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C. Hermans & W.J. Schoeman

SURVEY RESEARCH IN PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND CONGREGATIONAL STUDIES

ABSTRACT

Empirical research is understood as the search for knowledge-based empirical data. The best-known data-based research strategy is survey research. In practical theology, survey research is probably one of the most used research strategies. In the exploration of congregational life, a broader (quantitative) lens is required in order to investigate congregations. The aim is to explore the use of survey research in practical theology and congregational studies. First, we shall describe survey research as a methodology, in order to explain its relevance as an empirical method for doing practical theology. Secondly, we shall explain the relevance of survey research for congregational life. Surveys make a valuable contribution to congregational studies, as they provide a quantitative perspective on congregational life and its context. National and local demographics are an important part of the positioning and ecology of a congregation. Thirdly, we shall evaluate the relevance and contribution of the survey research methodology for congregational studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Empirical research is most commonly understood as the search for knowledge-based empirical data. The best-known data-based research strategy is survey research. In modern times, we are often asked to be part of a survey research (from an evaluation of a stay in a hotel to an enquiry by some academic institution). In practical theology, survey research is probably one of the most used research strategies. This is not only true on

Prof. C. Hermans, Research fellow, Department Practical Theology, University of the Free State, e-mail: c.hermans@ftr.ru.nl; Prof. W.J. Schoeman, Department Practical Theology, University of the Free State, e-mail schoemanw@ufs.ac.za

a large scale, but also on a local scale, where congregations want to have insight into the ideas of their members on a specific issue or examine the bigger context of the congregational ministry. Congregations are locally embedded; their members come from the local community, and they function within a local context. However, this does not mean that they are not part of, or influenced by the broader community or society. Trends such as the social, political and economic environment that influence society also affect the congregation. National demographics plays its part in the demographics of the local congregation. In the exploration of congregational life, a broader (quantitative) lens is essential in order to examine congregations. This quantitative lens needs to investigate the influence of society on the congregation, as well as what is happening within a congregation.

Doing practical theology is to listen to different voices from both the text and the context. To listen may be an informal and unstructured process, but it is also a formal and empirical research process (Osmer 2008:37). As an important part of practical theology, empirical research needs to describe the formal aspects of a reliable methodology. The task of a sound practical theological methodology “is to discover exact and empirically valid knowledge about religion, instead of relying purely on assumptions” (Heimbrock 2005:278). The contextual voice about congregational life should be heard in such a way that a valid and reliable conclusion can be drawn and general assumptions avoided.

The purpose of empirical research is to explore a topic, or to describe a situation and events, or to explain the causality between variables and events (Babbie & Mouton 2001:79-84; Fouchè & De Vos 2011:95-96). This distinction between the three purposes of research is not an absolute distinction, because, in most instances, research will have elements of all three.

The construction of specific, reliable measures often seems to diminish the richness of meaning our general concepts have. This problem is inevitable. The best solution is to use several different measures, tapping the different aspects of the concept (Babbie & Mouton 2001:125).

Survey or correlational research strategies are strong in producing descriptive and explanatory knowledge.¹

The aim of this article is to explore the use of survey research in practical theology, in general, and in congregational studies, specifically. Survey or

1 See Figure 1 in Hermans & Schoeman (2015:20).

correlation research is part of a quantitative research methodology and could contribute to doing empirical research in practical theology, and, in this instance, with specific reference to its role in congregational studies.

It is important to first describe survey research as a methodology, in order to explain its relevance as an empirical method for doing practical theology. Secondly, we shall explain the relevance of survey research for congregational studies. Surveys make a valuable contribution to congregational studies because it provides a quantitative perspective on congregational life and its context. National and local demographics are an important part of the positioning and ecology of a congregation. The attitudes and preferences of congregational members are important for the leadership of a congregation to make certain choices and to plan the ministry of a congregation. Surveys are, therefore, important in helping the leadership of a congregation. This will be discussed in section 2. The article ends with an evaluation of the relevance and contribution of the survey research methodology for congregational studies.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY RESEARCH

In more general terms, a survey could be described as a quantitative research method to “collect information from or about people to describe, compare, or explain their knowledge, feelings, values, and behaviour” (Fink 2006:1). Survey research operates within a quantitative framework where phenomena are viewed as observable and can be empirically studied. In some instances, there is a linear relationship between phenomena that, in most of the cases, may be described by means of deductive reasoning (Nieuwenhuis 2009:57). It is thus possible to measure, classify and categorise phenomena.

