

# Missionising Youth Identity Crisis

## Towards a missional hermeneutic of coping in youth ministry practice

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### Abstract

The intention of this paper is to interpret the ontological conditions of youth<sup>2</sup> identity<sup>3</sup> crisis missionally. This is first done by conceptualising identity crisis as a psychological phenomenon using frameworks of authenticity and attachment to explain the impact of early attachment abuse, abandonment depression, attachment-anxiety with God, and self-regulation on the identity formation of the youth. Secondly, the paper introduces a missional hermeneutic that provides an interpretative framework for coping with the crises<sup>4</sup> of identity amongst young people. A missional hermeneutic for coping with the crisis of identity formation, therefore, elaborates on the missional

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<sup>2</sup> It might be difficult to give a definition of “youth” in this paper because of the on-going debate on who is a youth. Nel (2000: 97) has noted that the concept of youth is comprehensive and inclusive. The idea of youth is often looked at as being age-related and connotes specific age brackets. Sometimes between 18 and 35 years, and sometimes between 18 and 25 and so on. These age categorizations does not really explain who a youth really is, as František Štch has pointed out in his paper “Who are Youth in Theological Perspective?” Stech described youth as young people, adolescents or young adults whose age varies from early pubescence to late young adulthood. This “youth” perspective suggests a period of transition and formation from childhood to adulthood. Owing to this point, Stech saw youth from a theological perspective as a community in transition and not as a strictly age-related group, but rather a viewpoint, the special way human beings relate to God. Theologically, “we may see youth as inseparable from our whole humanity or from the human condition.” In other words youth is an integral part of one’s identity that also expresses “kairos”, a very opportune time, distinct from others by its characteristic features (e.g. longing for love and acceptance, searching for meaning, openness, excitement, activity, creativity, hope, pursuing development, expecting the future to come, etc.) but yet inseparable from totality of human being.” (Stech 2016, p.263). Youth is therefore looked at in this paper through the lens of formation and human expectation, and as a community in transition awaiting God who reveals Himself within their ontological crisis and experiences.

<sup>3</sup> Identity is another important concept I want to define in this paper. My interest is not to look at the identity of the youth as it were but to understand the different ontological experiences that form the youth’s identity and belong to the youth’s humanity in their everyday life. In other words, I am looking at how the attachment abuse, abandonment depression, insecure attachment experience with God, and experiences of self-regulation impact youth identity and in the process is seen as some sort of ontological crisis. These experiences are what I have conceptualised in this paper as identity crisis. I am not referring to their identity in Christ at this point.

<sup>4</sup> The crises of identity has been conceptualised in this study as the constellation of attachment abuse, abandonment depression, insecure God-attachment anxiety, and experiences of self-regulation as part of the ontology of being a youth living the world.

basis of biblical interpretation as a powerful framework within which to interpret a skewed, conflicted identity. The author herewith proposes a missional opportunity that can activate the missional consciousness of young people in their time of crisis and identity formation. Furthermore, the author insists that this missional methodology can be a very useful strategy for producing therapeutic change in young people and can help youth ministry workers and pastoral caregivers to reframe the crisis of youth identity formation from the perspective of 'missio Dei'.

**Keywords:** missional hermeneutic of coping; youth identity crisis; self-images and authenticity; God images and attachment; youth identity formation; missional opportunity

## 1. Introduction

Elsewhere (Counted, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2016d) the author has established that staying true to self and resolving a relationship conflict with God due to the effects of attachment abuse, abandonment depression, separation with loved ones, etcetera, are the building blocks of youth identity crisis. These negative and conflicting experiences often give young people problems coming to terms with what their identity should look like in relation to the "mission of God", i.e. *missio Dei*, which is stylishly explained as the story of God's walk with humanity from beginning to end and humanity's response to God's invitation to become part of his mission, even in the time of crisis (cf. Wright, 2006). The experience of negative emotional impulses of insecurity and abandonment or identity crisis in general applies to all of humanity from time immemorial, even with the early church (cf. Bosch, 1991) and it is still true today as we move into the third millennium. But it is even more applicable to contemporary youth born in a time where old paradigms of life are collapsing.

