

# 'Preaching from the pews': A case study in vulnerable theological leadership

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When explaining vulnerability as a theme for the conference of the *Societas Homiletica*, the organisers referred to two ways in which the concept can be interpreted. On the one hand, it can refer to preachers themselves as vulnerable people, subjected and accountable to other people. On the other hand, it can refer to the fact that preachers are often called to preach about difficult and challenging aspects of life and faith. In this sense, preachers speak on behalf of those who are vulnerable and in need of attention. In this contribution, both understandings are at play when the researcher takes a closer look at the sermons that were preached as part of a project known as the 'The sermon of the layperson' in Stellenbosch, South Africa, during September and October 2013. An analysis of the contents of these sermons, as an exercise in 'preaching from the pews', shows that they were preached on behalf of vulnerable people. In the process of analysis, it also became apparent that the preachers were themselves examples of vulnerable theological leadership in the sense that they were 'lay people' and therefore not in positions of official authority within faith communities. All of the preachers were however quite influential in their own areas of specialisation and professional life, and therefore, their sermons also communicated hope amidst situations of vulnerability.

## Introduction

In 2013, the International Board of the *Societas Homiletica* under the leadership of the current president chose the theme 'Preaching vulnerability – naming and neglecting reality' as the focus for the 11th international conference for this international academic society.<sup>1</sup> The choice was strongly motivated from the president's own Indian context. He invited participants to take heed of the social locations, nations, churches and local cultures of our own context in the preaching moment. According to the organisers, every country, congregation and preacher is vulnerable in different ways and for different reasons.

I responded to this call by showing through the research for this paper how preachers and the contents of the sermons I analysed in the South-African context are related to vulnerability in various ways. The preachers who participated in this project, known as the 'sermon of the layperson',<sup>2</sup> spoke on behalf of three different groups who are indeed vulnerable within the South-African context. An analysis of the contents of the sermons clearly identified the three groups. The manner in which difficult and challenging aspects from the existence of these vulnerable groups were named and addressed required courage and conviction from the preachers. In this regard, it is surely a form of '... prophetic preaching from the pews' (Tisdale 2010:7).

Simultaneously, the vulnerable position of the preachers were also evident in terms of their position as people who are not ordained ministers of faith communities and thus have no official position of authority in any church. Therein lies the vulnerability of their positions, namely that questions could have been asked about the legitimacy and value of their message. In this context, the sermons were not without risk for there is always the possibility of misunderstanding (cf. Coetzee 2013:48). Nonetheless, sermons by lay people can be considered a form of theological leadership if one bears in mind that all of these lay preachers are in influential positions in their various professional spheres.

## Problem statement and goal of research

The basic problem statement addressed in this study is the following: What can we learn about vulnerability from the sermons and preachers who participated in the 'sermon of the layperson' project in Stellenbosch, in the Western Cape (South Africa).<sup>3</sup> In the search for answers, the

1.Cf. the document discussing the theme (*Societas Homiletica* 2013).

2.Visit the project website (*Sermon of the lay person* 2013).

3.By demarcating the preachers and sermons in this way, a specific 'context of vulnerability' is brought into focus.

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following procedure will be followed. Firstly, more will be explained about the project 'sermon of the layperson' as far as its origin and purpose are concerned. The initiative originated in the Netherlands and developed in its own unique way in the South-African context. Secondly, the contents of the sermons will be investigated by means of a content analysis<sup>4</sup> to determine who the vulnerable groups were on whose behalf the sermons were preached. In all five sermons, the preachers had certain vulnerable and marginalised groups in mind. This is clear in their choice of texts for the sermons but also in the contents of their sermons. Thirdly, the focus will be on the vulnerability of theological leadership. The aim is to determine whether one can in fact refer to theological leadership and, if so, what kind of vulnerability do we discover in this form of leadership. Lastly, attention will be given to the role of hope amidst vulnerability. Before turning to these four issues, greater clarity needs to be attained about the concept of vulnerability. From the literature, it is clear that the concept itself is vulnerable and open to different interpretations.