Surveys² are the most widely used non-experimental and explanatory research design (Fouché *et al.* 2011:144; Babbie & Mouton 2001:232; Edmonds & Kennedy 2013:107-108). Survey research is both non-experimental, because it does not actively manipulate variables, and correlational, because it seeks the relationship or correlation between variables (Salkind 2012:6). Against this general description of survey research, the following characteristics of survey research will be discussed:

2 In this article, surveys refer to quantitative or correlational surveys that focus on the analysis of frequencies of characteristics of a phenomenon and associations between characteristics. Another type is qualitative survey that focuses on the description of the diversity of characteristics (Jansen 2010).

- Quantification of constructs.
- Questionnaires.
- Sampling techniques.
- Scale construction.
- Descriptive statistics.

In the case of survey research, the emphasis is on the *quantification of member characteristics within a population* or, to put it differently, to assign numbers to things (Babbie & Mouton 2001:49). Quantification makes it possible to express the ‘mass’ or volume of a phenomenon. Within a quantitative framework, questions such as *How much?* or *How strong?* are relevant. The aim is to produce numerical descriptions of some aspects of the study population; information or data is collected by asking people questions (Fowler 2002:4-8).

Asking questions by means of *questionnaires* is an important part of survey designs (Fowler 2002:4-8). Questionnaires are used to generate the necessary information or data from the respondents regarding a phenomenon about which they are informed (Maree & Pietersen 2009:158). The questionnaire may be completed by means of an interview (face-to-face or by telephone), or respondents may be asked to complete the questionnaire themselves (self-administered, mail distribution or electronically) (Babbie & Mouton 2001:249-261). Good questionnaires generate useful and valuable information about a phenomenon.

Survey research makes use of *sampling techniques* to generalize the relevant findings to the study population as a whole (Maree & Pietersen 2009:145). This strategy collects the same information about all the cases (usually individual people) in a sample by asking them questions (Aldridge & Levine 2001:5). This is the best method to use when collecting data to describe a population too big or complex to observe directly. The use of sampling techniques is, therefore, common practice in surveys.

Scale construction is used in the way in which questions are asked and structured in survey research. A scale uses response options that are set up in such a way that the variables are measured as numerical scores that are ordinal, interval or ratio (Maree & Pietersen 2009:167). The most commonly used scales are a Likert scale or semantic differential scale. The Likert scale is used when respondents “express attitudes or other responses in terms of ordinal-level categories (e.g. agree, disagree) that are ranked along a continuum” (Delpont & Roestenburg 2011:212). The semantic differential scale measures indirectly the feelings or thoughts of respondents, by using adjectives in polar opposites

(enjoyable/unenjoyable) and rating these on a continuum (Babbie & Mouton 2001:154-155; Delport & Roestenburg 2011:212-213). Scales help uncover the relationship between variables.

This relationship between variables can be explained, using *descriptive statistics*, a collective name for organizing and summarizing data in a meaningful manner (Pietersen & Maree 2009:183). Descriptive statistics are based on measures of association or correlation; this is done, for example, by examining central tendency and cross-tabulation (Somekh & Lewin 2012:227-228). The statistical significance (strength of association) and direction of association also play an important part in the description of the statistical correlation between variables.

3. THE VALUE OF SURVEY RESEARCH FOR THE STUDY OF CONGREGATIONS

The aim of this section is to illustrate the important contribution that quantitative analysis and survey research, in particular, make in the understanding and positioning of congregations. The bigger and quantitative picture adds a valuable perspective towards the description and understanding of the role and positioning of congregations in society. Survey research also contributes towards understanding what is happening within a congregation.

To illustrate the point, three surveys will be discussed to explain the value of survey research from a quantitative methodological perspective for congregations:

- Describing congregations – the *Church Mirror* surveys.
- Giving a voice to congregational members – the Church Life Surveys.
- The religious profile of the South African society – the General Household Survey.