Against that background, this paper will highlight the experiences of identity crisis among young people today and suggest a hermeneutical key for unlocking these experiences missionally. Hence, the author proposes how the story of God's mission to the world can provide a fruitful framework within which to interpret youth identity crisis and provide a missional hermeneutic for coping with the crisis of identity formation. The author will thus pay close attention to the missional interpretation of youth identity crisis as an opportunity for representing the character of God, after the youth is reduced to a 'weak' state of mental experience due to the effects of a compounding internal conflict.

## 2. Conceptualising Youth Identity Crisis

Bosch (1991) saw how the looming crisis of identity in the early Christian Church was portrayed through emotional outbursts, as the then Gentile Christians struggled

with their identity when the faith of the Church was tested. According to Bosch, they were asking relational and emotional questions such as, “‘Who are we really?’, ‘How do we relate to the Jewish past...?’, ‘Is Christianity a new religion or a continuation of the faith of the Old Testament?’, ‘How do we relate to the earthly Jesus, who is gradually and irrevocably receding into the past?’” (1991, 85). These and more were questions related to the crises of identity confronting the early Gentile Christians at that time. These questions spotlight the kind of emotion-laden crises the early Gentile Christians were facing, as the Church was undergoing an “almost complete transformation” (Bosch 1991, 85). The identity crisis in the early Christian Church, according to Bosch, was fueled by the “increasingly hostile attitude toward the church displayed by Pharisaism” (1991, 85).

In a similar study on *Emotions in the Christian Tradition*, Roberts (2014) argues that the early Christians’ experience “express a character that is attuned to the way things are [today]: to our nature as creatures, to God’s nature as God, [and] to the relations we bear to the goods and evils of life” (Roberts 2014, 34). Due to our nature as creatures, we are left within the confines and crisis of our “world” to discover ourselves and experience God for ourselves in relation to what our identity should look like. Therefore, it is on this basis that the author gives a definition to the phenomenon of identity crisis, in particular the subcultures of ‘self and God images’ as the constellation of the human identity and our nature as creatures - necessary to discover the core of our existence as we stay true to self and maintain a positive relationship with the divine (to read more see Counted 2016a, 2016b). Identity crisis is therefore a time of testing and a “period of transition, on the borderline between a paradigm that no longer satisfies and one that is, to a large extent, still amorphous and opaque” (Bosch 1991, 366). This is also a point where “danger and opportunity intersect”, says Bosch (1991, 366). The author proposes that this ‘danger’ can be linked to a polluted attachment contagion, resulting from lack of secure attachment relationships with caregivers/attachment figures, which often lead to feelings of insecurity, anxiety, fearful-avoidance, low self-esteem and self-deception in social relationships with self, close others, and even with the divine (cf. Bowlby 1989; Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010; Davis, 2010; Counted, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d).

Bowlby (1982) viewed the attachment system as one of the motivational bases of human behaviour, which provides an explanatory framework for understanding social relationship conflicts in relation to our identity. The attachment phenomenon explains how social relationships are determined by the nature of the internal working models of an attachment system. Internal working models are the mental representations of ourselves in relation to our identity and close others, which develop through the effects of a particular set of activating triggers, e.g. our mental

states, environmental demands, or emotional needs, during a parent-child bonding experience. This sense of attachment resonates with each and every single one of us, and as a result, when we are deprived of quality attachment by a relational partner or experience some kind of insecure attachment in an unhealthy relationship, we seek out ways to compensate for such relationship elsewhere or decide, out of own volition to explore a new relationship in a more 'stronger' and 'wiser' relational partner otherwise known as a substitute attachment figure (SAF). The role of the SAF can be that of an "affect regulation tool" (cf. Kirkpatrick, 1998: 961-973) and/or as a "security-enhancing figure" (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2004: 174). Relationships with relational partners, SAFs, or attachment figures, e.g. parent, friends, a deity, etcetera, are maintained due to the attachment functions they afford in relation to a general 'set-goal'. For example, from being a target for our proximity-seeking behaviours, to acting as a safe haven providing security, to being a response to loss or separation (cf. Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012), and serving as a source of emotional strength and support in times of difficulty.