## Naming vulnerability

According to Koopman (2013:43–44), following Reynolds (2008:138), vulnerability can be understood in at least two ways. Firstly, it means that our lives may be in danger and that we face real risk and the possibility of suffering. The original meaning of the word 'vulnerability' derives from the Latin *vulnerare*, which means to inflict hurt on someone and therefore be in a threatening position with the possibility of injury. Secondly, vulnerability can refer to real and concrete suffering in various forms. It can be any condition in which our basic needs for a life of human dignity are in danger. These physical needs can vary. With reference to Maslow (1943), the following needs can be distinguished by simplifying them into three groups: Firstly, there are physical and safety needs like housing, food, water, medical care and education (needs 1–2 in Maslow's hierarchy). These can be referred to as physical vulnerability. The second group of needs relates to love and belonging and our need to participate in various forms of socialisation. To live in community with others and to not experience exclusion are important here. We could call this social vulnerability (need 3 in Maslow's hierarchy). Thirdly, there is the need for freedom to develop our gifts and talents and serve others (combining needs 4–5 in Maslow's hierarchy consisting of respect and self-actualisation). We could translate these needs to theological vulnerability since it is related to the *telos* or purpose of our lives.

When these basic human needs are not met, we experience suffering in various forms. This suffering is exacerbated by the powerlessness that people often experience when trying to overcome their vulnerability. This powerlessness could be a result of various circumstances like poverty, sickness or death. The circumstances are often systemic in nature, which means that it is not easy to break free from the situations causing suffering. If we bear in mind the different forms of vulnerability

4. Content analysis focuses on the semantic fields in which words, metaphors and sentences operate.

that exist and the various needs we have as people, it will help us when we consider the vulnerability of different groups of people in the different sermons (Koopman 2013:44).

The vulnerability of people is, however, not a foreign topic within the discourses of the ecumenical church. During a mid-term report of the Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Porto Alegre in 2006 on the Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV), an interesting statement was made in this report (Koffeman 2009):

The praxis of non-violence must be rooted in a spirituality that acknowledges one's own vulnerability and is able, at the same time, to resist being caught in the mentality of perpetrator and victim. (p. 407)

In the rest of his article, Koffeman (2009:409) wrestles with the question concerning what it really means for churches to '... acknowledge their own vulnerability'.

A key issue for Koffeman is the moral vulnerability of the church, and he shows how the different aspects of vulnerability can be connected to the four quality markers of the church (one, holy, catholic and apostolic church). According to him (Koffeman 2009:407), '... the church is a vulnerable community and a vulnerable institution in many respects, basically both in its relation to its context and in its internal dynamics'. He goes on to illustrate that vulnerability is a multi-layered term and distinguishes the following four aspects: physical (the risk of being subjected to violence, being damaged, hurt, destroyed or killed), moral (the risk of losing integrity and giving in to certain temptations), communicative (presenting oneself in a vulnerable way by not being too defensive but open for dialogue and criticism) and compassionate vulnerability<sup>5</sup> (getting into the shoes of a fellow human being). The theoretical insights of Koopman and Koffeman will be kept in mind as attention is now focused on the project as such.

## The 'sermon of the layperson'

On the website of the project (Sermon of the lay person 2013), it is described in the following way:

The Sermon of the Layperson is an initiative that began in the Netherlands and is now also being presented in South Africa for the first time. In earlier times ministers had great influence on society. In modern societies this role is often played by writers, comedians, journalists, politicians and scientists. As project team we think it should be interesting if people from these environments were to stand on pulpits with Bible texts in their hands. We are curious how a performance by such a person can be accommodated in a church service where we pray, sing, read and preach. These public figures who preach are not chosen on the grounds of their faith beliefs, but on the grounds of their courageous and creative participation in public debates and influence in society – for the preachers of our time no longer wear robes/cassocks. (n.p.)

5. Concerning 'compassionate vulnerability', Koffeman refers to another contribution of Koopman (2008) in which the latter gave some thorough insights into the vulnerability of the church. Koopman linked the vulnerability of the church with the mission of the church and takes as his point of departure that the church is the church of the triune God: 'Faith in the triune God is faith in a vulnerable God' (Koffeman 2009:241).

The preachers were chosen by a project team (Sermon of the lay person 2013). From the introduction on the website, it is clear that the criteria used for the selection included that the preachers should be people with influence in society through their participation in public debate. It was also important that the people should have a 'prophetic voice' and should neither hesitate to address problems (vulnerabilities) in society nor fear criticism. 'Courageous and creative participation' in public discourse was therefore an important criterion (*ibid.*). The project team also tried to select people from different sectors of public life, representing various groups (*ibid.*).

