

The rediscovery of the role of the laity in the mission of the Church – with reference to the Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BUSA)

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The role of the laity is at the cutting edge of Christian missions today. The author conducted a number of interviews and questionnaires to determine the status of the laity across denominations of the Christian faith in South Africa. His findings are in a number of instances startling: The picture of the laity, and what lay Christians in South Africa believe, run against general expectations. Some suggestions and proposals on how to empower the laity in general, and the churches of the Baptist Union in Southern Africa (BUSA) in particular, are made. The underlining motive for the research is to encourage the BUSA churches to become truly missional churches that make a difference in the world in which we live.

Introduction

It is a well known fact that the role of the laity is at the cutting edge of the Christian mission (Bosch 1991:467ff). The rediscovery of this role will empower the church to face the many opportunities and challenges of our time. The biblical view of the priesthood of all believers, the recognition of the so-called 'every-member ministry' (EMM) at grass roots level, and for all believers to be accepted as ministers of the Gospel in their own right, should be standard in the Christian community (Kritzinger 1994:44). This view alerts churches to change their priorities to enable more people to engage in ministry that serves the nations of the world. However, there seems to be a position of passive dependence of the laity on the clergy in the churches of the world. This is the case as well in the Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BUSA). It is my firm opinion that if each member, both clergy and laity, knew their gifts, roles and positions, they would each be able to make their own distinctive contribution to the life of the church and to the expansion of God's kingdom in the world.

The status of the laity in the Church in South Africa

Life in South Africa has changed over the last 10 to 15 years. The RSA of today in many ways is quantum leaps beyond where we were nearly a decade ago. There have been changes in technology, national politics, lifestyle choices, education, health care and family dynamics. During these years, there have been shifts in a number of areas pertaining to the religious beliefs of the Christian Church in South Africa as well as the religious beliefs of the population in general. With the great number of changes, it is only natural to additionally expect important and observable changes in the spiritual life of the nation.

Research, in the form of questionnaires distributed amongst lay Christians from many denominations in South Africa, was performed by the author in preparing his PhD thesis. This thesis was on the status of the laity in South Africa, and indicated that a significant number of South Africans do not have strong and clear beliefs, largely because they do not possess a coherent biblical worldview. In this respect they lack a consistent and holistic understanding of their faith. Many South Africans say they believe in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and yet they believe he sinned whilst on earth. Many believers claim to trust what the Bible teaches, but they reject the concept of a real spiritual enemy or they consider that evangelistic activities are not a priority but rather optional. Millions of South Africans claim to be personally committed to God, yet they have their own 'belief system' or are 'spiritual people' in their 'own way' (For a thorough discussion of the questionnaires, see Christofides 2009:126–191).

The research question is: How do the BUSA churches measure up in this regard? What is the status of lay Christians in these churches?

An overview of the current status of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BUSA)

Background

At the end of 1819, and the beginning of 1820, between four and five thousand emigrants left England for the Cape. The British government promised aid for the support of a minister of religion if a party of 100 families or more could be gathered by any one denomination. The Wesleyans fell just short of this goal, and Baptists would never have attained this number in the first place. This resulted in a group of 11 Baptists associating themselves with the Wesleyans to reach the required number, and who duly arrived at Algoa Bay in 1820. At first they met for worship in a cottage in Salem near Grahamstown. One of them, William Miller, became their 'tent-maker' pastor. They were without an ordained pastor until William Davies was sent out to South Africa from England by the Baptist Missionary Society in early 1832, and he was determined to go despite a shipwreck, in which his son was lost. Currently, the Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BUSA) is a Protestant Christian denomination consisting of approximately 700 churches and about 50 000 congregants. It has an Evangelical 'Statement of Belief' which was passed in September 1924 (Baptist Union of Southern Africa n.d.)

Observations

Quantitative field research or empirical research has been conducted on the churches under BUSA, in order to derive a qualitative understanding of the situation and state of affairs within the churches. The results have been thoroughly examined in order to show either the shortcomings or competence of those denominational churches, in the whole process of rediscovering the role of the laity in the mission of the church. Once the whole evaluatory process was completed and analysed, recommendations were made in order to redirect the laity to the right process, to accomplish the correct mission of the church, which has made this research unique and distinctive. The author is an *observer* as well as a *servicing participant* in this exploration, which makes this research more realistic and dependable.

Over the years, the BUSA has been reluctant to empower its laity, and this has resulted in a decline in activity and service by local churches in this denomination despite the fact that, according to Greeves (1960:143), *kleros* (clergy) and *laikos* (laity) denote the same people, and that these biblical concepts are essentially different from 'clergy' and 'laity' as we regard them today. According to the New Testament all Christians belong to the *laos*, the chosen people of God, and all belong to the new community in Christ because they are incorporated in the Son (1 Pt 2:9f).

Obviously, many reasons can be offered for this reluctance, such as:

- the threat of the laity to the leadership
- a misunderstanding of the missionary role of the church

- an inadequate understanding of the priesthood of all believers by the clergy, as well as the laity
- insufficiently understanding people's gifts which must be used to serve one another and the world
- ineffective, or non-existent structures to allow the church to function as a living organism
- lack of proper training, teaching and education
- and the exclusion of church members performing certain functions in the church.