An unhealthy attachment experience can constitute a huge crisis of identity for a youth, especially when they experience any form of insecure attachment such as early abandonment, attachment abuse, unavailability of an attachment figure (cf. Ainsworth, 1978), and even more so when coupled with other social and environmental self-encounters (cf. Masterson, 1976). These difficult experiences do in fact influence the identity crisis of young people as they trigger their insecure attachment tendencies (like attachment-anxiety, attachment-avoidance, and disorganised attachment) toward potential future relationships. An insecure attachment experience with a divine personality (especially with God) who sometimes may be perceived as unavailable or insensitive can expose the youth to a state of crisis, which is a state where the youth feels abandoned and struggling with an undesirable, imaginary 'bad place'. Such a state of crisis can even lead to a split personality (Barach, 1991; Sadock & Sadock, 2007), where we see the youth trying to avoid their present self-realities and stay true to self by living in the 'future', creating images of a positive, promissory, hyphenated, and religious self (Counted, 2016a, 2016b). Authenticity scholars like Wood *et al.* (2008) and Counted (2016b) see this experience as the consistency or congruity between one's primary experience, symbolized awareness, and outward behaviours. These self-tendencies are some of the ways young people externalise their crisis of identity in relation to how they experience an attachment figure (AF), stay true to themselves, and experience their social environment (cf. Barry, Nelson, Davarya & Urry, 2010). Hence, a negative attachment contagion is not only self-destructive but also represents the threshold of an identity crisis.

Furthermore, Masterson (1976, 1981, 1985) and Moltmann (1974) support this conceptualisation of identity crisis, referring to it as a time of a depleting nar-

cissism, which plumbs the youth into an 'ugly' self-discovery and a search for authenticity (Bialystok, 2009; Counted, 2016b), a journey with the potential of self-creation/split-personality to satiate the attachment needs with the divine or another attachment figure. Hence, as the youth struggles with the difficult experiences of attachment and abandonment both in the past and present, they experience some kind of destructive 'acting out' and 'acting in' while relating with the social environment and attachment figures. According to Dykstra (1997), such internal conflict is externalized by displays of tensions discharged in the social environment as a result of attachment separation caused by divorce, sudden death, or separation from loved ones, abandonment depression, attachment abuse like unavailability and inaccessibility of an AF, et cetera.

Such acting out or acting in often leads to a self-discovery crisis, which is a regulatory experience employed by the youth to remain true to their self and maintain a positive attachment experience with close others. Self-regulation or splitting often highlights the experience of an identity crisis and acts as a way of dealing reasonably with an internal difficulty that involves a "radical alternation between two extreme or caricatured selves, with neither self fully determining one's identity" (Dykstra 1997: 30). A youth applying self-regulation while dealing with their identity crisis can be both loving and idealizing, and at the same time, hating and denigrating, according to Eagle (1987).

However, when young people apply the self-regulatory defense to counter their identity crisis they often go through life 'splintering' their self-realities and at the same time "relating to people as parts – either positive or negative – rather than whole entities" (Pruyser 1975: 36). According to Pruyser, when young people experience this type of crisis, they will be unable to maintain a consistent, healthy commitment in their social relationships with close others, and even with God. Moreover, due to their poor frustration tolerance, they will have difficulty maintaining a positive image of their attachment figures and even of themselves, particularly when their AFs are not physically and emotionally present for them. Such self-conditioning automatically makes the attempt to create a single unified self-concept that a youth recognizes as himself or herself in both good and bad moments infertile. Pruyser further reasons that such radicalization of the self makes the youth prone to a crisis of identity - "a 'good' self that engages in immature, clinging, passive, unassertive behaviours and a 'bad' self that wants to grow, assert itself, be active, and independent" (Pruyser 1975: 40). Ultimately, the bad-self continues in an unending struggle of wandering and self-discovery, developmentally disjoined, and challenged by hyper-selectivity while building and destroying relationships with close others and staying true to self (Pruyser 1975). Dykstra (1997) believes that such self-creation potential of the 'bad self', although not in all cases, eventually hardens the youth into having a consistent lack of

tolerance for ambivalence, makes the youth anxious of social relationships, and creates a self-ambiguity within the confines of interpersonal relationships and spirituality, thus constituting the identity crisis. This will be discussed later as the crisis of identity formation, since it represents a significant time of testing and a period of transition the youth undergoes that ontologically belongs to their humanity as they discover and define their identity in the present life.

