

# Report from Emerging Young Theologians SAMS 2011

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## Introduction

Before explaining what 'emerging young theologians' is about, let me start by saying thank you for creating this space. To Nico and Nelus, who were committed to opening up a space where younger voices in theology can participate in the conversation, I hope that we have started a tradition that will become a defining characteristic of SAMS, and influence the broader South African theological conversation as well.

## Young theologians?

Since the call for papers went out, we've had various people asking: so what counts as a "young" theologian? Now, I have to leak this fact: a few people asked us whether Reggie still count as a young theologian. Reggie, you seem to be a yardstick of some sorts. However, Reggie answered the question in a public space yesterday, so we can settle this matter once and for all. Two nights ago I requested some input on the #sams2011 hashtag, which I will explain in a minute, concerning what participants thought the main themes of the day was, and Reggie responded with the words:

@cobusvw I think it would be critical for the younger voices to l'd these; I will listen. Thanks again C. #sams2011

Now, before you accuse me of speaking in code, let me share something about what the emerging young theologians conference was about. I'll share something about our vision, then about the form of the conference, and finally a few thoughts on themes from the conference.

## Emerging young theologians

The official conversation exploring this idea started when Nelus, Nico, and myself started planning for SAMS 2011. We soon had consensus that we had to make space for younger voices at the conference. Maybe it was the contributions from younger voices at SAMS 2010 which convinced us that we should give more weight to this. We decided on a pre-conference, rather than a parallel track, since we believed that it was important to invite our most experienced missiologists and theologians into the conversation so that they might engage in the conversation that is emerging among younger voices.

I think we stated our vision in the call for papers:

This is a space where young voices, graduate students and potential researchers, can present their ideas within an academic environment, and gain experience in participating in an academic dialogue. It is accepted that ideas presented might still be in initial stages of reflection only, and

we hope that this opportunity will create an environment where young voices can be stretched to develop these ideas into full research papers afterwards.

The focus will be broadly on the ideas that young voices bring to the table which might shape the future of a missionary/missional theology. We hope to create an environment where creativity in presentation can flourish, and where young theologians can engage with senior researchers in missiology.

Whether we were successful in all these aspects remain open for debate.

We never connected age to our use of the word “young”. In the back of our minds we had the idea that this is not for post-Doctoral researchers, but apart from this decided that everyone should make an own decision on whether they wanted to participate.

### How did it work?

Let me first make a few remarks on how the conference was set up.

First: We cut the presentation time. Part of the motivation was to create an easier point of entry, since although a 30 minute presentation time might seem like far too short for many of you participating in SAMS, for those standing up for a first presentation at an academic conference, 30 minutes can be quite challenging. However, there was a bigger motivation behind our decision: We wanted to create a space where people only share what they believe to be most important, where they are forced to stick to that which are of ultimate concern. So we created 12 minute slots. And hoped for 12 participants. And we got 12 participants. And we had a very fast-paced conversation.

Next, we wanted to create an interactive space. The screen which you’ve seen running yesterday and today was set up to contribute to this. What you see is called twitter. You’ve heard of it. You might have thought that it was irrelevant, and certainly, our debates yesterday reminded us that the emerging technologies is not an uncontested topic, however, we chose to experiment with this.

During the course of about 5 hours of presentations, we had somewhere between 350 and 400 of these little messages pop up onto the screen. They shared quotes from the presentations, asked questions, explored ideas. They were mostly from within the conference, but a few people on the outside also started participating. And many more on the outside listened in to the conference purely through these little messages.

Yesterday morning I couldn’t attend the conference, but I had a similar screen running at home while I was working. The tempo of tweets falling onto the screen was much slower than Tuesday at the young theologians session, yet, still, at one stage while Tinyiko Maluleke was speaking, I made the following remark:

Sitting in my office working, amazed at how much I can keep in touch by following [#sams2011](#) tweets. thanx @ReggieNel @andrieslouw @Niemandt

No, I couldn't follow Maluleke's whole argument, but I could pick up some of the main themes from it, and these could stir some ideas in my own thought processes.