Through this analysis and research, we have been able to diagnose the maturity of these churches with the significant data ascertained and to reflect on the way forward to produce responsible and mature churches. We are well aware that behaviour is driven by core beliefs. It is possible to find changes in behaviour without concurrent shifts in beliefs related to that behaviour, but without change in the underlying beliefs, the changed behaviour is unlikely to be permanent. In most cases, the behaviour will eventually revert back to its original state because there is not a mental, emotional and spiritual support system to sustain the alteration in activity. According to Jauncey (1972), love is also crucial:

Love occurs in its most intense form in maternal love and sexual love, but these can be self-defeating unless they are backed up by that more general love that can be true of any other relationship as well. This general love is the *feeling* of belongingness, that spiritual integration with another person or other people that becomes so important that the self is committed to it regardless of personal cost involved. (p. 56)

There is always the possibility that the changes in the behaviours observed will produce some permanent transitions in beliefs. For example, it may be that there is a dramatic increase in Bible reading that could produce a new understanding of biblical content. It is possible that more church attendance would lead to a deeper relationship with God. It is reasonable to expect more widespread involvement in home-cells and small groups to produce some degree of change in people's lives, if there is correct and appropriate teaching and if there is a conscious effort toward this intention. Although such transitions do not occur often, there is always the hope that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, lives will be changed. Because God works through people to accomplish his purposes, it is an exciting challenge for Christian leaders to seek his guidance toward facilitating a genuine period of renewal and revival in this country. Hendriks (2001) makes an excellent observation in mentioning some of the challenges facing South Africans:

If South Africa wants to face and even have a future, it must face the past. The different groups of people in this country can learn to trust each other (then start working together) only if they are allowed to tell one another their stories. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission could not achieve this ideal for the population as a whole. The church has a vital role to play in this regard. (p. 65)

It is difficult to conceive of a time when Baptists will not be grappling with the often conflicting issues of their faith. Motions relating to the nature and authority of Scripture

have regularly come before the Assembly. Here a high view of Scripture has been maintained, although some would like to see the Union's affirmations on Scripture made even more explicit than they are at present. The changing political and social structure of the country has brought enormous challenges, and Baptists have not always been as prompt or effective in responding to them as they should have been. The AIDS crisis is a case in point. Furthermore, although there have been some encouraging signs, there is still a long way to go before meaningful racial integration is found at all levels of Baptist life. Affirmative action has sparked much debate. The rise of the charismatic movement and the influence of liberation and social theology have brought into the Union a theological diversity, with which some have found it difficult to live. Congregationalism and the role of leaders within it is under the spotlight at the moment. This is a major contributing factor for why the BUSA is finding it difficult to grow churches and to empower their congregants to become informed, faithful and committed followers of Christ. Associated with this there is no real understanding of the role that leaders should play and the role that the laity should play. No progress can be made unless the understanding of the role of the laity is taken seriously. The role of women in Baptist churches and the structure and financing of the Union are also burning issues on which agreement will probably not be found in the immediate future. For many Baptists, the reality of the African context still needs to be considered earnestly. It is for these reasons that some churches have left the BUSA.

Nevertheless, despite a mind-boggling degree of diversity and an array of challenges, the work continues to move forward. One of the noteworthy features is that more than 200 new Baptist Union churches have been planted during the last decade. God expects his people to live righteously

and this includes what *is* obedient and not merely what *is not* obedient. Active participation in the Kingdom of God leads to active participation in the world in areas such as forgiveness and generosity. Congar (1985) adds to this by saying:

The Christian's position as God's faithful servant in the world makes two principal demands, corresponding respectively to an aspect of detachment or transcendence and one of engagement or immanence. (p. 433)

Results of the information and status of the Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BUSA)

If one were to plan a projected growth rate from 2007 to 2010 to be approximately 3% per annum, this would give us 694 churches in 2007, 715 churches in 2008, 736 churches in 2009 and 759 churches in 2010. However, Figure 1 shows the reality of the situation.

From 1991 up until 2002, for a period of 12 years, there was an average growth of 32 new churches per year. Since then, there has been a significant drop in the number of new churches.

From Figure 2, it seems that the BUSA is doing well if one were to compare it to a church per 50 000 people. However, the growth needs to be seen against some benchmark. If one were to take the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in America, which has 44 000 churches within an American population of 240 million people, there is an average of 5 000 Americans per SBC church. If we work on a benchmark of one Baptist Church per 50 000 South Africans, we ought to have about 1 000 churches. To achieve this goal we will need to launch 80 churches per year over the next four years. This is an annual growth of about 10%.

