Chapter 1
Introduction: A journey

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A church without a roof

In many African countries one finds the local market by following cyclists on bicycles loaded with bulking bags of charcoal. Big cities like Lusaka have a charcoal market easily found by following bicycles or pickups stacked with charcoal bags. The Reformed Church in Zambia’s (RCZ) Garden congregation has little green left since black charcoal dust permeates everything. “Charcoal market congregation” would actually be a fitting description. Large areas of the congregation consist of informal housing.

The RCZ Garden congregation’s church premise is in a compound with a rectangular street plan. A two metre wall surrounds it. Huge iron gates with a peephole allows for busses to enter. It has adequate parking, a borehole, a manse, the necessary toilets and a church building. The roof was quite dilapidated. The church board was aware of the story of Luke 13:4 about the tower in Siloam that came down and killed 18 people and therefore, as a precautionary measure, removed the roof. When we visited the church only a small section had a roof. The congregation added sections when money was available to buy steel girders and corrugated iron roofing.

On a cool day under a clear sky the local pastor, Rev Morris Mwale introduces Esther Kajombo who explained the “Circles of Hope” concept to an audience of about 80 people. She introduced herself by telling how her parents gave her (“sold” may be a better description), as a 14 year old from a rural village to a rich old man as second wife. The next ten years of her life was a horrifying ordeal. Eventually she was tested HIV positive when she AIDS developed. Through the grace of God she was one of the lucky ones who were able to get ARVs. Her mother’s faith and Esther’s conversion to Jesus Christ paved the way to a ministry in the RCZ where she is doing remarkable work.

The group that met in the church were divided in seven smaller groups. On the church walls signs indicated where the choirs were seated. The groups were “posted” to their positions using these signs. The most frequent notice painted on the walls was the request to put cell phones on silent. In this part of the world a cell phone was something to live and die for, more important than an identity document.

Justo Mwale Theological College, a founding member of NetACT, were hosting a conference called Mission to the Western Culture. Dr DT Banda, the principal, and Rev Moses Mwale, the moderator of the Reformed Church of Zambia were our guides. The visitors were the leadership in the Missional Church movement brought together by NetACT and the Allelon group led by Alan Roxburgh. They had representatives from each continent. The local people were those that Rev

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2 Japhet Ndlovu’s doctoral dissertation tells the story of the “Circles of Hope” and the enormous role that the church in Zambia played to develop a unified strategy to deal with AIDS. Esther eventually worked with the Christian Council of Zambia where Dr Ndlovu was the General Secretary.


3 The occasion was Allelon International’s “Mission to Western Culture” project meeting in Lusaka Zambia 3-8 of Aug 2008. The topic of the conference was Missional Churches in Dialogue; Discerning missional calling in mutuality.

Mwale and Esther invited, all being members of “Circles of Hope,” all HIV positive. About thirty plus of the forty local people were women.

The agenda was telling stories. Lunch was served in the vestry. Luke 10’s “eat what is set before you” applied and we all enjoyed a local meal conscious that to have a meal was a privilege. I asked the pastor about the bags with corn flour and beans in the vestry. It turned out that the congregation with its 540 members in this low-income area was helping about 150 families to survive. In most cases these families were unemployed HIV infected people. Repairing a roof was not a priority.

We were seated in circles. Suddenly the devastating pandemic’s trail of pain and suffering was told by someone you could see and hear. When the worst and most degrading stuff were told the simple act of holding someone’s hand was comforting to narrator and listener.

There were five women in the small group where I was. After the meeting I took them home by car.

Several impressions stay with me. There was no real road. We simply followed the path around large rocks, trees and even houses that were built in the middle of what seemed to be the road. Taxis drop people where the official road ends. It was indeed an informal housing area. Luckily the visit was not in the rainy season. The bad-smelling uncollected waste dumps, typical of all squatter camps, reminded me of the inequalities in life and the harsh reality of living here.