After the preachers were identified, the project team followed a specific method of preparation for each of the sermons. Members of the project team acted as mentors for the preachers. In the first conversation with the preachers, they were asked about their current concerns which could become a possible theme for a sermon. After deciding on a specific theme, the mentor suggested two or three possible texts on which the sermon could be based. The preacher chose a text, and in a second conversation, the mentor assisted the preacher with exegetic and theological perspectives on the text. Thereafter, it was the preacher's own responsibility to write a sermon. In the last conversation, the mentor also discussed the liturgy of the service, including aspects like music, offerings and technical support.

## Laypersons, texts and themes

This section commences with a short description of the biographical information of the different laypersons, the texts they chose, and the themes that were addressed. Each of these elements contributes to illuminate the 'context for vulnerable preaching' in this specific project. This will be followed by a short summary of each of the sermons before focusing on the 'vulnerability of the content of the sermons'.

### The preachers who participated in the project<sup>6</sup>

#### Amanda Gouws

She is a professor in Political Science at Stellenbosch University and Commissioner of Oaths for the Commission for Gender Equality. As an activist for gender equality, she is well known for her pronouncements on the radio and other media. Her areas of specialisation in Political Science, namely the representation of women in government and civil society and policy analyses of gender equality, reflect her sensitivity for women's participation in, and exclusion from, the political sphere.

#### Beyers Truter

He is a winemaker, who, since 1981, has been particularly known for the Pinotage wines from his farm Beyerskloof (he is known as the Pinotage king). He is passionate about red wine, and in 1991, he was awarded as international winemaker of the year at the International Wine Competition for his Kanonkop Pinotage 1989. This was a watershed

<sup>6</sup>The participants gave consent that the content of their sermons might be used for research purposes.

moment for Pinotage. He is involved in local politics and does not hesitate to speak out on behalf of minority groups, particularly farm labourers.

#### Rhoda Kadalie

She is the managing director of the Impumelelo Social Innovations Centre which supports and rewards social innovation that improves the quality of poor people's lives. After 21 years in the academy, President Nelson Mandela appointed her as a human-rights commissioner. She has received honorary degrees from four universities for her contribution to academic and public discourses on human rights and poverty.

#### Chris van der Merwe

He is the chief executive officer of Curro Holdings Ltd, a JSE listed company, which is also responsible for the development of the Curro Private Schools. He qualified as a school teacher at Stellenbosch University and taught at state schools in the Western Cape for 15 years before founding Curro Durbanville, the first Curro private school in the Western Cape, with the assistance of a number of colleagues. Besides the private schools catering for children of parents from high-income groups, the Curro group also started the Meridian brand, which offers private-school tuition for children of parents from middle and lower-income groups.

#### Conrad Sidego

He escaped the so-called 'poverty trap' in the Tulbagh valley where he grew up and matriculated at Lückhoff High School in Stellenbosch. He studied Communication and Political Science at Stellenbosch University and worked as a journalist at Die Burger and Rapport newspapers for 16 years. He later became head of corporative communication of the Anglo American Corporation. After the release from prison of Nelson Mandela and with the birth of the new South Africa, he became the South-African ambassador to Denmark. During this time, he succeeded in convincing the European Commission to lift sanctions against South Africa. He serves on various boards, including Casidra, a rural-development organisation, and Business against Crime and is currently the mayor of Stellenbosch.

## The texts and themes addressed

The texts and themes that the preachers chose are mentioned in Table 1, as discussed with their mentors.

TABLE 1: Preachers, texts and themes.

Preacher	Text	Theme
Amanda Gouws	Genesis 34:1–17 & Esther 2:1–18	'What it means when a king asks for a virgin'
Beyers Truter	John 15:1–17	'Pressed grapes and living vines'
Rhoda Kadalie	Luke 19:1–10	'The trials of the unobserved life'
Chris van der Merwe	1 Corinthians 9:17–27	'A race run with Paul'
Conrad Sidego	Matthew 25:14–30	'Let us escape from the valley of fear and rise to the heights of refreshing renewal'

The choice of texts and accompanying themes clearly shows the underlying theme of the 'vulnerability of people' in all the sermons. Below follows a short summary of the content of each of the sermons after which the 'theme of vulnerability' will be discussed, illustrated by examples from the sermons.