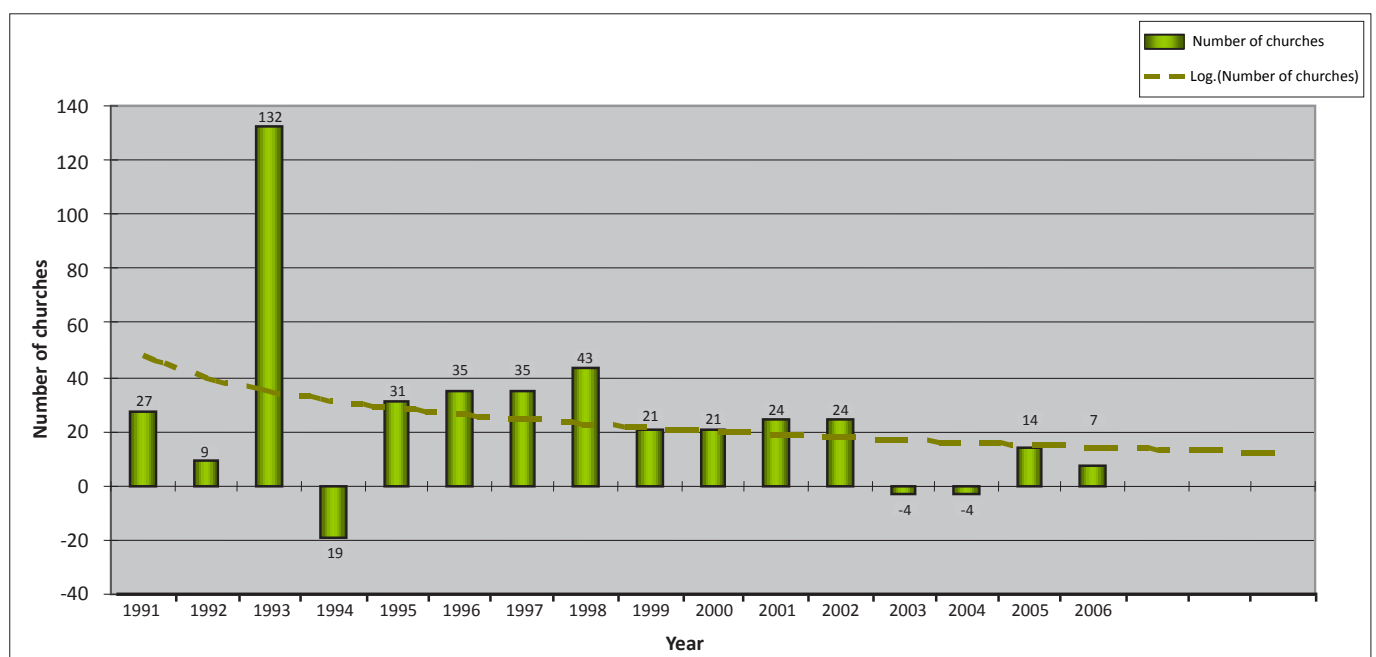


FIGURE 1: Growth within the Baptist Union 1991–2006.

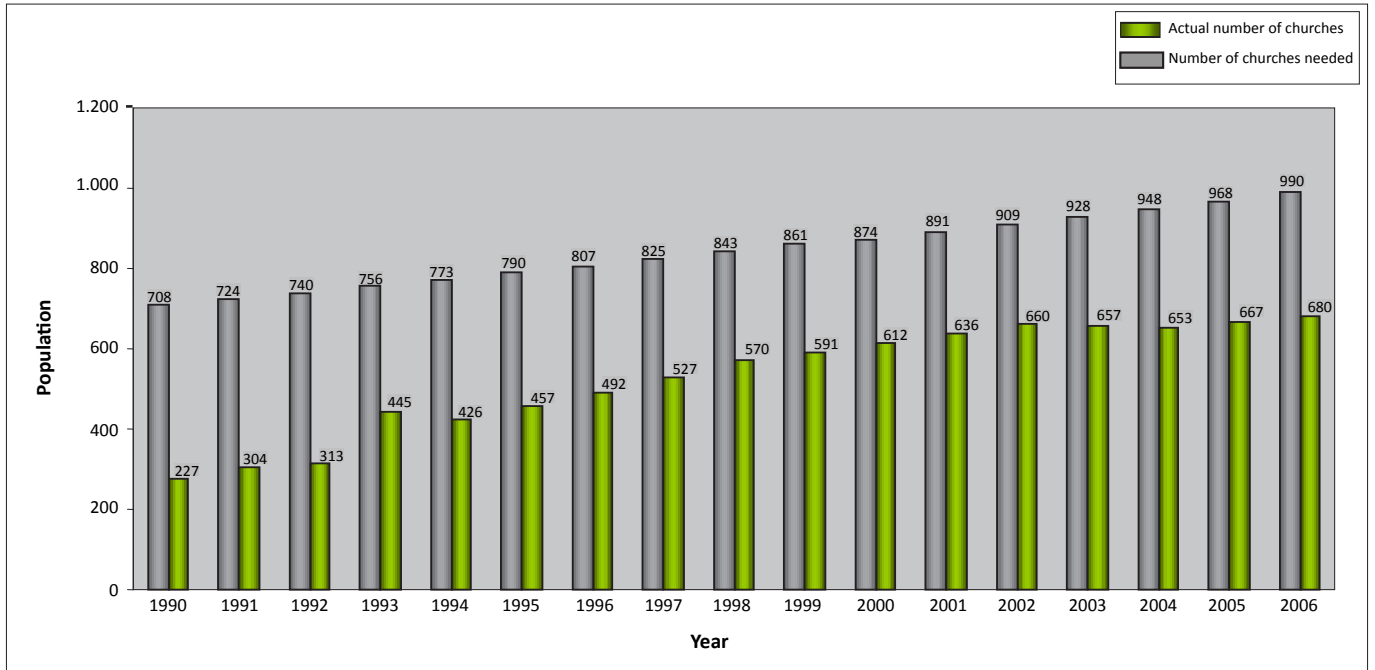


FIGURE 2: Number of Churches needed per 50 000 of the population.