3.1 Describing change in congregational life

Congregations as social organizations change in time and place. Surveys help give an empirical description of the context and ministry of a congregation. We shall refer to aspects of the *Church Mirror* surveys that inform a theological evaluation as to whether congregations are in a particular situation in which they ought to be.

Practical theology is that theological discipline which is concerned with the Church's self actualisation here and now – both that which

is and that which ought to be. This it does by means of theological illumination of the particular situation in which the Church must realize itself in all its dimensions (Rahner 1972:101).

The *Church Mirror* surveys started in 1981 as a church census within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). Since then, it has continued as a fourth-yearly quantitative survey.³ The survey consists of at least a congregational questionnaire and, for some time, a leadership questionnaire. The congregational questionnaire is the main survey instrument with the aim of providing a comprehensive description of the functioning of congregations in the DRC. The following aspects are covered: membership, worship services; youth ministry; finances; offices (ministers, elders and deacons); functioning of the congregation (church council, vision and mission); small groups; community involvement, and ecumenical networks.

The mail-administered survey is sent to all the congregations in the DRC to be completed by the leadership of the congregation. In 2006, the questionnaire was sent to 1 176 congregations and 52% (602) of the congregations returned a completed questionnaire. In 2010, it was sent to 1 146 congregations and 58.6% (671) of the questionnaires were returned.

The following two aspects of the congregational surveys may be used to illustrate the value of this longitudinal survey, namely membership and the attendance of worship services:

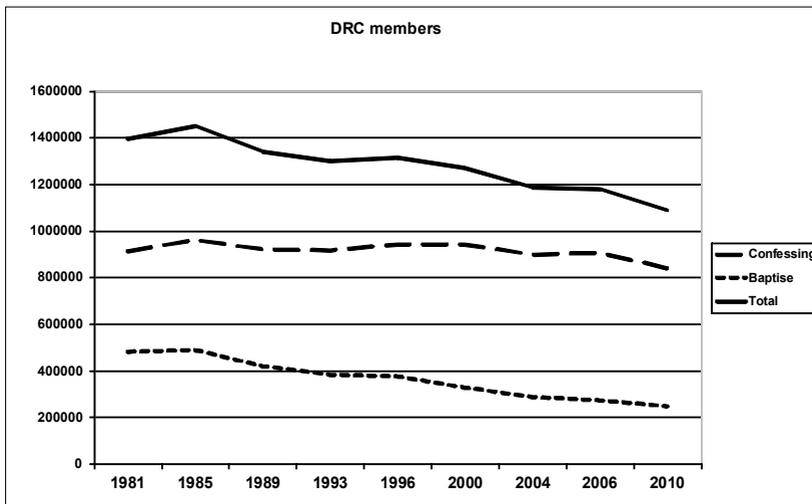
- The total membership of the DRC constantly declined from 1981 until 2010 (Table 1). The composition of the membership also changed over time. Confessing members (adults) comprised 66% of the total membership and, in 2010, it was 75% of the membership. This pays testimony to the aging of the DRC membership.

Table 1: Dutch Reformed Church: Estimate of membership

Year	Confessing members	Baptised members	Total
1981	91 2380	48 2337	1 394 717
1985	95 9720	48 9742	1 449 462
1989	92 0274	41 9791	1 340 065
1993	91 7247	38 3169	1 300 416
1996	94 1556	37 5308	1 316 864
2000	94 1037	32 8837	1 269 874

³ For a more comprehensive description of the *Church Mirror* surveys, see Schoeman (2011).

Year	Confessing members	Baptised members	Total
2004	89 8615	28 7059	1 185 674
2006	90 4374	27 4462	1 178 836
2010	84 0610	24 8445	1 089 055



- An important activity or ministry of a congregation is its weekly worship services (Table 2). Approximately a third of the members attended the morning service in February; the attendance has declined since 2000. The evening worship service is not well attended; less than 6% of the members attend this service.