What you see behind you is a kind of timeline of thoughts from various people participating in the conversation, and marking it with the keyword #sams2011. Together we tell a story of what is happening by sharing not necessarily what the speaker is saying, but what we are hearing.

This screen therefore serve another purpose in that it engage those on the outside of our society with the thoughts begin shared. I had two very specific questions that were directed at me by theologians/pastors who would never have attended SAMS, but who were forced to ask certain questions, although maybe because they differed from what they heard, but nonetheless, they momentarily became participants to an academic theological conversation and were forced into critical reflection through what they could gather from the conference.

We've had some requests yesterday from some of you asking for a demonstration on how to use twitter. Please talk to any of the people constantly on their computers during the conference, and they'll gladly help. We would love to have you as part of our ongoing conversation.

Yes, we also welcome critique. Some of our participants didn't participate on via twitter on Tuesday, since they gave up twitter for lent. So yes, we do recognize that this can become an idol from which repentance is needed, but it has also been a tool which is connecting young voices in theology together in ways which we could only dream of in past years.

## **Main threads**

For the second half of the report, I would like to identify a few main threads from the conference. This is not a final list, and others might identify different threads. We hope to gather as much of what was presented together so that others might also reflect on what was said.

First, something about the participants:

We had 12 people participating. Most are busy with Masters level theological studies. Most were from the University of Pretoria, a few from the University of South Africa, and Carl Brooks joined us from the University of Kwazulu Natal.

3 of the 12 were woman.

8 of the participants were white.

Most were from the Dutch Reformed church.

I mention this to give some context to the conversation, but also to point out that the bulk of participants were local. My guess would be that many more voices could participate in a similar conversation, if they are motivated by various universities to which they are connected, and also if funds can be made available to get them together. In short: the location where the conference are based might be of special importance for this specific conversation.

However, from this primarily Pretoria-based crowd, this is what we heard:

### **Reflecting on the world they live in**

The papers that were read reflected on the world which the participants were coming from. This is not simply clinical academic papers on various interesting research ideas, but rather, true to what I believe should happen in missiology, critical reflection on issues which come from the world in which we live.

A woman living with a house full of girls that were given a home since they had no other place to go talks about these safe homes as part of the mission of the church.

A young theologian who grew up as the son of a domestic worker shares in moving words the implication of moving around the baas and the kleinbaas. Contrary to what might be expected, these experiences become the resources from which he also think about reconciliation.

The list goes on: We hear about new monasticism from someone actively working towards the formation of a new monastic community. We hear about the challenges of being church in the suburbs from a pastor in the Johannesburg suburbs. We hear about gangs in the coloured community from someone who grew up in this context. Whiteness in the Afrikaner community from an ordained member of the Dutch Reformed church. Ministry with those at the receiving end of xenophobia from someone who had to flee her country of origin and come to South Africa.

This is the emerging young theologians reflecting on the future of South Africa. They talk about the world in which they live.

### **Reflecting on the church**

Next, the church was important in the conversation. Be it a pentecostal or reformed congregation, or one of various other places where church is happening, where communities of people caring for each other are gathering. Maybe what we just heard about committing to the questions concerning Christian Communities in contemporary contexts might be exactly what was at heart when this group of 12 young voices started articulating their thoughts.

Some of the things we heard was:

- The local church is becoming a prophetic voice on ecological issues.
- The local church is becoming a reconciling community.
- The local church is seeking to radically follow Jesus by becoming a monastic community, or connecting to various monastic traditions.

### **Talking about the big issues**

The large issues facing South Africa is important.

One person on twitter, who did not attend the conference at one point wrote:

[@cobusvw](#) Well, what we have heard so far (especially yesterday) was mostly ONLY social transformation, politics, economics, etc.

Now we can take a moment to reflect on this comment. It reflects not primarily what was said in the papers, but what was heard and tweeted. We don't know the background of the person making the comment. We might want to debate the validity of the word "only" in this statement. But the point is made clearly by his observation: The papers presented at this theological conference was not limited to the private or even the ecclesial sphere. Although the church was important in many papers, it is the public church which is under discussion. It is the church speaking about social transformation, politics and economics.