However, around each house the ground was regularly swept and the premises clean. Children were everywhere; running, playing, shouting. The paths were full of people. At strategic points vendors were selling their goods. Sites near the communal water points were popular. Notwithstanding the sand and dust, the vendor sites were clean and neat. Among the merchandise were supermarket bags filled with charcoal alongside cooking oil, bananas, soap, batteries, freshly baked buns, candles; the essential stuff the people need. Entrepreneurial cell phone shops are ever present! It seemed like a happy community.

When we arrived at someone’s house, I was invited in. A house tells a story. All were small, neat and tidy, very full and radiating warmth. The hoard of inquisitive children was ordered to stay outside. Photos and memorabilia were shown and related to what was told in the church. I asked to be introduced to the children. It was special to them. I then prayed for the children and their mother asking God’s blessings on the house. This was a solemn ritual at every house. While visiting a house, the remaining women peacefully waited in the car. To be taken by car to your house by a pastor was a way of acknowledging human dignity. Being listened to and prayed for obviously meant much. The whole neighbourhood got out, waived, smiled, watched – and somehow, though this may sound pretentious, was blessed. Someone cared.

Nolipher was a cashier and then an accountant in a commercial bank. She was well educated but when she got HIV&AIDS, she lost her job and her husband left her with their children. Esther helped her to get to a hospital and to get ARVs. She survived. Regaining health is a long road; physically, psychologically and spiritually. Being HIV positive and contracting AIDS is like falling from grace. Unemployed, without a husband and left with the responsibility to care for the children women bear a terrible burden. But with the support of the faith community and her Circle’s meetings Nolipher was on the road to rebuilding her life. She showed me her sewing machine and the clothes she makes to earn a living. She was an educated and very capable woman. This was the case with every one of the women that I took home.

At each home I enquired about the children and took photos. There was not a single house without orphans that were taken in and cared for. The church building might not have had a roof, but the faith community was providing a roof for the destitute. The charcoal congregation was indeed a garden in its very own way.

Three streams
Three events led to the formation of the Network for African Congregational Theology. NetACT’s vision and mission put the quest for gender equality on the cards even though it was not thus formulated at the very beginning of the network.

The first stream of NetACT’s origin was an “African Safari” in 1997 when three staff members of Stellenbosch University and one from the University of the Western Cape visited 37 theological schools in Namibia, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Ever since South Africa’s first democratic dispensation, 1994 onwards, these institutions were receiving post graduate students from the churches founded by die mission work of the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa. Others soon joined. The aim of the safari was to get to know the theological schools to our North in a more personal way; to strengthen ties, to further ecumenical cooperation, to take some exams from students on the way and to ask an important question to the 37 theological schools: What are the main challenges and problems that theology and theological institutions face in our sub-continent? We were personally changed by this visit and our institutions too.5

The source of the second stream, also in 1997, was in Amsterdam in the Netherlands when the International Society for the Study of Reformed Communities met at the Free University for their triennial meeting. The Society studied the influence of secularization on Reformed communities and a pretty negative scenario unfolded. The writer and colleague Prof Russel Botman represented the Reformed Church in South Africa and told the conference that it was their research described a pretty one-sided picture. We then explaining what are happening in southern Africa. We challenged them to listen to other voices than just Western ones. The outcome was that the next meeting was held in Stellenbosch, South Africa in 2000. Ten of the nineteen papers were from sub-Saharan Africa, from the countries visited during the 1997 Safari. They were presented by people we met on that Safari. This meeting between “North and South” left nobody untouched and eventually was much more than a typical scientific research based event.6 A lot of trust was build between the southern-African contingent in the three years in which we worked on our papers and presented them. Our papers had a remarkable impact on the academics of Europe and North America. It meant a lot to all of us.