### Sermon 1

In the introduction, the preacher started with the latest South African Police statistics of sexual transgressions in South Africa. In 2013, 66 196 cases had been reported by October, which was already 2.9% more than the cases reported in the entire previous year. The preacher then described patriarchy according to Genesis 34, using Dina as an example of someone who was raped and who thus brought shame upon her family. She summarised her sermon according to five points:

Patriarchy creates the conditions of male domination that justify and normalise violence against women and justify men's entitlement to sexual favours. The act of rape is a profoundly embodied act that causes severe psychological damage, exactly because the intimacy of the act for women is denied.<sup>7</sup>

Rape and all forms of gender violence make women voiceless. 'For women to regain their voices are [*sic*] a way to make a difference – it is a political act.' Communication is at the heart of love.<sup>8</sup>

### Sermon 2

In the introduction, the preacher explained how sparkling wine is made by describing how the grapes are broken to free its colour and flavour before the fermentation process in tanks and bottles. He uses this example to tell something about his own faith story, of how the Lord sent him to a farm to learn about humility, to be satisfied with what you are and what you have and to be loyal and obedient. These virtues became particularly clear to him in his dealings with farm labourers. He uses various examples of the way in which their lives of poverty and simplicity touched his own life, including the story of Paultjie the orphan who later died of tuberculosis. In his reflection about Paultjie's life, according to Matthew 25, he questions himself asking whether he saw God in Paultjie's short life. These experiences led him later to become involved in politics, specifically for the rights of farm labourers.

### Sermon 3

In the introduction, the preacher refers to the fact that we live in a world in which the adoration of glittering personalities dominates newspapers and magazines. According to the preacher, it does not matter how people acquired their wealth. In South Africa, people are amazed

by anyone who 'made it'. According to her, the opposite is also true – we often discriminate against people who do not fulfil these stereotypes of success and fame. The preacher then puts Zacchaeus on the stage and contemplates his story. She refers to his 'unobserved life' both in terms of his career as tax collector and his physical size. She then looks at the transformation in his life when he meets Jesus. The rest of the sermon focuses on our responsibility to physically and metaphorically embrace the marginalised, particularly children who suffer neglect. In this way, she also places the role and task of the church in the spotlight. She concludes:

May this message grant us the grace to develop more empathy with those on the other side of the tracks and see in them the potential to embrace the transformative power of Jesus, our Lord and Master.

### Sermon 4

The preacher started with snippets from his own life story in which he tells how his father died when he was 4 years old, and his widowed mother battled for their survival with a meagre monthly income. Despite financial and other challenges, he later studied with the help of a teaching bursary and uses Paul's image of running a race to demonstrate how obstacles can be overcome if the final goal is clear. He links this to his passion for teaching and the enormous challenge of 30 000 schools in South Africa with 12 million children of school-going age and the ineffectiveness of many of these schools. Yet he also demonstrates how education is recovering, naming examples of schools that achieve well and the growing role of private schools. He also refers to the fact that the size of classes have decreased from an average of 70 in 1994 to the current 40 and the fact that the Curro group is also developing private schools for children from middle and lower-income groups.

### Sermon 5

The preacher started by telling about one of his first challenges shortly after he became mayor of Stellenbosch. He was introduced to a woman who has been raising her four children as a single parent in a township in Stellenbosch for 25 years. She sometimes had to do so with water running through her house ankle deep. She approached his office after her house eventually collapsed because of heavy winter rains. The preacher explained the housing shortage in the town, placing it in the context of the housing shortage countrywide. In his search for an answer, he identified with the third slave's reaction in Matthew 25:18, the parable of the coins. He illustrates how this slave's actions were characterised by fear and lack of imagination and applies this to communities in South Africa. He refers to the actions of the other two slaves, showing how their actions were characterised by gratefulness and imagination based on a positive God image. He concluded by encouraging the congregation to think new and differently about the needs of people without homes, naming examples of projects of the Stellenbosch Municipality to address the housing crisis.

7. Most of the quotes from the sermons are translations from the Afrikaans that I did myself.

8. Gouws, in conjunction with Claassens, made use of the sermon to write an article. The title of their contribution is 'From Esther to Kwezi: Sexual violence in South Africa twenty years after democracy' (Claassens & Gouws 2014).



## Interpretation through the lenses of vulnerability

A content analysis<sup>9</sup> of the sermons with a view to investigating the subject of vulnerability produced the following results, with examples from each of the sermons. After categorising<sup>10</sup> the elements of vulnerability in the sermons, I also briefly discuss the projects these people support, for which offerings were taken up during the services.