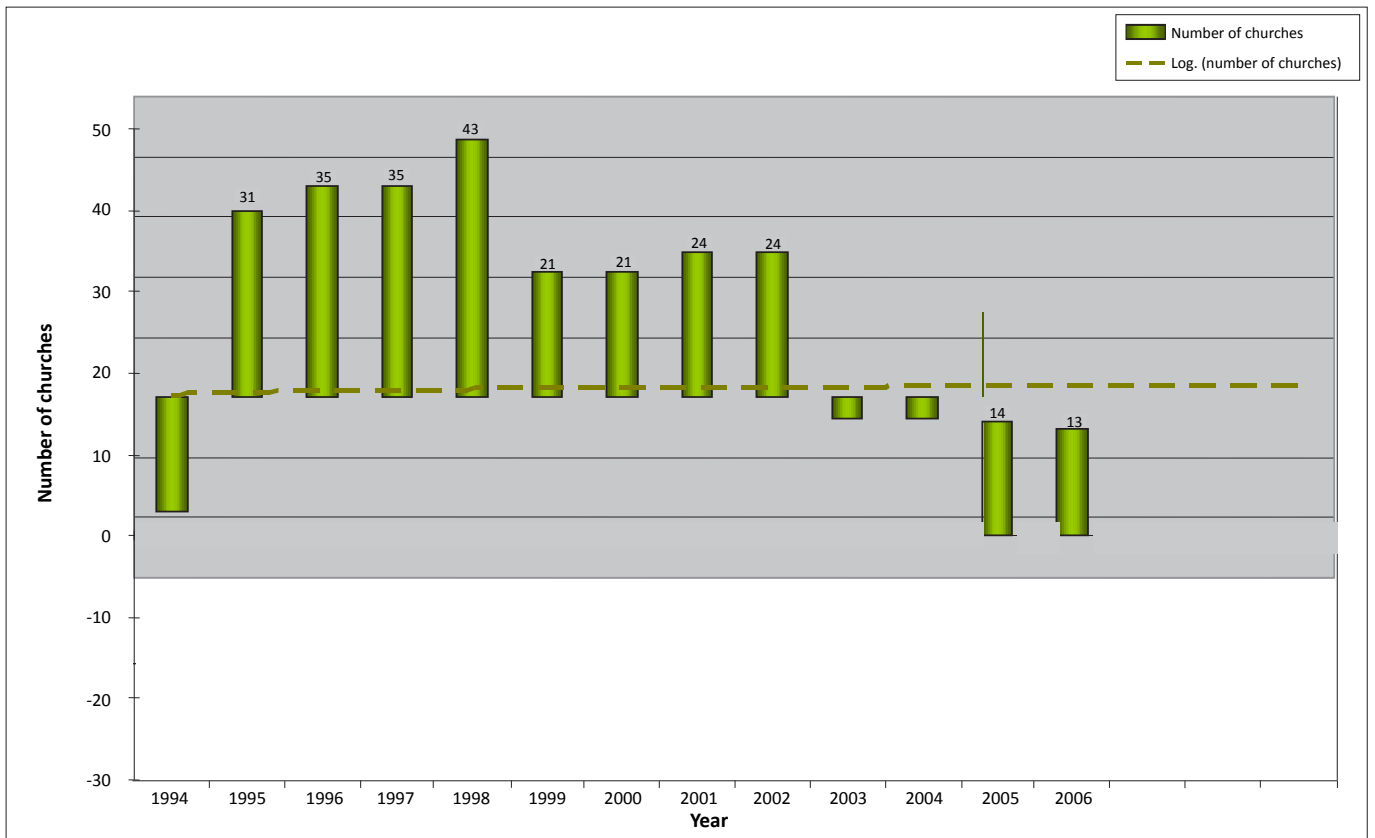


FIGURE 3: Number of new churches and lost churches 1994–2006.

According to Figure 3 above, there seems to have been a steady growth in the number of new churches in the mid-1990s. At the turn of the century, there was a consistent medium growth in the number of new churches. However, in 2003 and 2004, the BUSA actually 'lost' churches at a

rate of four per year in these respective years. This is, in fact, alarming as it not only shows no growth but rather a negative state of affairs. The next two years, namely 2005 and 2006, were more encouraging years as there were 14 and 13 new churches established respectively. The existing situation