Willem Saayman made the very important comment last night that we need more complex analysis of how the systems which govern this world works will be shared by many who participated at the conference.

We talk about poverty. Unemployment. Racism. Xenophobia. The looming ecological crisis. The list goes on.

The kind of theology under discussion was one which can speak to these issues.

One question was being asked over and over again. In the words used in one specific instance of this questions: should the church be doing charity or concerning itself with social justice? Should we care for the poor, or challenge the makro-economic structures which cause the poor to be poor. Yes, we know we are not the first ones asking this question, but we are a younger generation of theologians, and we are also asking this question! And if I can use my soapbox to stress one point it would be this one: as prof Saayman said, we know that we have been speaking too quickly. We know that we don't understand the complex factors contribution to our society today. But there is a growing group of emerging young theologians that are willing to commit to asking the big systemic questions. I hope that those of you who come from a time when complex social analysis was needed will be able to help in forming a new generation of theologians who can contribute to the needed analysis.

### **Self-critical reflection**

Fourth. We heard a deep commitment to self-critical reflection. I want to share a few tweets that was retweeted to point this out. First, an explanation is in order. Among twitter users we talk about a "retweet" when one person repeat what another has already said. We do this because everyone has a different collection of ears listening in on what they are saying. So when Reggie says something, some of those listening to him will hear it, but when I repeat what Reggie said, those who listen to me will also hear what Reggie said, and some of them might then retweet the thought even though they don't know Reggie. We usually retweet what we believe to be important.

So, listen to these short comments. Comments which I believe we as the church need to ask ourselves today:

RT @NeelsJackson: Question raised about "the church and the poor". Are the poor not the church? **#sams2011 #fb**

Do we in the church continue to ignore the fact that the poor are part of the church? They are not a category on their own, while church is that which the rich are busy with, whether for the poor or with

the poor. The poor are the church, or at least, many who are poor are part of the church. The church consist also of those who are poor. The church as the poor. We will do well to listen to this question concerning how we talk.

A question connected to this that was also retweeted:

RT @HannoL: Shingange: Is the church contributing to the inequality status quo or listening to the needs of the marginalized? #sams2011

I believe the question speaks for itself.

RT @ReggieNel: Its only in conversation that we are able to face up to the social constructions, of who we are... @andrieslouw#sams2011

In a different thread, this thought was repeated a number of times. Whiteness as a social construct was on the table, although I believe more than whiteness is under discussion in this comment.

RT @cobusvw: One of our key ministries should be our toilet ministry, then strangers can use our toilets @reggienel #sams2011#fb

The toilet comments deserve some attention. The presentation focusing on the church in a suburban context was full of questions. No, that is an understatement. It was only questions. 12 minutes of questions about begin missional. One after the other. One of them asked: why do we lock our toilets? Are we afraid that 'they' will use it? Are we afraid that they won't flush it?

RT @HannoL Why do I feel my theological training left me missional disabled? #sams2011

Don't think theological education was spared the critique. Here you have it. Masters level theological students critically reflecting on their theological education while participating in an academic conference.

RT @ReggieNel: Social media can become a copout, the realities; Fundamentally Christian mission is about incarnation; (Nico Botha)#sams2011

And thanks to some voices not on twitter participating, twitter was also under discussion.

RT @ReggieNel: When the poor revolt, will churches march with them, or will our heads roll? (((((BOOOM)))))) #sams2011

However, I end with this question. Retweeted a number of times, I believe this captures the deepest level of self-critical reflection from the event. On whose side is the church today? We talk about the poor, but when the poor revolt, will we march with them? Where is the church when the poor are marching?

## Conclusion

With this I conclude. We decided on a pre-conference rather than a parallel track because we hoped that this will also be an inter-generational conversation. The presence of missiologists and theologians from various generations enriched the conversation. Thank you for not simply accommodating young

voices, but for actively engaging young voices. I hope that this commitment to younger voices will continue to enrich SAMS into the future.