### 3. Introducing A Missional Hermeneutic

The propositions of Wright (2006) and Hunsberger (2011) for a 'missional hermeneutic' took a turn on missiologists, as they saw the bible as a tool that not only provides the basis for mission but also elaborates on the missionary nature of the religious life. Wright (2006) and Hunsberger (2011) argue that the story of God's mission to the world ought to be the lens through which the believer should read the bible as it provides a fruitful hermeneutical framework for understanding our nature as humans. Consequently, in an attempt to define the nature of the missional hermeneutic of the bible, Hunsberger (2011) first presents the bible as the product of God's mission for dealing with the human experience. This missional perspective converges a swelling tide of imagination, arising from the emphasis of the story of *missio Dei*, which can be surmised within the context of 'Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus the Messiah, Church, and New Creation' (Russell 2014: ¶3). The missional story starts and ends with the revelational portrait of what the future new creation in God should look like in relation to God's character. More in-depthly, a missional hermeneutic also includes 'the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts from which and within which people read the biblical texts' (Wright 2006: 39) and recognises that the 'writings that now comprise our Bible are themselves the product of and witness to the ultimate mission of God' (Ibid: 48). Drawing from this background, the primary tenet of a missional hermeneutic is that it sees the bible as a missional phenomenon.

Wright provides us with a summary of what a missional hermeneutic really is:

A missional hermeneutic, then, is not content simply to call for obedience to the Great *Commission* (though it will assuredly include that as a matter of nonnegotiable importance), nor even to reflect on the missional implications of the Great *Commandment*. For behind both it will find the Great *Communication*—the revelation of the identity of God, of God's action in the world and God's saving purpose for all creation. And for the fullness of this communication we need the whole Bible in all its parts and genres, for God has given us no less" (2006: 60-61).

The 'Great Communication' of God's mission to the world starts with the creation story: God created the heavens and the earth. Human beings were wittingly crafted

in the image of God as the pinnacle of His artistry, functioning in His image over the rest of God's creation. From the earliest beginnings, "humanity was created for missional purposes to represent God before creation by reflecting God's character, with one another and with the world" (Russell 2014: ¶4). The opportunity that lies in this missional intention of God is discussed in this paper as a missional hermeneutic of coping.

And like the abandonment and attachment history of most crises of youth identity, the Great Communication of the missional intention of God was flawed by a 'Fall' - an error of the past, which has been corrected by the emergence of Jesus the Messiah through the nation of Israel to rebuild the mission of God through the Church to the world. As a missional response to youth identity crisis, a missional hermeneutic sees the crisis of youth identity, firstly, as a missional phenomenon, and secondly, as a unique opportunity that not only provides the basis for embodying the *missio Dei* in our everyday lives, but also elaborates on the nature of the missionary life as a story of God's walk with the youth from beginning to end rather than just about their salvation. This perspective calls young people back to God's mission as a missional community that embodies God's image before the world as they interpret the crisis associated with their identity in order to hear God's living voice, giving them the answers to life's complex questions.

#### **4. Towards A Missional Hermeneutic of Coping**

Drawing from Hunsberger's (2011) proposition, a 'missional hermeneutic of coping' would take God's people back to the task for failing to live in God's character, as the people of God. This perspective announces the confronting effect of God's love over the nature of identity crisis to enable the afflicted assume a new promissory self emerging out of God's identity (cf. Counted 2016b). It is against this backdrop of God's intention that Hunsberger (2011) argues for a missional hermeneutic to remind us of the mission of God to the world, one borne out of perfection to 'purify' us within the ontological confines of our being and existence. Hunsberger further argues that this missional opportunity starts by coming to grips with the Great Communication of the bible in relation to our ontological and pathological placements (identity crisis). A missional hermeneutic for coping with the crisis of identity formation, therefore, seeks to draw us closer to the mission of God as we understand our crisis of identity as part of the Great Communication of the scriptural story of God's redemption. This missional hermeneutic also beckons on the youth and youth ministry workers and pastoral caregivers to interpret the crises of youth identity in light of God's perspective.