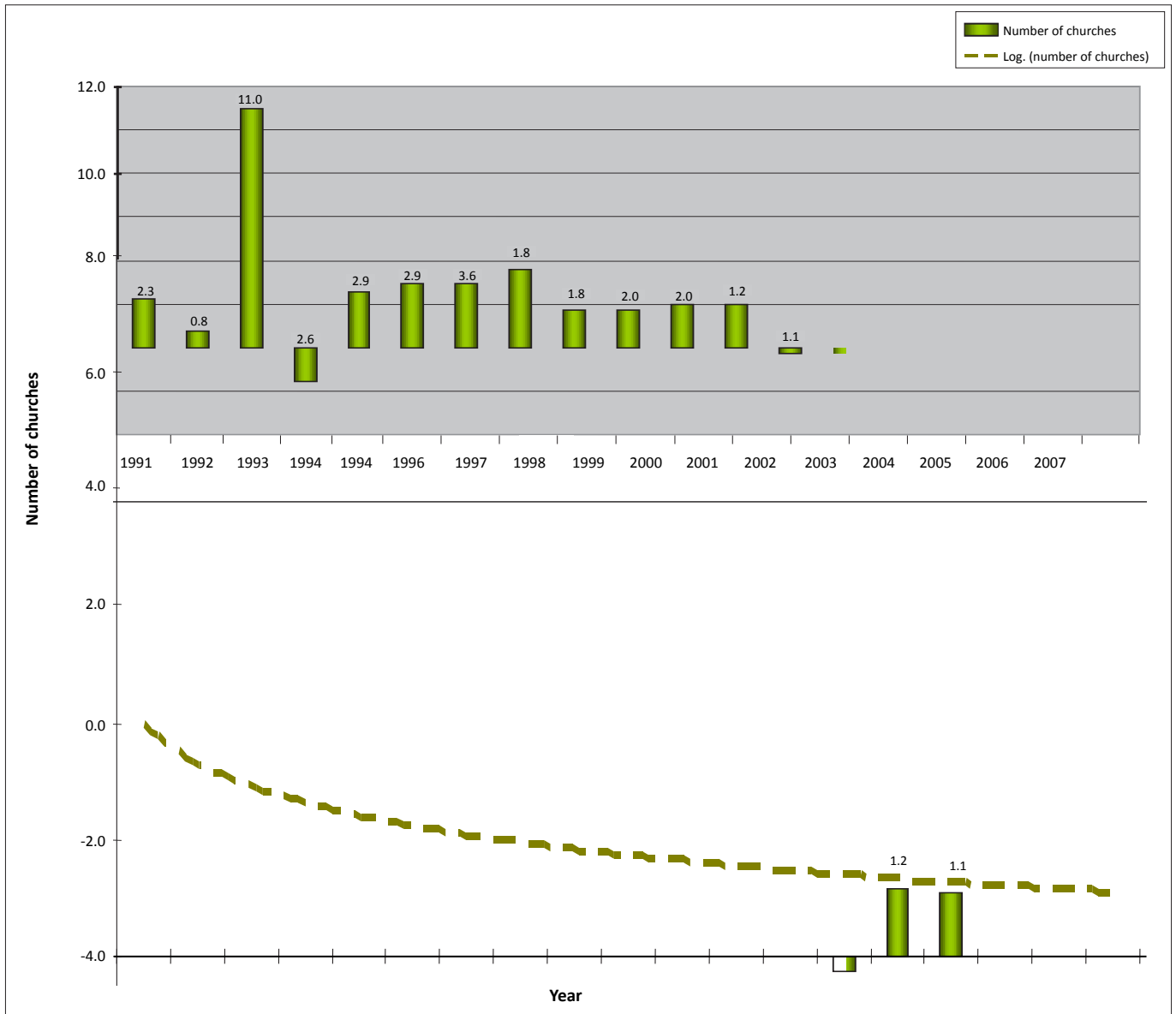


FIGURE 4: Number of new churches, formed per month.

is not a pleasant one. The current trend line suggests we will only achieve in establishing about 30 new churches per year, unless we implement something exceptional or change our structures and strategy. This poses an enormous challenge to the BUSA, hence this study of the role of the laity and its rediscovery in its function in the local mission of the Church.

To achieve the desired goal of reasonable growth in the number of churches per annum, the required number of new churches would be 80 new churches per annum, which translates to seven per month or two per week. Presently the BUSA are launching two per month, resulting in the need for an increase in new churches launched, of 350%. A new church every two weeks, for 10 years, is what is ideal!

It makes sense that the most significant growth in the number of churches occurred in the mid-1990s. Subsequently, the number of churches remained constant yet the number of

members dropped significantly. If one examines the number of church members in 1995 (41 792 members) through to 1999 (48 215 members), there is a steady growth, even if it was a small percentage. From the year 2000, there has been a steady decline of members in the BUSA. From 2002, the numbers did not drop significantly but despite the small decline in the number church members, this should have been an increase. If the average growth trend is followed, there was an increase in church members of 0.90% growth per annum from 1991 to 2001. Since 2002, there has been an average decline of 0.43% per annum. The distressing result is quite simple: many of the churches have become 'empty shells'.

The South African population growth has been at roughly 2% per annum. Baptist membership growth has historically been higher than this 2% per annum, and certainly between 1990 and 1997. However, the trend is downwards and the projection is that it will fall below the population growth rate in the future.