### The vulnerability of women

The vulnerability of women lies at the heart of Gouws's message and is undoubtedly a deep concern to her. A thorough knowledge of the South-African landscape in this regard is illustrated by the following quotes from her sermon:<sup>11</sup>

Given our colonial history and our apartheid past, there are complex reasons for gender-based violence, but since time immemorial, women have lived in patriarchal societies that create conditions in which violence against women becomes normalised. South Africa is no different. Patriarchal societies are male dominated. They create relationships of power that very often exclude women from decision-making positions and control over their own lives and bodies ...

What we know, however, is that many women do not report rape because of having to relive the trauma of rape. The statistics of 66 196 is by far not the number of rapes that occur in South Africa annually. Very often, women rape survivors are not believed, or they are turned into spectacles to be laughed at at police stations, a form of secondary victimisation. The epidemic of rape in South Africa has rendered a large proportion of its women citizens voiceless.

We may think that, because we have not been raped, the issue of rape is the problem of 'other women'- of the other unfortunate ones. But rape falls in a spectrum of abuse of which emotional and psychological abuse and economic dependency are also part. These conditions also render women voiceless and create conditions for violence against them.

Claiming a voice is a profound act of activism for women that may lead to more violence against them. But it is the only way to be heard because it is a political act that reinstitutes them as subjects and citizens.

Referring to the chosen text, Gouws describes how Esther, in the book of the Bible by the same name, regained her voice and how that was the beginning of communication between her and the king. Within this relationship of trust, she was able to draw his attention to the conspiracy against

him and her people. According to Gouws, the core of this communication was love. She concludes:

Therefore it is very important that we talk to each other, no matter how painful. Violence cannot be a substitute for communication. We each have a duty to talk about conditions that normalise violence against women.

If we read the sermon through the lenses of vulnerability (physical, belonging and freedom), as described by Koopman (2013:33–34), the three forms of vulnerability can be discovered in her message. Women's lives are often physically in danger, they experience various forms of suffering, and their freedom to develop their gifts and talents is restricted. Gouws asked that the offerings be donated to the Stellenbosch Night Shelter<sup>12</sup> project, which has a shortage of 'safe places', especially for women.

### The vulnerability of children

The vulnerability of children is the focus of both the sermons by Truter and Van der Merwe, but in different contexts. In Truter's case, it arises from his background as a wine farmer and his experience of and identification with the children of farm labourers on wine farms. The following personal anecdote in Truter's sermon invites reflection:<sup>13</sup>

On Christmas day last year, Paultjie died. Paultjie was an orphan. Paultjie broke into our house on Beyerskloof as a child and left my wife a letter to explain that he did not want to do damage, he was only looking for food. Paultjie was actually searching for love. Paultjie later became our gardener, my right hand. He never complained, he never argued, he was always friendly. About two months before he died one of the cellar staff members came to tell me Paultjie did not have long to live – he was very seriously ill with TB. After his death, it suddenly hit me: Was I sensitive enough? Do I hear the voice of God, and do I obey him? Was I a human father for this boy without parents? Did I tell him enough about his heavenly Father and Jesus' love? Did he see Jesus in my actions?

Although this is the story of one single child, it is clear from the rest of the sermon how deeply Truter cares about the vulnerability of children. The project Truter chose to support with the offerings was SANCA<sup>14</sup>, which also works with children with FAS (Foetal Alcohol Syndrome). Alcohol abuse and alcoholism on wine farms makes children very vulnerable. His involvement with and support for the development of children on wine farms confirm the fact that the vulnerability of these children were part of his agenda for becoming involved in politics.

In Van der Merwe's sermon, he paints a picture of education in South Africa, including the following facts:

12 million children of school going age, 30 000 schools, 5500 are ex-model C schools, 22 000 are state schools and approximately

12. Stellenbosch Night Shelter is a project of the Stellenbosch Municipality offering homeless people a safe place where they can stay for up to three months to find their feet (Stellenbosch Night Shelter n.d.).

13. Truter, male farmer, between 50 and 60 years of age.

14. SANCA (South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence) is directly involved with FAS children (SANCA National Directorate n.d.).

9. The content analysis was done by making use of the Heidelberg method. This could be described as an intra-textual approach making use of the close reading of sermons by implementing theological and rhetorical criteria in identifying and selecting codes. For an overview of this approach, cf. Pieterse (2010:1-16).

