) explains that the focus on the faithful embodiment of the gospel is not about whether people should take part in the word- and works-based ministries, but rather how both word- and works-based ministries can create opportunities for God’s people to accurately embody the character of Jesus Christ accurately. Hirsch (2006:114) indicates that the embodiment of the message of the gospel both personally and combined in words and actions makes the missional church as an evangelistic church credible (cf. Goheen 2011:198; Schoon 2018:172–173). In this way, it makes the message transferable and points to Christ.

Chilcote and Warner (eds. 2008:xxvi) contend that authentic evangelism is inevitably contextual (cf. Bosch 1991:417). In

faith, discernment is carried out contextually regarding ways in which words or works embody the love of God in an appropriate way, from a holistic perspective. Holistic evangelism can be distinguished from the point of view of Guder (1985:91; 2015:132; cf. Rawson 2015: location 137; Reppenhagen 2017:63) regarding witnessing, as 'the Church and the Christian are to be the witness, do the witness, and say the witness'. The integrated missional approach proposed by Schoon (2018:5–7) between liturgical rhythms, praxis-orientated discipleship and evangelism specifically wants to dismantle the silo approach that extinguishes the interaction between the focus areas of worship, discipleship and evangelism. It also prevents these areas from occasionally competing and becoming territorial.

It is noticeable in the qualitative research that the congregations that participated in this study find a wide and creative variety of ways to practically reach out to the communities in distress. From studying the literature, the main researcher wonders how integrated the sharing of the good news is in these congregations, in the form of 'being' or 'presence', 'doing' and 'telling' the good news. There could be a risk that the congregations could respond to the bad practices of the past by focusing on the 'deeds' part of evangelism and that sharing of the gospel verbally does not receive enough attention. If this is the case, evangelism could be reduced to missional projects [*diaconate*], however important they are.

Evangelism as an invitation

Bosch (1991:414) explains that evangelism is only possible when the faith community evangelising is a radical manifestation of the Christian faith and reflects this lifestyle as attractive (cf. Brienens 2017:138). Churches are busy rediscovering that the quality of life of a witnessing community is a key factor for evangelism (Brienens 2017:138). He mentions that hospitality and welcoming are discovered to be central to the Christian calling and that they belong to the heart of a Christian community. A good deal of emphasis is therefore placed on hospitality and the welcoming of people in contemporary congregations. Hamman (2005:161) maintains that hospitality is a basic feature of mature spirituality, and it is a powerful witness of the life and love of Christ (cf. Ungerer 2021). A bad hospitality culture will undermine any strategy to attract visitors (cf. Ungerer 2021:110).

Evangelism, explains Osmer (2021:268–269), is therefore an invitation to people to live in the here and now in the light of God's glory. For Bosch (1991:413), evangelism is always welcoming, and it is a positive message of joy (cf. Löffler 1977:341; Sundermeier 1986:72, 92). Stone (2007:146) reports that in a secular context, a faith community that is sensitive to the secularity of people should focus on a welcoming approach to evangelism rather than a confronting one.

What does this invitation include? Reppenhagen (2017:60) remarks that it is an invitation to repentance, to the gospel, to

the kingdom of God, to Jesus Christ, to the church, to a heavenly feast, to a life of abundance and to the love of God. No matter the differences, all the different approaches agree that evangelism without an invitation is not an option. Bevans and Schroeder (2004:358) go so far as to say that:

[W]ithout the practice or intention of introducing others into a relation with God through and in Jesus, the church's missionary activity remains just that – the church activity and not participation in God's activity. (cf. Reppenhagen 2017:60)

Reppenhagen (2017:56) points out that evangelism is open and invitational and longs to give church-alienated people as many opportunities as possible to experience the gospel. The approach of the invitation in evangelism also creates a space for true interfaith discussions in evangelism, where the openness can contribute to mutual transformation and repentance (Stone 2007:162). The theme of vocation (calling) serves as an entry point for the understanding of the invitation in evangelism (Osmer 2021:14–15). This invitation should fit the people, circumstances and cultural context. It is always personal and contextual. The Spirit works and convinces people to accept the invitation and join the wedding feast. The Spirit is not under human control.

Evangelism, according to Brueggemann (1993:10), means people are invited to leave their own stories and to rewrite and experience them through the stories of the gospel (cf. Thiessen 2018:19). Witnessing and invitation is the only fitting way to evangelise, as the process of converting someone is the work of the Holy Spirit and outside the ability of any person (Reppenhagen 2017:257). Bliese and Van Gelder (eds. 2005:128) refer to evangelising churches as witnessing and inviting churches that invite neighbours, colleagues and family members to hear the story of God's love in Jesus Christ.