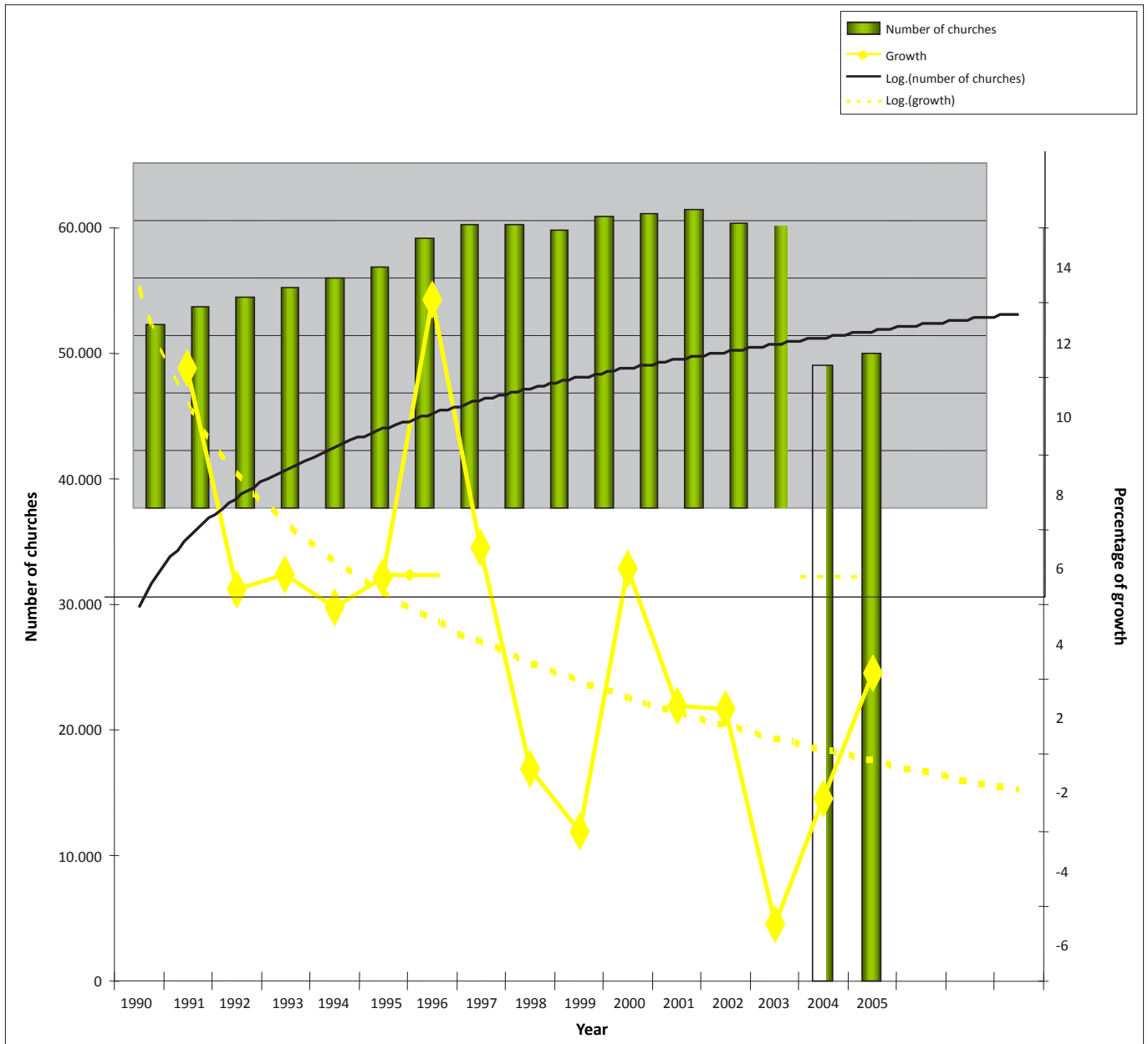


FIGURE 5: Number of members of all churches in the Baptist Union.

In planning for the future, as a Christian denomination, the BUSA needs to be relevant and ask whether or not the church, and in this case, the BUSA, are working towards the goal of reaching all peoples of the earth with the Good News of Jesus Christ. The apostles were very aware of the importance of the local congregation in God's strategy of bringing the message of salvation 'to the ends of the earth'. In planning, it should be remembered that the Church is different from any other organisation or institution. The Church derives its nature from Christ. This is crucial in the planning process as it is in Christ that the Church originates and is sustained and will come to maturity (Eph 1:4; 4:11, 13). This relational aspect of the Church to the Lord can easily be overlooked, or even only be ascribed to theoretically. This may be one of the reasons why the above figures (Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5 and Figure 6), indicating a decline in numbers, are prevalent in the BUSA. It is crucial that

the BUSA plan, with this relational virtue in view, in order for the Church to fulfill its task of reaching out with the Gospel.

As the BUSA plans to rediscover the role of the laity in the mission of the Church, both locally and universally, people will be encouraged to plan their lives around biblical values and commands. If the statistics are true, people (more especially the majority of the adherents) have become 'spectators' rather than 'participants' in the local congregations in the BUSA. If people are genuinely 'born again' according to John 3:3, Jesus will be acknowledged in their lives and the task which he has given to the Church of making disciples of all nations becomes a priority, which in turn shapes the lifestyle of church members individually. Corporately the Church will then seriously undertake its responsibility to reach other people so that they too may come into a relationship with the Lord, and duly participate