10. 'Categorization is a major component of qualitative data analysis by which investigators attempt to group patterns observed in the data into meaningful units or categories. Through this process, categories are often created by chunking together groups of previously coded data. This integration or aggregation is based on the similarities of meaning between the individually coded bits as observed by the researcher. Categories in turn may be abstracted or conceptualized further to discern semantic, logical, or theoretical links and connections between and across the categories. The results of this process may lead to the creation of themes, constructs, or domains from the categories' (Denzin & Lincoln 2011:73).

11. Gouws, female professor in political science, between 40 and 50 years of age.

2500 private schools. Thousands of the 22 000 state schools are considered ineffective. Schools are usually evaluated according to six levels: Excellent, good, average, functioning, effective and ineffective. Some schools in this last category have a matric pass rate of 0%. By now, you should have an idea of how fit South African education in general is.

Despite this negative picture, which again spells out the vulnerability of school-going children, Van der Merwe is convinced that this is not the full story. He tells the tale of a private school in Limpopo:

On a campus of 6 ha in Polokwane, a private school, Northern Academy, was founded by an engineer 15 years ago. The school teaches 4200 black learners from grade R to 12, and the sizes of classes vary from 30 to 70. The school boasts a pass rate of 99% to 100% over the past five years. The parents of these children live in shacks and send their children to this private school because they want to make SA a better country, and they want the best for their children. The school is based on Christian principles, and the children are taught the Bible from a young age. The reason for the good results: Discipline and passionate teachers ... 300 of them.

He also highlights the positive changes in South-African education over the past 20 years:

The sizes of classes decreased from 70 in 1994 to 40 today. Enormous improvements in physical facilities in the more than 22 000 state schools. Angie Motshekga is the first Minister of Education who admits that we must investigate effectiveness in classrooms and fix things THERE. Perhaps we expect too much too soon in terms of education achievements ...

Through the lenses of Koopman's (2013:33–34) comments on vulnerability, there is no doubt that children are vulnerable in a number of ways in the South-African context. What is distressing is that if you look at the problem closely, those children have little choice. They are powerless to escape from their vulnerable circumstances.

### The vulnerability of the socio-economically marginalised

The last two sermons focussed on people who are marginalised by society and therefore vulnerable. Kadalie began with children but then moved on to all people who struggle with 'the trials of the unobserved life'. What follows are some segments of her sermon:<sup>15</sup>

Being ignored is one of the worst things that can happen to a child. Contact with caregivers are key to a child's development – just 30% of what is required to grow into a happy child is enough to give a child guidance, reassurance, as sense of what is right and wrong, etc. A lack of this kind of socialisation results in all kinds of insecurities.

It is a direct challenge to us to embrace those who suffered as children because of abuse; those who turned to lifestyles of gangsterism because of a lack of parental love and guidance. This story speaks directly to us as ministry, to those we despise and reject, and raises the question about the role of the church

15.Kadalie, female activist, between 50 and 60 years of age.

in seeing the full human being. It is a ministry of generosity that allowed Zaccheus to find a new life in Christ – give away his wealth, remorse, compensation, restitution out of embrace of love.

And yet this is God's work in us too: restoring our true identity as sons and daughters of God through the death of his Firstborn for our sin, taking the covenant curse upon us and freeing us from sin and guilt, redeeming us by his blood. Jesus the Firstborn dies for us.

May this message grant us the grace to develop more empathy with those on the other side of the rails and see in them the potential to embrace the transformative power of Jesus, our Lord and Master.

Kadalie asked that the offering at the service where she preached be donated to Soil for Life,<sup>16</sup> a project which supports needy people 'on the other side of the tracks', to plant vegetable gardens, which in turn provide food for hungry people.

In his sermon, Sidego also focussed on people 'on the other side of the tracks'. In the introduction, he referred to an incident in his office during the first 10 days of his term as mayor of Stellenbosch:<sup>17</sup>

The next moment a council member was walking in holding the hand of a woman. Apology for not having an appointment or advance warning, but it is an emergency. 'This is the mayor ... this is Mrs Malgas', was the introduction. And a story unfolded which left me feeling uncomfortable in the mayor's chair. Mrs Malgas, a single parent since her husband abandoned her 25 years ago, brought up her children in a Wendy house. The last few years, the house became dilapidated. Many mornings she would put her feet out of bed and into water, or cooked food standing ankle-deep in water. But even this was some form of shelter. And she was in my office because even that finally collapsed. She was roofless, homeless, nobody in town could help her, she said.