To witness about the kingdom, without directing an invitation to join the kingdom, is not just partly wrong, according to Stone (2007:49), but totally wrong. Jesus announces the kingdom and invites people to become part of this new reality (cf. Stone 2007:83, 86, 171–172) and to become participants of the glory of God (cf. Koukoura 2018:396).

Stone (2007:129) mentions that Christians and churches offering the good news are always hopeful that the invitation will be accepted. The church, however, does not focus on the acceptance but rather on offering an authentic invitation that will be understood clearly, so that it can be accepted or rejected with responsibility. Rejection of the Christian invitation should not be seen as less 'successful' than acceptance, according to Stone (2007:277), as evangelism is defined purely as the practice of offering the invitation faithfully (cf. Mobsby 2020:40).

From the quantitative data, it appears that strangers and visitors are warmly welcomed at congregational gatherings and hospitably welcomed by 69.8% of the DR church respondents. Although there is an openness at worship

services and congregational gatherings to welcome strangers and to receive them hospitably, there is still much to be done to establish an inviting culture where relationships are developed with these strangers and where they are intentionally invited to gatherings to join in the fellowship. This purposeful invitational culture, which was tested with the participants of this study, revealed that it is still a void that needs significant attention.

The qualitative data revealed that the participating congregations make a concerted effort to be open and welcoming, and that hospitality is important to them. There are, however, challenges around the 'inviting', and in some congregations, this is even absent. It seems that establishing an active invitational culture in congregations will take much effort, as half the participants did not have invitation practices in place. The other half also did not necessarily have an active culture of invitation. According to several scholars (eds. Barna & Kinnaman 2014:27; Nel & Schoeman 2019:7), there is exceptional potential to inspire members to invite friends. The inviting of others comes from an inviting and hospitable culture in congregations where people are intentionally and actively encouraged to attend congregational meetings, to follow Jesus as Lord and to experience the adventure of a new life in the kingdom together.

Conclusion

Evangelism is once again appearing on the agenda of the church and theology. It is imperative that the church does not repeat the same mistakes of the past, as the integrity and credibility of the gospel are at stake. Evangelism should then resist the Constantinian temptation and rediscover it in the context of post-Christendom as substantial participation in the mission of God *missio Dei* [missionality], an invitation to missional discipleship and a discipling participation in the kingdom of God. In this way, integrated, missional and evangelising congregations can be seen as a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God, which embodies the good news in an authentic way by faithful presence, acts of service and words of hope!

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

F.R.C. was the main researcher, while M.N. was the study leader and supervisor. J.K. was the co-study leader and cosupervisor.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained by the ethical committee of the University of Pretoria (ref. no. T014/19). The manner of consent was written. The data source for the quantitative (questionnaires) and the qualitative (structured interviews)

empirical research was used and kept anonymous and confidential according to the guidelines of the University of Pretoria.

Funding information

This project was financially supported by the South African Academy for Science and Art.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