The origin of the third stream was in Karin, Nairobi, Kenya 2-5 February 20007. A consultation was organized by the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA)8 and the Nairobi Evangelical School of Theology (NEGST).9 It was attended by 350 delegates from all parts of Africa. It dealt with seminaries as theological institutions of higher education and their relationship with the church. “Serving the church: partnership in Africa” was the theme, and Prof Tite Tienou, the previous president and dean of the Faculty of Theology in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and currently professor in Missiology at the Trinity International University, Deerfield, Illinois, was the main speaker. The challenges, shortcomings and tensions in theological education in Africa were debated. Emphasis was laid on the importance of the church’s financial support of seminaries and on the responsibility of seminaries to cooperate with the church in training future ministers.


In this atmosphere, the representatives of Justo Mwale Theological College (Lusaka, Zambia), Zomba Theological College (Malawi) and Reformed Institute for Theological Training and Stellenbosch University met and decided to form NetACT. The following institutions were not present, but indicated their willingness to be part of such a network: Murray Theological College (Zimbabwe), Nifcott (Malawi) and Hefsiba (Mozambique). The very first objective was to work together to produce theological textbooks and to commence by writing *Studying congregations in Africa*. The emphasis on “congregational theology” should be understood in the light of the conference’s theme and with the conviction that nothing will change in Africa if change does not start on a congregational level.

NetACT’s second meeting was in Lusaka, 18-25 April 2001. We put our dream on paper in the form of a mission, goals and a constitution and we started working on our first book. The NetACT website has all the minutes and reports of this and subsequent meetings as well as the network’s mission, goals and constitution.

What is making it work?

The NetACT story highlights several principles that explain what made such projects work. Adhering to and understanding these principles will be important to the Gender Equality project.

The first of these undoubtedly are leadership & commitment. From 2001 to 2011 we had two chairpersons, doctors Amon Kasambala and Devison Banda. Both were from Justo Mwale Theological University College (JMTUC), an anchor institution that was committed to the goals we set. Stellenbosch University provided the necessary administrative infrastructure and the Executive Director, the writer of this introduction, kept the communication alive. However, one can only realize the commitment if the names of the board members and staff members of the NetACT institutions themselves are scrutinized and one discover how many staff members of these institutions undertook post graduate studies and received doctoral degrees dealing with the very issues outlined in NetACT’s goals. A movement got underway as leaders were intellectually empowered through studies and research to dream and to envisage a missionally reformed church and society. In this quest we are still lacking the indispensable input that only women can contribute.

The second principle is that of trust. In the beginning there was something like layers of trust. On the upper level everyone was friendly with typical African hospitality but on deeper levels there clearly was a “wait and see” attitude. Stellenbosch University with its apartheid legacy and many resources seemed an unequal partner was not distrusted, but “put on hold.” We were fortunate that this “elephant in the room” was spoken about and addressed by name ever since the second meeting in Lusaka (2001). Honest communication helped. Trust can only be built over time and through the development of deep and personal relationships. The HIV&AIDS program that Christo and Liezl Greyling presented to the whole Board and local church leaders in Lilongwe, Malawi in 2002 was a deep spiritual experience that brought us together in a remarkable way. The testimony of a local CCAP pastor dying with AIDS forced us to realize the reality of what we are dealing with. It was the first time that a local pastor shared his status and the terrible journey of pain and spiritual suffering that he experienced. In the long run it was clear that all the institutions were benefitting and that Stellenbosch University really did put its money where its mouth is. Personal friendship, knowing one another’s family and homes, working together on various projects, are the indispensable prerequisites for building trust.


The third point may not be a “principle” in the strict sense of the word. By God’s grace we were put in touch with the Hartgerink family in the USA and especially Dr Ron Hartgerink, a chemical engineer, whose father founded the Elmer E Hartgerink Trust. This Trust “paid our expenses” until 2006 and Dr Hartgerink with his business background as well as his knowledge of theological institutions (he was president of the Board of Western Theological Seminary in Michigan, USA) played an indispensable leadership role in establishing the network. So did people like the well-known Dutch sociology of religion professor, Gerard Dekker. With Prof Martin Pauw, missiologist from South Africa, they and others acted like father-figures to get us on track. From 2006 we were challenged to be financially “independent.” Thus the network established a network of funding agencies or partners that believed in us and funded our endeavours. With a proven track record this transition was less painful than we envisaged – it actually led to expanding the network with associate members that wanted to join us in pursuing the goals we set.