Mrs Malgas is one of 25 000 families trying to find a home in our beautiful valley. Many of them live in backyards, thousands in informal settlements and shacks, others sleep under bridges and elsewhere, including shelters. They survive somehow – through cold Cape winters.

Sidego's sermon emphasises the current housing crisis in South Africa. He uses the text in Matthew 25:14–30 about the parable of the coins to identify with the fear of the third slave and to also overcome this fear by putting our metaphorical 'shoulders to the grindstone'. He too asked that the offerings be donated to the Stellenbosch Night Shelter.

From the analyses of segments of the five sermons, it is clear that the preachers are concerned about the vulnerability of especially women, children and marginalised people in our society. Their sermons are underscored by their prophetic participation in public discourses in this regard. Yet the

16.Soil for Life is a Cape Town-based non-profit organisation teaching people how to build the soil and grow healthy plants. They strive to help people reconnect with the earth and to realise their potential for healthy, productive and fulfilling lives (Soil for Life n.d.).

17.Sidego, male mayor, between 60 and 70 years of age.

nature of their participation in the project is a further form of vulnerability, which I would like to call 'vulnerable theological leadership'.

## Vulnerable theological leadership

In their invitation on the website of the academic society, the organisers of the conference (Societas Homiletica 2013) state:

On the other hand, we may understand preachers themselves as vulnerable. We are often subject to others who hold us accountable to norms and practices with which we do not agree – and/or the governing authorities who have the power to reprimand, ridicule, punish, persecute or censor us for questioning and critiquing their actions. Preaching is risky when we realise that our studying, praying, exploring and speaking is never exhaustive or complete – we are always at risk of misunderstanding something about God, ourselves, our people, and our contexts. (n.p.)

Keeping this in mind, a number of these aspects can be applied to the vulnerability of the preachers participating in this project. Coetzee (2013), for example, criticizes the entire concept of the 'sermon of the layperson' based on Reformed church polity principles and reaches the conclusion:

These practices definitely cannot survive the test of being a true church. Pure preaching is one of the characteristics of the true church (NGB art. 29). Public figures are important opinion formers, but their place is not on a pulpit where the Word of God is proclaimed. (p. 56)

Furthermore, it is indeed true that not everyone might agree with the analyses these preachers made of society. There may even be differences regarding who can be considered to be vulnerable and marginalised. In this sense, preaching is indeed a 'risk activity' with no guarantee or pretensions of effectiveness. There is also much scope for misunderstanding. Theologians could disagree about the manner in which texts were chosen and the manner in which they were used in the sermons. The preachers themselves could also be queried, for instance, with regards to which political interests they represent, the groups they support and their reasoning as to why they support particular groups, perhaps even to the detriment of other groups?

The fact that these sermons took place within a specific Protestant liturgical context makes this an even more vulnerable activity. Before the actual sermons took place, the preachers themselves indicated that it would be an unfamiliar and unsettling challenge, forcing them out of their comfort zone. It was clear that public speaking was not a strange experience for any of them, but the fact that this was a sermon, requiring certain (theological-hermeneutical) skills when working with texts and even taking the responsibility of directing the liturgy, exposed the preachers' own vulnerability and fears in a number of ways. The lenses that Koffeman (2009:407) provides, especially his notions on 'moral and communicative vulnerability' are very helpful in understanding this kind of vulnerability.

## Theological leadership amidst vulnerability

Despite the various forms of vulnerability named in the previous section, I am convinced that a number of aspects of theological leadership also surfaced in the sermons of the preachers participating in this project. For some more light on vulnerable theological leadership, I make use of the three elements mentioned by De Gruchy and Ellis (2008:9–20) in their discussion on leadership in a new context. These are power, collaboration and a dialogical pedagogy.

### Power

There is little doubt that we live in a time in which 'power' is being redefined throughout the world. This is happening from the smallest and intimate circles of households and community life to global organisations worldwide. De Gruchy and Ellis (2008:18) are of the opinion that the attention which is being paid to power also indicates that it is important to investigate the differences in relationships based on a number of factors. These differences include race, age, language, gender, nationality and professional status. Each of these factors exerts a unique influence on the exercising of power.