Table 2: Attendance of worship services in February (%)

Year	Morning service	Evening service
1981	33.52	9.97
1985	35.78	9.35
1989	35.52	10.37
1993	36.01	9.53
1996	34.70	10.10
2000	37.04	9.07

Year	Morning service	Evening service
2004	33.50	3.60
2006	32.72	5.96
2010	31.81	5.39

Surveys can also be used to measure attitudes and perceptions. Leaders play an important part in congregations. A research question was formulated regarding the relationship between the DRC leadership and members of the DRC family and other racial groups. This research question was conceptualized, using an altered social distance scale to measure church acceptance and not social distance. The following question was included in the *Church Mirror* survey to be completed by the leadership of the church: To what extent are leaders and ministers in the DRC willing to accept members of the DRC family? (Schoeman 2010b:135). Table 3 reports on the acceptance of members of the DRC family as members of 'my' (the DRC leader's) congregation.

Table 3: Church leaders: Relation between age and church acceptance (%)

Age in years	Acceptance as a member of my congregation			N	Chi-square	Degrees of freedom	Significance	Gamma
	Yes	Unsure	No					
<30	78	12	10	204	40.6	8	.0001	2005: 15
30-39	75	10	15	470				2000: 3
40-49	74	11	15	945				1996: 12
50-59	71	11	18	1011				
60+	65	14	22	1255				

This cross-tabulation answers the question: How does age as an independent variable influence church acceptance as a dependant variable? It can be deduced from Table 3 that younger church leaders are more open in accepting members of the DRC family than older members. According to the *gamma* value (measuring an ordinal value), age explains between 3% and 15% of the variance in the responses (Schoeman 2010b:136). Younger leaders from the 'White' DRC are more open in accepting members from the DRC family. This description informs the practical theological reflection of congregations and their leadership. If the church understands itself as a missional church, what does it mean that there is a growing acceptance by the leadership to be inclusive communities?

Longitudinal surveys are conducted over time, whereas *trend studies* are seeking changes within a general population over time (Babbie & Mouton 2001:93; Maree & Pietersen 2009:156). The changes in a denomination's membership patterns could be described over time. It is possible to describe shifts in affiliations and attitudes from 1996 to 2005 within the same population (DRC leaders).

3.2 Comparison of the vitality of congregational life

The members of every congregation are important resources of the vitality and health of their congregation. From an ecclesiological perspective, vital congregations have certain strengths such as helping members to grow spiritually, caring relationships, a strong community involvement, and an inspiring leadership. Vitality is not a static quality, but differs in time and space, due to changes in society and culture. These changes influence congregations, yet they differ in vitality. Through comparison one can map these differences and reflect theologically on the desired future of congregational life. Survey research can be a valuable instrument for this theological reflection, and as such supports the transformation of congregational life.

The Church Life Survey (CLS), as an international survey among denominations and congregations, started with the intention to give a voice to congregational members. It started in 1991 in Australia with 6 700 congregations from 18 denominations completing the first survey (Kaldor 2002:96). This was repeated in 1996 and expanded to New Zealand in 1997. This time, 324 000 churchgoers from roughly 6 900 congregations (20 denominations) participated in the survey. The success of the survey led to it being used in England and the United States. In 2001, approximately 1.2 million worshippers from these four countries participated in the International Congregational Church Life Survey (Bruce *et al.* 2006:3). The US CLS was repeated in 2008 and roughly half a million worshippers completed a questionnaire (Bruce & Woolever 2010:4-6).⁴

The attender survey gives an opportunity to congregational members attending a worship service to give their opinion on aspects regarding congregational life. The survey was conducted in the DRC in 2006 and 2010. The same questionnaire that was used in the National Church Life Surveys was used in the DRC (see Woolever & Bruce 2004).

4 For a discussion of the 2006 CLS conducted in the DRC, see Schoeman (2010a).

The following methodology was used for the DRC surveys:

- 2006: A random sample of 10% was selected from the 1 176 congregations in the DRC. The sample population was 118 congregations, of which 95 (81%) completed the questionnaire during August 2006. Worshipers (aged 15 years and older), who attended any worship service on one of two Sundays in August 2006, completed a total of 12 522 questionnaires.
- 2010: A similar random sample was selected as in 2006. The sample population included 115 congregations, of which 85 (a response rate of 75%) congregations returned 12 286 questionnaires.