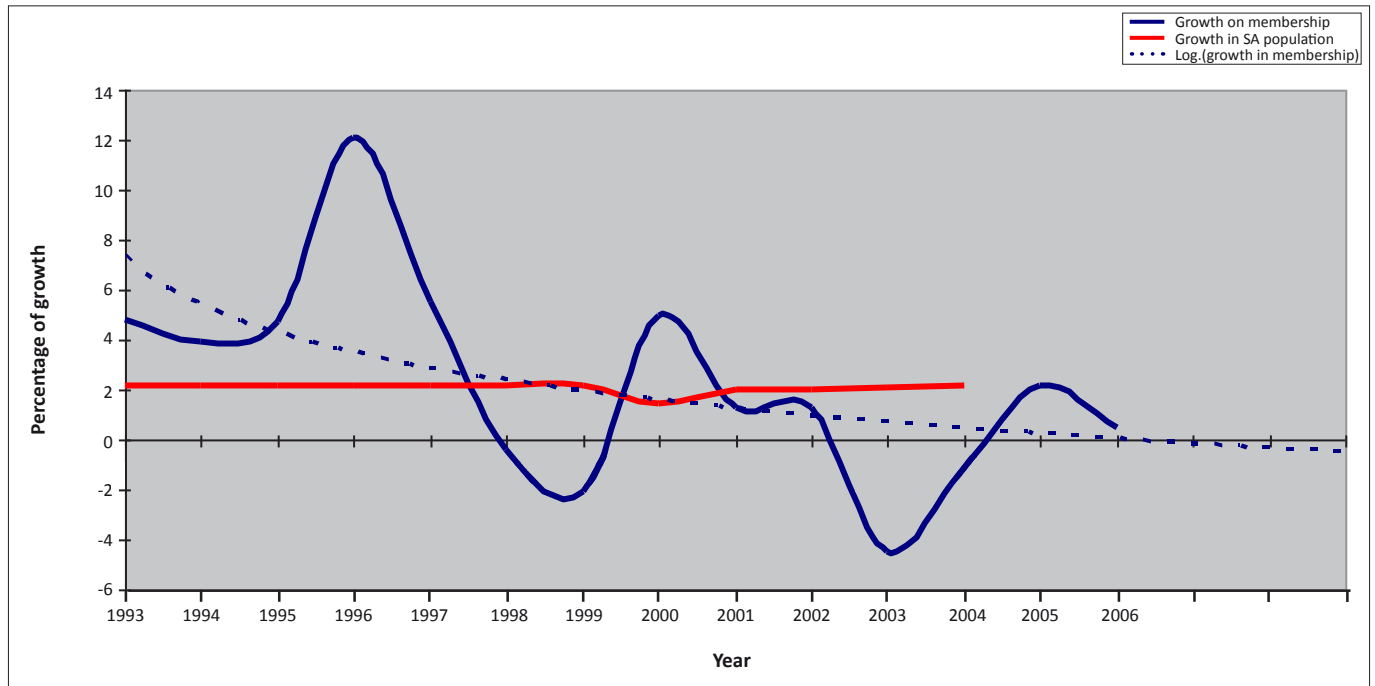


FIGURE 6: Growth of BUSA membership in comparison to the growth in the South African populations.

in the reconciliation with God achieved through Christ for all people everywhere who respond to him as Saviour and Lord of their lives (2 Cor 5:18, 19).

In considering the nature of the Church, it must be stated that the Church is part of the Kingdom of God which exists before Christ comes back to earth, for a second time. This is imperative to understand in the forward planning of the BUSA, or else it will become 'inward focused' rather than 'outward focused', concentrating more on the church and its membership than on the Lord who has sent the Church into the world. The Baptist community needs constant reminding of the reality of the *missio Dei*, of the involvement of the triune God in the world, who in his grace and love invites all churches world-wide, BUSA as well, to become his co-workers, and partakers in the *missio ecclesiae*. The sovereignty of God extends to the whole universe and not solely to a limited number of people or any specific denomination. The BUSA will constantly need to remind itself that it is not an end in itself, but that its very existence is for the purpose of bringing the Good News of how humanity may enter the Kingdom of God, according to Colossians 1:12, 13. In this process every single member must be involved, above all the laity. Henrichsen and Garrison (1983) put it well:

We are in the midst of a second reformation. The first had to do with getting the Scriptures into the hands of the laity. This one deals with getting the ministry into the hands of the laity. (p. 9)

When a person has come into a relationship with Christ, the person will join with others and so be part of a local congregation. Such congregations of people would be 'expressions' of what the Kingdom of God is like. This they undertake by living lives, based on Kingdom principles, before a watching world. The local congregation is, therefore, to be defined as a group of believers, disciples

of Christ, who worship and adore their Lord together [*leitourgia*], who study the Word of God all together [*kerygma*] who regularly meet together for fellowship and prayer [*koinonia*], who serve and care for one another [*diakonia*] and who reach out individually and collectively to their neighbours, to be salt and light in their immediate communities. From within these people some will be sent to other parts of the world, to share the Good News of Jesus Christ across the globe (Ac 2:36–42; 13:1–3).

Issues to be addressed by the Baptist Union of Southern Africa (BUSA)

Each local body of believers must assess whether or not they have realised that their church has come into being for the purpose of making their Lord known in their own community and beyond. When Jesus is served as Lord, the selfishness in us which keeps us from moving out towards other people, is dealt with as we move with him in the direction he wants us to go, that is, sharing his love and telling the Gospel message to those who still need to hear it. The church must fulfill her responsibility to be a bearer of the Good News of Christ, until he returns in power and glory. For some, it will mean going and for the rest, supporting in every way possible (cf. Mt 24:14; 1 Pt 2:9,10).