References

- Akkerman, J.R. & Maddix, M.A. (eds.), 2013, *Missional discipleship: Partners in God's redemptive mission*, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, Kindle Edition.
- Alexander, E.D., 2014, *Holistic evangelism: Redeeming works and word*, Research Paper, viewed 12 November 2021, from https://www.academia.edu/15701327/Holistic_Evangelism_Redeeming_Works_and_Words?auto=download&email_work_card=download-paper.
- Arias, M., 1984, *Announcing the reign of God: Evangelization and the subvertive memory of Jesus*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, Oregon.
- Barna, G. & Kinnaman, D. (eds.), 2014, *Churchless: Understanding today's unchurched and how to connect with them: Based on surveys by the Barna Group*, Tyndale House Publishers, Austin.
- Bevans, S.B. & Schroeder, R.P., 2004, *Constants in context: A theology of mission for today*, Orbis, Maryknoll, NY.
- Bliese, R.H. & Van Gelder, C. (eds.), 2005, *The evangelizing church: A Lutheran Augsburg contribution*, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis.
- Bosch, D., 1987, 'Evangelism: Theological currents and cross-currents today', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11(3), 98–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693938701100301>
- Bosch, D., 1991, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of missions*, Orbis, New York.
- Bosch, D., 2008, 'Evangelism: Theological currents and cross-currents today', in P. Chilcote & L.C. Warner (eds.), *The study of evangelism: Exploring a missional practice of the church*, pp. 4–17, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Bowen, J.P., 2002, *Evangelism for 'normal' people: Good news for those looking for a fresh approach*, Augsburg, Minneapolis.
- Breen, M., 2016, *Building a discipling culture: How to release a missional movement by discipling people like Jesus did*, 3rd edn., 3DM Publishing, Kindle Edition.
- Brienen, F., 2017, 'Trends and developments in Evangelism: An overview', in G. Noort, K. Avtzi & S. Paas (eds.), *Sharing good news: Handbook on evangelism in Europe*, pp. 133–154, World Council of Churches Publications, Geneva.
- Brueggemann, W., 1993, *Biblical perspectives on evangelism: Living in a three-storied universe*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Kindle Edition.
- Burger, C.W., 1999, *Gemeentes in kragveld van die Gees: oor die unieke identiteit, taak en bediening van die kerk van Christus*, Buvton, Stellenbosch.
- Castro, E., 1978, 'Liberation, development, and evangelism: Must we choose in mission?', *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 2(3), 87–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693937800200303>
- Chilcote, P. & Warner, L.C. (eds.), 2008, *The study of evangelism: Exploring a missional practice of the church*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Franke, J.R., 2020, *Missional theology*, Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Kindle Edition.
- Gehring, M.J., Kinsey, A.D. & Baker, V.W., 2019, *The logic of evangelism: Revisited*, Pickwick Publications, Eugene, Oregon.
- Gibbs, E., 2013, *The rebirth of the church: Applying Paul's vision for ministry in our post Christian world*, Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Kindle Edition.
- Goheen, M.W., 2011, *A light to the nations: The missional church and the Biblical story*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Guder, D.L., 1985, *Be my witnesses: The church's mission, message, and messengers*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.
- Guder, D.L., 2000, *The continuing conversion of the church*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.