The proposed missional perspective tends to have a gravitational pull towards what, according to this author, is the most fundamental aspect of what makes our

crisis of identity missional and an opportunity for mission. With caution, none of these hermeneutical perspectives are sufficient on their own to provide a robust *missio*-logical interpretation of youth identity crisis.

## 5. Personalising the missional direction of God's story

Hunsberger starts with an emphasis: "The framework for biblical interpretation is the story it tells of the mission of God and the formation of a community sent to participate in it" (2011: 310). Wright (2006) in his book "The Mission of God" explained this more clearly, as he offers an elaborate rationale for interpreting the scripture from the perspective of *missio Dei*, in which the reader finds themselves as part of the biblical story. This is a shift from what the bible means *to* the reader to what the bible is *for* the reader. It is an understanding that includes the "missional basis of the bible" and excludes the "biblical basis for mission" (Wright 2006: 103, 106). Therefore, in terms of helping young people in their crisis of identity, the first step to a missional hermeneutic of coping would be to see young people as a community *sent* to participate in the *missio Dei* because, indeed, they are part of the story of God's mission. This first step starts with the process of inclusion, an understanding that includes the missional basis of young people in a way that helps them find themselves in the revelational portrait of God's Great Communication. This inclusiveness allows the youth ministry worker or pastoral caregiver to draw the attention of the youth to the inclusive character and intention of God, one that enables the youth to see themselves as part of a global and intergalactic enterprise.

Wright adds, "The God the Bible renders to us, the people whose identity and mission the Bible invites us to share, and the story the Bible tells about this God and this people and indeed about the whole world and its future" (2006: 108-109) are the basis for understanding the plot of the story of God's mission. In other words, when youths see themselves as part of the narration of the purposeful story of God's mission for the world, it gives tangible meaning to their crises of identity. A missional hermeneutic of coping, therefore, starts with this first task of inclusion as the youth ministry worker or pastoral caregiver loosens the meanings of the crises facing the youth with the aim of re-reading the meanings as a whole story of God creating and redeeming the world. This first step answers the 'why' and 'where' questions in Louw's account on the 'Meaning of Suffering'. According to Louw, this becomes the quest for understanding God's identity as it relates to youth identity. When young people understand the missional direction of the story of God's mission, such revelation can reveal a deep longing to locate God in their attachment and abandonment history in terms of providence, support, and protection (cf. Louw 2000: 16). In asking "Where is God in my experience and what is His will?" the youth may encounter the presence of God by envisioning their difficult

attachment and self-experiences in light of God's story. This perspective frames a sense of coping upon which a hermeneutic is undertaken as young people explore their experiences and all that lies behind it in relation to God and his mission to the world. Such missional posture allows the youth to rest on the promise of the ultimate story of God to lead them back to the image of God as new creations in Christ.

Over all, having a missional direction of the story of God's mission allows the youth to forge meaning in their helpless and difficult experiences; as a faith community being sent to fulfil the *missio Dei* (Goheen, 2008). Most importantly, this first step would also require an understanding of the meaning of *missio Dei* in a more personal and transformative way. This revelational understanding of the mission of God transcends the traditional understanding of the phrase in terms of *sending*, "in reference both to the mutual sending among the persons of the Trinity and to God's sending of Israel and the church", and thus the youth (Hunsberger 2011: 312).

By encouraging the suffering youth to personalise the missional direction of God's story for their lives, they are empowered to participate in the *missio Dei* as they practice a self-hermeneutic process that becomes, in itself, an embodiment of the good news they are called to proclaim (cf. Brownson 2002). This hermeneutical process may not entirely erase their crises of identity but would re-frame it (cf. Capps, 1990), so that the quality and character of the youth-in-mission can become a reflection of God's intention.

A direction to the story of God's mission would produce in the youth a kind of 'dislocation' (see Brownson 2002: 313), which accompanies the experience of being 'called' and 'sent' and would generate in our young people a critical principle by which their coping becomes evidently self-correcting and redemptive.