The CLSs provide a vast amount of information about the understanding of congregational life from an attender's perspective (cf. Woolever & Bruce 2010). The aim of this article is to illustrate the value of the CLS as a data-based approach for understanding congregations and hearing the voice of the attenders. Every congregation has certain strengths and the aim of the CLS is to identify these strengths from an attender's perspective (Bruce & Woolever 2004:14-15). Congregational life is, therefore, described in terms of ten strengths grouped into four connections (Bruce & Woolever 2010:131-139):

- *Spiritual connections* address the private devotional activities of worshippers; their participation in activities in the congregation, and the role of the worship service in their religious life (Strength 1: Growing spiritually; Strength 2: Meaningful worship).
- *Inside connections* are related to the activities and relationships within the congregation (Strength 3: Participation in the congregation; Strength 4: Having a sense of belonging; Strength 5: Caring for young people).
- *Outside connections* describe the community involvement of the congregation and its membership. It also measures the openness of the worshippers and congregation toward newcomers (Strength 6: Focusing on the community; Strength 7: Sharing faith; Strength 8: Welcoming new worshippers).
- *Future connections* relates to the role congregational leaders play in inspiring the membership and the worshippers' vision of the congregation's future (Strength 9: Empowering leadership; Strength 10: Looking to the future).

The ten strengths can be categorized and summarized by calculating an index number for each of the strengths. Table 4 gives a summary of the findings of the 2006 and 2010 surveys in the DRC. It is also compared with

the Presbyterian Church (USA) 2001 and fast-growing congregations in the Presbyterian Church (USA) 2011 (Bruce & Woolever 2012).

Table 4: Summary of the ten strengths

	DRC 2006	PC (USA) 2001	DRC 2010	PC (USA) 2011 fast
Spiritual connections				
1. Growing spirituality	46	42	46	45
2. Meaningful worship	62	56	60	64
Inside connections				
3. Participating in congregation	45	57	43	56
4. Having a sense of belonging	26	30	28	32
5. Caring for young people	39	48	37	57
Outside connections				
6. Focusing on the community	30	39	34	43
7. Sharing faith	21	22	16	25
8. Welcoming new worshippers	31	26	27	37
Future connections				
9. Empowering leadership	44	43	43	51
10. Looking to the future	38	32	43	43

The data of the Presbyterian Church (USA) on the strengths and connections is used as a point of comparison and reference. The results from the two DRC surveys are compared with those of the PC (USA). The contexts of the two denominations are certainly not similar: there are at least socio-political, economic and ecclesiological differences. The Presbyterian results are a reference point to help DRC congregations benchmark themselves within a wider context. There are definitely limitations in this comparison, but it is at least of some help to have a guideline to use in the description of the strengths and connections.

A first question is: Are there stronger connections that can be identified? The spiritual and future connections of the DRC are, to some extent, stronger than those of the PC (USA):

- *Spiritual connections:* Both strengths (1 Growing spiritually and 2 Meaningful worship) seem to be stronger for DRC attenders than for the PC (USA). The individual and private experience of DRC attenders is an important aspect of their congregational and religious life.
- *Future connections:* Empowering leadership and a vision towards the future are important. It may be that the empowerment of leadership in the DRC needs improvement (this is an important aspect for fast-growing congregations of the PC (USA) in 2011).

Similarly, it is possible to identify the two weaker connections for the DRC:

- *Inside connections:* Strengths 3, 4 and 5 are, in the case of the DRC, weaker than those of the PC (USA).
- *Outside connections:* From the attenders' perspective, DRC congregations are not strongly involved in, and open to the community. It would appear that hospitality and community involvement are not strengths of DRC congregations.

Computer-based research is making it possible to share survey data and to conduct a *secondary survey analysis* (Babbie & Mouton 2001:264-265). Larger research projects have a vast amount of data available for use by other researchers. The advantages are that it is faster and cheaper than doing the original survey. A key problem or weakness is the issue of validity. Are the original measurements of variables the same as those used in the secondary analysis?