- Guder, D.L., 2015, *Called to witness: Doing missional theology* (The Gospel and Our Culture Series [GOCS], Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Kindle Edition).
- Hamman, J.J., 2005, *When steeples cry: Leading congregations through loss and change*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland.
- Heath, E.A., 2017, *The mystic way of evangelism: A contemplative vision for Christian outreach*, Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Kindle Edition.
- Hirsch, A., 2006, *The forgotten ways: Reactivating the missional church*, Brazos Press, Grand Rapids.
- Hirsch, A. & Hirsch, D., 2010, *Untamed: Reactivating a missional form of discipleship*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Kindle Edition.
- Hirsch, A. & Nelson, M., 2019, *Reframation: Seeing God, people, and mission through reenchanted frames*, 100 Movements Publishing, Kindle Edition.
- Keum, J. (ed.), 2013, *Together towards life. Mission and evangelism in changing landscapes*, World Council of Churches Publications, Geneva.
- Koukoura, D., 2018, 'Reflections on evangelism and re-evangelization after Arusha: A case for Europe', *International Review of Mission* Volume 107(2), 391–397. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irrom.12238>
- Löffler, P., 1977, 'The confessing community. Evangelism in ecumenical perspective', *International Review of Mission* 66(264), 339–348. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.1977.tb01222.x>
- Louw, D.J., 2017, "'Black Pain is a White Commodity": Moving beyond postcolonial theory in practical theology: #CaesarMustFall!', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(4), a4504. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4504>
- Louw, D.J., 2018, 'The "Frail Researcher" in dialogue with existential phenomenology: The threat of empiricism within the quest for sound methodology in practical theological research', *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 52(1), a2361. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v52i1.2361>
- Maddix, M.A., 2013, 'Missional discipleship', in J.R. Akkerman & M.A. Maddix (eds.), *Missional discipleship: Partners in God's redemptive mission*, pp. 15–26, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, Kindle Edition.
- Marais, N., 2018, 'Integrering en koördinerings van bedienings in identiteitsontdekking en -ontwikkeling', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 39(1), a1869. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v39i1.1869>
- Marais, N., 2021, 'Integrating and coordinating all ministries in the function of developing a missional congregation', in M. Nel (ed.), *Mission moves: Cultivating communities of the gospel*, HTS Religion & Society Series, vol. 11, pp. 133–153, AOSIS, Cape Town.
- McKnight, S., 2014, *Kingdom conspiracy: Returning to the radical mission of the local church*, Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Kindle Edition.
- McKnight, S., 2016, *King Jesus Gospel: The original Good News revisited*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Kindle Edition.
- Mobsby, I., 2020, 'The beginnings of a nondirective approach to mission and evangelism', *Anvil: Journal of Theology and Mission* 36(2), 39–43.
- Nel, M., 1994a, 'Building up a missionary local church', in C.J.A. Vos (ed.), *Proclaim the gospel*, pp. 130–148, Etiole, Pretoria.
- Nel, M., 1994b, *Gemeentebou*, Orion, Johannesburg.
- Nel, M., 2007, 'Verantwoordelike evangelisasie in die teenwoordigheid van God: 'n teologiese refleksie', *Practical Theology in South Africa/Praktiese Teologie in Suid-Afrika* 22(1), 98–117.
- Nel, M., 2011, 'Missionale integriteit en kontekstuele relevansie', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67(3), Art. #1084. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i3.1084>
- Nel, M., 2015, *Identity driven churches. Who are we and where are we going?* BibleCor, Wellington.
- Nel, M., 2017, 'Called and sent to make a difference: Radical missionality', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38(1), a1755. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i1.1755>
- Nel, M. & Schoeman, W.J., 2019, 'Rediscovering "disciplemaking" and the role of faith-sharing', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(4), a5119. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5119>
- Newbigin, L., 1982, 'Cross-currents in ecumenical understandings of missions', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6(4), pp. 146–151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693938200600401>
- Newbigin, L., 1989, *The gospel in a pluralist society*, SPCK, London.
- Niemandt, C.J.P., 2016, 'Rediscovering joy in costly and radical discipleship in mission', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4), a3831. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3831>
- Nikolajsen, J.B., 2015, *The distinctive identity of the church: A constructive study of the post-Christendom Theologies of Lesslie Newbigin and John Howard Yoder*, Pickwick Publications, Eugene, Kindle Edition.
- Osmer, R.R., 1990, *A teachable spirit: Recovering the teaching office in the church*, Westminster/John Knox, Louisville.
- Osmer, R.R., 2008, *Practical theology: An introduction*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Osmer, R.R., 2021, *The invitation: A theology of evangelism*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids.
- Ott, C. & Wilson, G., 2011, *Global church planting: Biblical principles and best practices for multiplication*, Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Kindle Edition.
- Paas, S., 2017, 'Challenges and opportunities in doing evangelism', in G. Noort, K. Avtzi & S. Paas (eds.), *Sharing good news: Handbook on evangelism in Europe*, pp. 37–51, World Council of Churches Publications, Geneva.
- Paas, S., 2018, *Vreemdelingen en priesters: Christelike missie in een postchristelike omgeving*, Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, Zoetermeer.
- Paas, S., 2019, *Pilgrims and priests: Christian mission in a post-Christian society*, SCM Press, London.
- Peace, R.V., 2004, 'Conflicting understandings of Christian conversion: A missiological challenge', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28(1), 8–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693930402800102>
- Rawson, K.J., 2015, *Crossing cultures with Jesus: Sharing good news with sensitivity and grace*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Kindle Edition.
- Reppenhausen, M., 2017, 'Contemporary theological discourse on evangelism', G. Noort, K. Avtzi & S. Paas (eds.), *Sharing good news: Handbook on evangelism in Europe*, pp. 55–78, World Council of Churches Publications, Geneva.
- Schoeman, W.J., 2015, 'Describing a congregation – Looking for certain markers', in M. Nel (ed.), *Identity-driven churches: Who are we, and where are we going?* pp. 363–371, Biblecor, Wellington.
- Schoon, C.J., 2018, *Cultivating an evangelistic character: Integrating worship and discipleship in the missional church movement*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, Kindle Edition.
- Spong, J.S., 1982, 'Evangelism when certainty is an illusion', *The Christian Century* 99(1), 11–16.
- Stetzer, E., 2016, 'An evangelical kingdom community approach', in C. Ott (ed.), *The mission of the church. Five views in conversation*, pp. 91–116, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids.
- Stone, B., 2007, *Evangelism after Christendom: The theology and practice of Christian witness*, Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Kindle Edition.
- Sundermeier, T., 1986, 'Konvivenz als Grundstruktur ökumenischer Existenz heute', *Ökumenische Existenz Heute* 1, 49–100.
- Thiessen, E.J., 2018, *The scandal of evangelism: A biblical study of the ethics of evangelism*, Cascade Books, Eugene, Kindle Edition.
- Ungerer, A.G., 2021, 'Cultivating a prayerful culture of hospitality', in M. Nel (ed.), *Mission moves: Cultivating communities of the gospel*, HTS Religion & Society Series, vol. 11, pp. 109–132, AOSIS, Cape Town.
- Verkuyl, J. 1978, *Inleiding in de evangelistiek*, Kok, Kampen.
- Willard, D., 1998, *Divine conspiracy: Rediscovering our hidden life in God*, HarperCollins Publisher, London.
- Wright, N. T., 2012, *How God became King: The forgotten story of the gospels*, HarperCollins, New York, Kindle Edition.