What is of imperative importance for the BUSA, as well as the Church universally, is to acknowledge that there is a great challenge ahead and for the church to begin to put into practice its distinguishing factors: firstly, the church's understanding of the sending process from a biblical perspective; secondly, the role discipling has to play in this process; thirdly, how effective teaching should be accomplished in this context

(the mission field becoming a church field); and fourthly, the church field becoming a mission field in turn. These distinguishing factors are crucial for reaching the end goal, which is the obedience to the Great Commission.

Although the BUSA may be growing numerically, there is an increasing concern over the stability of many of the churches and their leaders. Without a greater emphasis on strengthening, educating and equipping churches, the churches under the banner of the BUSA will be faced with troubling consequences.

Although these distinguishing factors represent real steps in the advance of missionary endeavour which can be recognised to measure progress, they actually represent a continuous over-lapping and dynamic growth because of the goal of the Christian mission. Each generation in geographical locations must be reached, as well as a ministry of Word and service to all nations. As the planning for a better future for the BUSA takes place, the above basic concepts need to form the root basis of planning and discussion. The following must also be kept high on the agenda of planning:

- All believers have gifts which must be used to serve one another and the world. Thus, everybody has a ministry.
- Although the church is the body of Christ and a living organism, it cannot exist in the world without necessary structures, organisation and leadership. These structures, however, should empower, and never inhibit, the laity in their service in the church and in the world.
- The fact that Christians have charismatic gifts does not rule out the need for training, teaching and education. Programmes should be developed to inform and empower the laity for their ministry in the church.
- Training does not mean that church members become mini-pastors, relieving the ordained pastors from their responsibilities. But the possibility of church members performing certain functions which are currently fulfilled mainly or entirely by the pastor, should not be excluded.

Examples of functions for which church members may be trained include the following:

- visiting the sick, possibly specialising in visits to hospitals, chronically and terminally ill patients
- visiting newcomers to the neighbourhood
- taking charge of parts of the service of worship, including preaching
- certain facets of pastoral work
- care of the aged
- leading Bible study sessions
- youth work.

It will serve BUSA well to give serious attention to these mentioned matters, and to develop in a creative way, functions and ministries specifically for its laity, enabling men, women and children to serve the Lord to the utmost, and using their individual talents to their fullest.

David Bosch sums it up well (1979):

The Church has borne witness in different times and places in different ways. This is important. There are occasions when

dynamic action in society is called for; there are others when a word must be spoken; others when the behavior of Christians one to another is the telling witness. On still other occasions the simple presence of a worshipping community or [person] is the witness. These different dimensions of witness to the one Lord are always a matter of concrete obedience. To take them in isolation from one another is to distort the Gospel. (pp. 228–229)

Two important areas of training need to be mentioned. The first is the training and equipping of members to live and work in society as Christians. The focus should be on training people to conduct dialogue and to play a Christian role in decision-making processes. In such a training programme, members of a particular profession or engaged in a certain type of work, may gather in groups in order to work out a strategy and identify problems.

The second is to train and equip parents to give their children religious and spiritual guidance. Research has shown that the home is the principal venue for spiritual moulding. Yet the church does very little to give parents active support in this regard. No institution will appoint people to posts for which they have no training or, if they are not fully qualified, will fail to train them. The education and upbringing of children is one of the very few tasks for which people are considered to be qualified. A detailed comprehensive programme needs to be drawn up if such training is to be at all effective.

It would also be important to allow the laity to study more courses through the two denominational theological colleges, namely, the Baptist Theological College of Southern Africa (Randburg) and the Cape Town Baptist Seminary (Cape Town). These colleges equip members for ministry in the local church and the world. It would be wise to encourage more of the laity to attend more conferences on evangelism and missions, as it is observed that the clergy in any particular denomination are the ones attending most of these conferences. Shortterm mission trips can be of great benefit to the laity if they are planned and executed effectively.

The researcher believes that the role of the laity is at the cutting edge of the Christian mission. If there is no rediscovery of this role, the church will be faced with many more difficulties. The biblical view of the priesthood of all believers, or every-member ministry (EMM), illustrates that empowering the laity at grass roots level to be ministers of the Gospel, should be standard. This view alerts churches to change their priorities to enable more people to engage in ministry that serves the nations of the world, hence the term missional member ministry (MMM).

A few possibilities have been mentioned. Once this approach is applied in practice, certain weaknesses will emerge, and also other fields will emerge where church members can play a greater role. Actually, the possibilities are innumerable.

All these possibilities will fade away overnight unless the church, Pastors and congregations alike, are prepared to radically reappraise the position of church members. The members are not the poor relations of the church, they are

not a part of the church and they do not belong to it, they *are* the church. Foley (1986) explains it this way:

The church is a community gathered to be sent out to the world. Community entails an understanding of the church as sacrament to the world. The church does not exist for itself but to continue God's work in the world. (p. 52)

It is obvious that accomplishing the Christian mission is a progressive undertaking that is not accomplished all at once. May this proposed research result in stronger mature churches in the BUSA taking responsibility for the task of making disciples of all nations. Therefore, 'Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as we see the Day approaching' (Heb 10:25).

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this paper.

Authors' contributions

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