The fourth principle is a confession. The NetACT Board and the institutions they represented, shared a vocation. One “discovers” vocation at strange places! I can remember drinking Kenyan tea at Karen, Nairobi in April 2000 in deep conversation with the fellow pastors from the theological schools that later constituted NetACT. At a point our conversation stopped because we were all sharing the same ideas. We were looking at one another, surprised by our mutual conviction in the importance of local congregational leadership shared by men and women and the youth. That was the birth of a movement. For us it was a vocation, similar to Luther’s 95 theses nailed to the door of the church in Wittenberg in 1517. We were invited by the triune God on a missional journey to be a missional church in Africa.

From HIV&AIDS programs and curriculum development to gender equality

Focussing on gender was the result of a journey in discernment. When the Network met in Lusaka in April 2001 to write its mission, vision and constitution the topic most discussed was that of HIV&AIDS. A typical remark was “If we want to address the issue of HIV&AIDS effectively and faithfully we will have to move from denial to truth-telling.” The Network’s first formulation of its identity read:

NetACT is the Network for African Congregational Theology, a network of theological institutions in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Congregational Theology is theology as practiced in the Christian Congregation as the body of Christ, discerning the will of God in the process of interpreting the Scriptures and its own specific context, empowering the Congregation to address its multiple problems, challenges and sufferings, in Sub-Saharan Africa manifest in the pandemic of HIV&AIDS, abuse of power, corruption and economic injustice (among others).

NetACT aims at assisting the participating institutions to develop congregational theology and leadership. It seeks to achieve this aim through:

- contextual relevant training of congregational leadership
- upgrading of academic standards and institutional capacity-building
- developing research programmes at the participating institutions
- developing continuous education programmes
- lecturer-exchange between its participating institutions
- conferences and publications in the field of theology in Africa

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14 NetACT Minutes 2000: 11
15 NetACT Minutes 2000: 18-19
addressing the HIV&AIDS problem, especially by providing the theological, moral and spiritual undergirding to curb this pandemic.

Before the next NetACT meeting in Lilongwe Malawi 5-9 August 2002 the HIV&AIDS program got underway with Rev Christo Greyling visiting the seminaries in Zimbabwe and Zambia in preparation of conducting their first HIV&AIDS programs. A program was developed and then taught at these schools. At the Board Meeting in Malawi Greyling and his wife presented the program to the Board and senior CCAP pastors. It was a remarkable event. At first we were quite perplexed because we were not used to talking about sex, condoms and all there is to address in this “new world.” The testimony of a local CCAP pastor, dying with AIDS, touched us in a way that is difficult to put into words. Not even the fact that Greyling’s research at two seminaries disclosed that between 60% and 70% of the male theology students were sexually active shocked us as much as the story of our brother. Dr Kasambala’s leadership through these events really brought us together. The board then became a team. We visited a prayer house in Nkhoma congregation where we found 200 plus orphans that were taken care of by older people in that specific ward. Ever since these experiences fighting the AIDS pandemic was no longer an academic pursuit but something very real.

At all the NetACT institutions people were identified and trained to present such programs. The bad news was that all our trained facilitators were given better paid jobs by governments or NGO’s. The minutes of the subsequent NetACT Board meetings as well as the Administrative Reports that were tabled at these meetings tell the story than can best be described as a journey in discernment. A second module was developed and a book, Our church has AIDS. Preaching about HIV & AIDS in Africa today, was published.