From the sermons, it is clear that we each have our own stories, which are embedded in larger social narratives and where the difference in terms of privilege, knowledge and power may play a central role. We take these stories into relationships with us. We need to be aware of these power imbalances, and I am of the opinion that the preachers were particularly successful in exposing these wider networks of power. One gets the impression that they were willing, in the words of De Gruchy and Ellis (2008:18), '... to consciously frame them in a way that can add to the richness of the tapestry rather than serve as barriers to dialogue and development'. The abuse of power is a reality about which we may not be silent, but sharing this reality through 'communicative vulnerability' can be a very constructive process (Koffeman 2009:407–408).

### Collaboration

The insights of Social Identity Theory<sup>18</sup> teach us that the role of collaboration is extremely important a conscious decision to resist the temptation of individualism. In other words, life is about teamwork in which the capacity of someone else is increased by supporting one another in the process (De Gruchy & Ellis 2008:19). Naturally, the collective identity is not strange to faith communities and is known as *koinonia*, which is expressed in various ways.

Although five individual preachers participated in this project, they clearly work as members of teams and networks in their various professional worlds. The organisations they

18. 'Social Identity Theory is best described as a theory that predicts certain intergroup behaviours on the basis of perceived group status differences, the perceived legitimacy and stability of those status differences, and the perceived ability to move from one group to another' (Tajfel & Turner 1979:32).



support and to which I referred often depend on contributions from volunteers in terms of time, energy and funding to make a difference in the lives of vulnerable people. The power of collaboration in a network world cannot be overestimated. Friedman (2007:51–55) even refers to ‘a revolution of collaboration ... a massively emancipating move’. To this, one can add the notion of ‘compassionate vulnerability’ that Koffeman (2009:405–407) links to Koopman’s use of the concept.

## Dialogical pedagogy

According to De Gruchy and Ellis (2008:18–19), in the light of the elements of power and collaboration, a dialogical pedagogy refers to the attention that should be paid to the worries, fears and vulnerabilities of ordinary people because of the wealth of everyday wisdom that they offer. In other words, there is reciprocity in that leaders of faith communities do not only have something to offer to vulnerable groups but that leaders can also learn much of life and human dignity from vulnerable people. According to them, there are a number of key elements present, including the following:

- *intentionality* (which is concerned with the leaders of the future where the unequal distribution of power can be found at the heart of issues like poverty and globalisation)
- *inclusivity* (where the gifts and talents of all people, including vulnerable and marginalised people, must be utilised)
- *investment* (including monetary and social capital)
- *integrity* (which is related to the way in which leadership is practised and the underlying values towards which communities strive).

Once again, it is evident in the sermons how the various preachers were prepared to listen to the voices of the vulnerable groups on behalf of whom they spoke out. When, in the words of Gouws, vulnerable people ‘... find their voices ... those in positions of power would do well to listen to them’. Where the voices of the voiceless sound, they gain prophetic power that can dethrone the mighty. We have read this in biblical texts, and we have seen it in the stories of people.

## Conclusion

The vulnerability of theological leadership was addressed in various ways in this study. We saw how lay preachers worked with texts on behalf of vulnerable groups, highlighting their circumstances within the South-African context. We also saw how the preachers themselves were vulnerable in various ways in terms of who they are and where they are in serving society. Yet time and again, a voice of hope came to the fore amidst the situations of vulnerability.

Referring again to the contribution of Koopman (2013:47–52), the three ways in which he describes hope also highlights the kind of theological leadership we find in the contribution

of these lay preachers. Firstly, hope is realistic because the preachers did not hesitate, in an imaginative manner, to confront the hearers with the harsh realities of marginalised people and silenced voices. Secondly, hope is responsible because the preachers expressed the human dignity of these groups, and in doing so, they confronted the listeners with certain responsibilities. Thirdly, hope is opposing as they (and us) often have to oppose power imbalances without flinching from resistance. In this sense, these preachers were prophets in their own right amidst vulnerability and vulnerable circumstances.

Living in a country with many vulnerable people, I was inspired by listening to and analysing the sermons of the lay persons that participated in the preaching project on behalf of many without voices. A next round of sermons took place during 2014 and another round is planned for 2015 with the hope that the prophetic voices of these vulnerable preachers will make a difference in a vulnerable country, giving voice to some of those who became marginalised and silent.

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