3.3 The religious profile of the South African society

Recent information about religious affiliation of the South African population is not easily available. Religion was not an issue in the latest national census (2011). Religion was an open issue in the 2001 national census, but that was, to a large extent, not a reliable report (cf. Erasmus & Hendriks 2005:90).

The General Household Survey (GHS) is an annual household survey that has been conducted by StatsSA since 2002. The target population of the survey consists of all private households in all nine provinces of South Africa and residents in workers' hostels. The survey does not cover other collective living quarters such as students' hostels, old-age homes, hospitals, prisons and military barracks, and is therefore only representative

of non-institutionalised and non-military persons or households in South Africa (GHS 2013, 2014:10).

A multi-stage, stratified random sample is used in the surveys. Field workers employed by StatsSA visited all the sampled dwelling units in each of the nine provinces of South Africa. A total of 31 486 sampled households was visited across the country and 25 786 (including multiple households) were successfully interviewed during face-to-face interviews (GHS 2013, 2014). Two questions about religion from the 2010 Pew Research Centre's survey (cf. Lugo & Cooperman 2010:20-23) were submitted to StatsSA and included in the questionnaire of the 2013 GHS:

- How would you describe your religious affiliation?
- Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?

Religious affiliation. Table 5 describes the different religions in South Africa. According to the national census of 2001, 79.8% are affiliated with the Christian religion. In 2013, a majority (85.5%) of South Africans described their religious affiliation as 'Christian', while 5.6% said that they were not affiliated to any religion in particular. Muslims, who comprised 2% of the total, were predominantly found in the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. Hindus comprised about 1% of the population of South Africa, and 3.9% of the population of KwaZulu-Natal (GHS 2014:12). The majority of South Africans are affiliated to the Christian religion, at least nominally.

Table 5: Percentage distribution of religious affiliation (GHS 2013)

Religion	RSA (%)
Christian	85.5
Muslim	2.0
Ancestral, tribal, animist or other traditional African religions	5.0
Hindu	1.0
Buddhist	0.0
Bahai	0.0
Jewish	0.2
Atheist	0.1
Agnostic	0.1

Religion	RSA (%)
Something else	0.1
Nothing in particular	5.6
Refused	0.0
Do not know	0.3
Total	100.0

Religious observance. Table 6 gives an indication of the commitment of the membership religious group towards certain activities associated with that group. In the majority of the religious groups, a weekly religious meeting, mostly in the form of a worship service, is an important ritual. Nearly three-quarters (74.3%) of individuals who followed the Muslim faith attended religious services and ceremonies (excluding weddings and funerals) at least once a week. By comparison, 56.4% of Christians and 55.0% of Hindus attended services on a weekly basis (GHS 2014:33).

Table 6: Percentage distribution of religious observance by religious affiliation (GHS 2013)

Religious observance	Christian (%)	Muslim (%)
Usually at least once a week	56.4	74.3
Usually once or twice a month	21.5	10.1
Usually a few times a year	9.0	4.1
Seldom	7.5	5.1
Never	5.6	6.3
Total	100.0	100.0

What is the value of a national survey such as the GHS for congregations? The 2013 GHS helps congregations position themselves within the macro South African religious landscape. In light of the GHS 2013 data on religion, a critical question could be asked: Is South Africa a Christian or a secularized country, or what is the position of religion within the South African society? The demographic description of South Africa is not the same as, for example, Europe or North America. In the ecumenical dialogue, Christians have an important prophetic voice. Congregations on local level and denominations on national level may use it as an important instrument for critical discussions on the market place. Another consequence from the results of this survey for congregations is for them to redefine ecumenical

relationships as a partnership and not as an evangelism project. From this survey, DRC congregations may also learn something more about their own positioning within society. The membership of the DRC and their attendance of worship services may be on the decline, but it is not the same for the entire South African population. The bigger South African picture gives congregations important contextual and unique information about their role and positioning in society.

4. AN EVALUATION OF SURVEY RESEARCH WITHIN CONGREGATIONAL STUDIES

We again quote Rahner in his analysis of the place of practical theology within the totality of theological disciplines:

The task of practical theology as an original science demands a theological analysis of the particular present situation in which the Church is to carry out the special selfrealisation appropriate to it at any given moment (Rahner 1972:105-106).