## **6. The missional purpose of the crises of youth identity formation**

The second aspect of a missional hermeneutic looks at the purpose of biblical writings as it "pertains to the character of the biblical literature itself" (Hunsberger 2011: 313). Hence, if the first step to a missional hermeneutic has to do with recognising scriptural narratives as essential core of the *missio Dei*, then the second missional hermeneutic should deal with the purpose and aim of those narratives, thus emphasizing its "authority by virtue of their formative effect" (Ibid: 313). The emphasis at the second step to a missional hermeneutic of coping is not to focus on what the crisis mean to the youth per se but how God is present within the crises and how the difficult attachment and self experiences equip the youth for mission. Thus this second model emphasizes the need to focus on God who reveals Himself within a crisis. This model draws our attention to the purpose of the difficult experience of youth identity crisis which is to know God and grow in the knowledge of

God as a better witness in the face of adversity and the crisis of identity formation. By knowing God and witnessing to his mission to the world through their suffering and identity formation, the youth is invited into the process of discipleship as Christ's followers on a journey through their earthly ministry (cf. Guder, 2007; Hunsberger, 2011). While preparing and encouraging the youth to see their suffering in light of the missional purpose of God (e.g. as it relates to the suffering of Christ on the cross), they are also transformed as people of character, embodying the very image of God.

Ultimately, the purpose of youth identity crisis as it relates to the mission of God is to contribute to the continuing formation of the missional identity (and consciousness) of the youth. This identity formation happens as the powerful story of God's grace is told within the context of a missional community in transition; in a way that enables young people to see themselves as part of the big story of creation and 'sent' to the world to represent the *missio Dei* (Guder, 2004). This revelational portrait of *missio Dei* makes it possible to use the experiences of identity crisis to equip young people for missional purposes (Goheen 2008).

As the author proposes this missional hermeneutic for scores of theologians and youth ministry workers and pastoral caregivers, a continuing work is required in order to elaborate on the ways in which youth identity crisis can be understood from the perspective of divine purpose - as it transforms and prepares the youth-in-mission as a witness (Hunsberger, 2011; Louw, 2000; 2008).

## **7. The missio-cultural locatedness of youth identity crisis**

Two aspects of the 'missional hermeneutic' framework (*missional engagement with cultures* and *missional locatedness of the readers*) have been merged into one in this third missional hermeneutic of coping procedure because of their emphases on community, culture, and location. Hunsberger (2011: 314) is of the opinion that the "approach required for a faithful reading of the Bible is from the missional location of the Christian community". This is a movement away from the purpose of the scripture to looking more intently at "the character[s] of a missional hermeneutic from the other side of the coin – from the position of the community being thus formed" (Hunsberger 2011: 314). Barram (2007) understood a missional hermeneutic as more than a linguistic interpretive structure of the *missio Dei* from the scripture. As for Barram, a missional hermeneutic is an approach to scriptural text rooted in the conviction of God's mission in and for the world. This entails reading the scripture as a community called by God for his purposes here on earth, as was the Christian community in the New Testament who were caught up in the mission of God as they read the scripture from their social and cultural location (Barram, 2006; 2007).

In the same vein, the author argues that a robust missional hermeneutic for coping with the crisis of identity formation in youth ministry practice should move away from its general purpose to look more fruitfully at the practical and cultural issues within the youth community that might trigger a crisis of identity. This third process pays attention to the history of abandonment and difficult attachment experiences that might have led to the crisis of youth identity at the first place. Hence, interpreting cultural and societal proclivities that lead to attachment abandonment and attachment abuses in families can be a step in the right direction for understanding the youth as a community in displacement who within the whole story of God's mission is also part of a faith community.

The most resourceful way of understanding the cultural and missional placements of young people undergoing a crisis of identity would be to aim at faithfully emphasizing the cultural and *missio Dei* roles within the missional purpose of God. A missional hermeneutic for coping with the crisis of identity formation should therefore consciously and persistently approach the issues of identity crisis within the youth community by highlighting the cultural engagements of the story of God's mission and the shared experiences of young people to a range of critical, located questions. Questions that point to the church's foremost missional purpose of empowering and liberating those that are down and broken within a contextual community. Knoetze (2015) sees faith communities as the solution to the deceptive games played by organisations, families, and youth in a distrusting community. Knoetze believes that through participating in the *missio Dei*, "the church will have to be open to, as well as reach out to, people who are hiding behind masks and are expressing fear and hate" (2015: 8). If this is done, Nel (2000) reasons that the church can help the family and youth as a hermeneutic and an agogic community to find their identity in a relationship with the Trinitarian God. Knoetze further articulates the role of the church in achieving this hermeneutical step succinctly:

The faith community must position herself in such a way that she knows and is known intimately by the African families and youth. As part of the *missio Dei*, the church will have to make an effort to listen, understand and want what is best for the families and youth in Africa, accepting differences and respecting uniqueness in a way of confirming their humaneness. In this, the church is both a hermeneutic and an agogic 'lebensraum' (Nel 2000:18–25). Communication and relationships are built on trust and commitment. Where these two features are experienced, families and youth will share and be intimate. Where there is a lack of trust and commitment, instead of intimacy in relations and family, the church will experience a distance in its relation to the community.

It is this author's conviction as well that faith communities have a major role to play here, as Nel and Knoetze have pointed out. The emphasis, however, is to un-

derstand the way in which issues of youth identity crisis model engagement with the culture of communities and families involved. The church can also start by asking critical questions such as, 'How does our understanding of community and family affect the way we relate with our loved ones?', 'How has the circle of parental abuse and apathy become a norm in our communities and affected the way young people relate to God, self, and their social others?', and 'How can the church build and encourage better family models that can encourage and strengthen secure attachment relationships between parents and their children?' These questions and many more could help the church understand the missio-logical issues related to the cultural locatedness of the youth-in-crisis and engagements of communities with the youth culture, as faith communities set the path straight for reconciliation and healing.

## **8. The prophetic-missional voice of the youth in crisis**

The 'prophetic pathos' (Mills 2007: 110-136) of the scripture is often seen "challenging conventional norms" (Counted 2015c: 204) as it portrays the prophetic persona as a liminal being existing on the margins of society by virtue of being the voice that "performs social destruction and thus embodies the community's own existence on the borders between life and death" (Holt & Sharp 2015: 75). The prophetic persona plays a huge role in shaping the missional basis of the bible as a prophetic account, with implication for the religious life (cf. Evans 2000; Chung 2012). The prophetic-missional voice, therefore, penetrates into the word-event in terms of how the youth verbally appropriate the meaning of their identity crisis. This aspect of coping has profound consequences in the way youth identity crisis is interpreted in itself.

The term 'prophetic' has been discussed in the past (cf. Capps, 1990; Bosch, 1991) on a state-based level, mostly referring to how the prophetic persona in the bible critiques the contemporary life, as it moves away from the missional direction and purpose of God in a time of crisis. It is proposed here that the term 'prophetic' can also be used on a personal, relational, and pragmatic level to keep the youth in check overtime by testing the actual crises of identity over what is most essential to it: a prophetic-missional voice. This step can help the youth forge meanings that influence the outcome of their lives in a time of crisis (cf. McCullough & Willoughby, 2009), and can strengthen the emotional and social traumas associated with their identity. Furthermore, having a prophetic-missional voice can also mean relating to the crises of youth identity in terms of God-control and God-regulation, i.e. some sort of self-control and self-regulation that is missionally inspired. It has more to do with distancing the youth from the psycho-historical limitations of their milieu in order to shape and stabilize their perceived world order in terms of God's order.

Against this background, the argument is that the crisis associated with youth identity formation results from the lack of vocabulary to interpret and regulate at-

tachment insecurity and existential self-experiences, whereupon, when the youth fails to grasp an achieved understanding of the meaningfulness of their identity crisis, their emotional security is threatened and their sense of identity remains elusive to them. However, as the youth experiences the limits of their own human ability, it is important to encourage them, at this point, to have a prophetic-missional voice that reminds them of God standing with them by having a purpose for them in relation to his *missio Dei* story. Such a prophetic trigger can disabuse the threats of nothingness and helplessness in the experience of identity crisis, as it relates the hopeless self-experiences of the youth to a world of order that stands in consonance with the mission of God.