At the 2006 Board Meeting in Windhoek Rev Janet Guyer, regional AIDS consultant for Southern Africa for the Presbyterian Church (USA) led the discussion which led to a number of decisions. Amongst others it became clear that we had to concentrate on curriculum development. The problem being that a “once off” module on HIV&AIDS, often presented by part-time lecturers, does not lead to a change in attitude and deeply ingrained cultural assumptions. We realized that our curricula were not contextualized and as such does not holistically address the issue. As long as AIDS was seen as “someone else’s responsibility to teach” and addressed by a specific module, deep cultural transformation won’t take place. During the period 2006 to 2009 a new module was developed and the above mentioned book was completed and published.

The 2009 Board Meeting that coincided with the 150 years anniversary celebrations of the Theological School at Stellenbosch. A three day workshop on curriculum development was held for Old and New Testament lecturers as well as lecturers teaching HIV&AIDS modules. Those attending testified that this interactive workshop was probably the most constructive NetACT ever had. It was during this workshop that Prof Elna Mouton tabled the following motion that was unanimously accepted:

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18 Mash, Rachel, Cilliers, Johan, Griffiths, Keith, Chemorion, Edith & Katani, Archwells (Eds). 2009. Our church has AIDS. Preaching about HIV & AIDS in Africa today. Stellenbosch: NetACT. Copies are available at the NetACT office. Write to netact@sun.ac.za
Gender equality: Every institution to write a 10-12 page article about Gender Equality in its context. This should include consultation of women voices. Check existing research. To be ready for agenda of 2010 AGM.

Between 2009 and 2012 two initiatives gained considerable momentum. The NetACT institutions realized the value of curriculum development. Namibian Evangelical Theological Seminary (NETS) and Murray Theological College (MThC) took the lead and literally revised every aspect related to curriculum in a process that involved staff and board members. NETS subsequently was the first Namibian tertiary institution to receive national accreditation from their National Qualifications Agency. This inspired the rest of the NetACT family and Rev Kruger du Preez, who was requested by NetACT to do a doctoral dissertation on the status of curriculum development in the network, held workshops in Kenya, Malawi, Angola and Nigeria where all NetACT seminaries attended as well as others who requested to partake.

At these meetings it became clear that the request by the 2009 Board to deal with Gender Equality was a wise decision. Because of the curriculum workshops we did not have the capacity or money to start dealing with this challenge in 2010. It also needed more planning and budgeting. It was at this stage that Stellenbosch University’s HOPE in AFRICA initiative asked to partake in our venture and financed our 2011 meeting. Several partners came forward to support this venture.

This section outlined our journey in discernment highlighting the relationship between HIV&AIDS, the development of a holistic curriculum to address the AIDS issue and the importance of addressing gender equality. Very little in the African AIDS scenario will change if gender equality is not attained. The 2011 and 2012 meetings of the NetACT Board are Gender Equality workshops where the principals / board members of the NetACT institutions attend with a woman staff member or church member. The goal of this exercise is to intellectually and theologically empower at least one woman from each constituency to be the standard bearer in that church and seminary with regard to gender issues. For this we have the wholehearted support of the principals / board members who will see to it that they receive the necessary backing to pursue their research and writing.

On the equator

We were driving in a Toyota Hi-Ace mini-van from Limuru, near Nairobi Kenya, to Eldoret in the Kenyan highlands enjoying the scenery of the Rift Valley. Along the way we passed the camps were displaced people were given shelter after the ethnic violence of Kenya’s last election. It was a sad and moving sight, the rows and rows of tents, seemingly irresolute people sitting around doing nothing while small children played soccer with a soccer ball made from plastic bags.

As we crossed the equator I asked the group of male Kenyan pastors, if we could stop to take a photo of the billboard that marks the symbolical boundary line between North and South. I looked around at the rich and fertile land and noticed a woman who was weeding a crop of maize. It was hard work with a pick-axe. Suddenly a cell phone rang. She put the pick-axe down and from her apron produced the phone. While stretching her back, one arm in the air, the other holding the phone to her ear, she laughed out loud, greeted her conversation partner in a clear, warm welcoming voice and talked away with gusto, her free arm taking part in the conversation.

This is Africa, our continent. We are to cross several boundaries on a journey where we believe God wants to guide us to be a missional church.