In order to perform this task, we need a historical and contextual analysis of congregational life. This analysis is not an aim in itself, but informs a theological and ecclesiological reflection of congregational life. This theological reflection will often be prophetic and political. It is prophetic in the sense that it introduces the memory of the *missio Dei* to which congregational life is called. It is also political,

since it must be aware of the impulse of the Church's Spirit, which is not simply identical with the perpetually valid truth in the Church, but translates the latter into the concrete challenge valid at the particular hour (Rahner 1972:105).

How can survey research help fulfil this task of practical theology?

The value of surveys is that they are useful in providing information on the characteristics of larger populations; many questions may be asked in conducting the enquiry; standardized questionnaires are useful instruments in measuring general trends (Babbie & Mouton 2001:262-263). The same holds true for surveys within the study field of congregational studies, as illustrated in the previous section.

The strength of survey research is also its limitation (Babbie & Mouton 2001:263-264). The standardization of questionnaires may be forcing attitudes and behaviour into boxes or categories. Surveys have problems in connecting the context or social circumstances to the same level of the different answers to the questions. Surveys are, to some extent, inflexible,

and it is difficult to create space for a new variable or alternatives during a survey. Surveys do not measure social action, but report only on past or prospective actions.

Survey research scores very high on the internal scientific criteria of validity and reliability.⁵ For theological scholars not trained in empirical research, this may seem not so important, but the criteria of validity and reliability decide whether there is any truth in the empirical findings. What do we mean with validity? A measure is a valid measure when it measures what it is supposed to measure (Maree & Pietersen 2009:147). External validity refers to the generalization of results to the wider population. This is important in congregational studies, because it is necessary to know what the membership, for example, thinks about the worship services in the congregation. One way of obtaining information about congregations in this regard is to use a strategy called 'key informant methodology'. Key informants (a commission of the congregation, key leaders or the ministers) are used to provide information about the congregation, its membership, average weekly attendance, and so forth. This methodology is used in the national surveys of congregations in the USA (cf. Schwadel & Dougherty 2010:366) and by Callahan (1987; 1993). The Institute for Natural Church Development (NCD) of Schwarz also makes use of key informants. Respondents are chosen from various subgroups of the congregation and a group of roughly 30 key informants are used to do the analysis of the congregation (Schalk 1999:15-17). The use of the 'key informant methodology' places definite limitations on the generalization of the conclusions to the entire congregation.

Reliability refers to the consistency or repeatability of a measurement or instrument. High reliability occurs when the same instrument gives the same results, if it is repeated within the same sample (Maree & Pietersen 2009:147). The CLSs are part of an international survey and the questionnaires and methodology are linked to the research, for example, in the USA (see the comparison between the DRC and PC (US) surveys). Schwadel and Dougherty (2010:377) also evaluate the methodology of the US Congregational Life Survey (US CLS) and find it more reliable than data gathered exclusively from key informants and open possibilities for research across units of analysis, for example, between congregation and attender, from pastor to worshipper.

Congregational life is always contextual and survey research provides an instrument for evaluating congregational change over time. Survey research also helps position congregations on a macro level within society. Survey research helps congregations and churches define their prophetic role in society.

5 See Hermans and Schoeman (2015:8-25).

What is the future of survey research in practical theology and congregational studies? A few remarks could be made in this regard:

- Survey research in the field of congregational studies must be contextual. Within the South African context, social cohesion (cf. the National Development Plan) is, for example, a national priority. Churches and congregations could play an important role in addressing such a priority. Survey research could be conducted to describe and explore the contribution of the religious community in building social cohesion.
- Congregations need valid and reliable information about their own position. The CLS methodology makes an important contribution in giving a reliable voice to attenders, but this needs to be developed so that it can be used in different congregations and denominations within the South African context. This is very difficult to achieve, but the challenge should be accepted.
- Survey research is part of the methodology used within the fields of social research and practical theology. An important challenge is to develop concepts and theory that are part of the field of practical theology.

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