Consequently, this missional hermeneutic of coping at this stage takes a missiological approach in order to communicate the prophetic dimension of the *missio Dei* to the youth in crisis, as they are reminded of God's love and presence in testing times, through his mission for and with them, and indeed, the world. Having a prophetic-missional voice can also mean having a missio-logical perspective that engages in linguistic conventions in order to down-regulate the experience of a compounding internal conflict so as to reflect the character of God in a time of crisis.

As an affect regulating means for young people, a prophetic-missional voice facilitates God's control, God-monitoring, God-regulation, missional well-being, and authentic *imago Dei* behaviours by serving as a system that uses information about the present crisis of youth identity to change that crisis. For this reason, a prophetic-missional voice emerge when the youth is encouraged to exert control over their own responses in a time of identity crisis so as to maintain a spiritual well-being, live up to missional standard, and override a difficult attachment condition while in pursuit of a desired future (cf. Baumeister & Vohs 2004; Carver & Scheier 1998). Barkley equally saw this process as "any response, or chain of responses, by the [youth] that serves to alter the probability of the [youth's] subsequent response to a [difficult] event and, in doing so, functions to alter the probability of a later consequence related to that event" (1997: 68). As for Louw (2000), this can mean applying the transcendent quality of God to our daily lives using metaphorical theology that views God as "the inspirited body of the entire universe, the animating, living Spirit that produces, guides, and saves all that is" (McFague 1993: 20). Counted (2015b) also sees this process as an indication of a relationship experience with God using 'God concepts' that suggest a transcendent connection of some kind. Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2008) on the other hand describe this process as the application of the 'God attachment language' that allows the individual to see the divine as a strong and enduring attachment figure in a time of crisis.

A prophetic-missional voice that responds to the crisis of youth identity caused by attachment abuse, abandonment depression, attachment separation, depleting

narcissism, self-discovery, and etcetera using prophetic filters would bring about a change of attitude that have the character of promise amid an internal conflict. Therefore, on this basis it is argued that having a prophetic-missional voice and applying the three proposed models of a missional hermeneutic for coping with the crisis of identity formation, i.e. seeing the suffering youth through the missional lens of God's story, explaining the missional purpose of the crises of youth identity, and addressing the missio-cultural locatedness of youth identity crisis, can redeem and transform the youth as the people of God; on a mission to the world by example of their own lives. This hermeneutical key would help the youth-in-mission to submit to the leading of the Holy Spirit as they reinvent and reinvest themselves in the character of God as a community in transition hoping for an emerging future through God's mission.

## 9. Conclusion

This article aimed to highlight the experiences of youth identity crisis and to provide a missional hermeneutic for youth coping with the crisis of identity formation. The introduction of a missional framework as coping mechanism would enable youth ministry workers, or pastoral caregivers in general, to fruitfully provide therapeutic change for youths suffering a crisis as a direct effect of an attachment abuse, early abandonment, insecure attachment relationship with God, or self-discovery experience. The proposed hermeneutical methodology offers four guidelines for helping young people in youth ministry practice. Firstly, helping the youth to see their suffering in light of the whole story of God's mission to the world, allowing them to see themselves as part of God's missional community. Secondly, it is argued that a missional hermeneutic of coping would help the youth forge meaning in their experience as they are led to uncover the missional purpose of their identity crisis for themselves. Thirdly, a missional hermeneutic for coping with the crisis of identity formation provides sufficient explanation for understanding, on a deeper level, the cultural and community factors engendering the crisis of identity among young people within a familiar context. This approach helps the youth ministry worker and pastoral caregiver to address issues related to attachment abuse and abandonment depression from its community and cultural roots. Finally, it is proposed that having a prophetic-missional voice could be helpful in the process of coping as youths relate to their crises of identity using prophetic languages (in form of vocabularies or metaphors or God concepts) that strengthen and reassure them of their role as a missional community, living the missionary life in the world.

In submission, it is hoped that the missional hermeneutic introduced in this paper will help strengthen the work of youth ministry practitioners and pastoral caregivers, as they apply this methodology in their practice in order to help the

youth-in-crisis to alter the meaning of their identity crisis with the knowledge of the *missio Dei*. The author hopes that this missional shift would enable the youth to find themselves as part of the missional story, on the basis that the structure of their thought and the structure of their reality mirror each other, thus, seeing their crisis of identity as a missional opportunity to live out the character of God in an inspiring way.

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