

To Participate in God's Mission

Looking for an ecclesial structure to be a witnessing church today

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PREFACE

The love for mission has entered my life in a very profound way. When I studied theology at the Theological University of Apeldoorn (TUA) in the 1980s, I did so in order to become a minister within the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* in the Netherlands. I knew the Lord had called me to be a minister, to read the Scriptures together with the congregation and to spend time with people in pastoral care to discover with them how the Lord is present in life.

After a few years, however, the Lord made it clear to us that He wanted us in Mozambique. We were not able to ignore that calling, although questioning our ability to do so, and we lived and worked in Mozambique from the beginning of 1998 to the end of 2004. During those years, God firmly instilled in me love for mission.

After returning to the Netherlands, the Lord confirmed this love when the request was made to come and teach in the area of missiology at the TUA. Initially this was a part-time appointment, but when it was expanded to full-time, the assignment was also to take up PhD study. It was precisely in those years that there was a discussion (or debate) at the synodal level about the question of how churches should deal with the missionary character of being church. In that situation I saw taking up the study that concludes with this thesis as an opportunity to contribute to that conversation. The theme came naturally to me from within the conversation that was going on.

Now that the thesis is on the table, I think of all the people who guided and helped me to complete it. I think especially of Prof. Dr. Arnold Huijgen and Prof. Dr. Stefan Paas who acted as my supervisors. Initially it was Prof. Dr. Arie Baars who was my supervisor, for which I am still grateful to him. After his retirement, Prof. Huijgen took over from him. The way in which he and Prof. Paas have given shape to this guidance has been of great value and significance to me. They helped me overcome difficulties at crucial moments. I thank them very much for that. When it comes to finding all kinds of resources, I am grateful for the help I received from Mrs. Nikè van der Mijden-Groenendijk who almost always managed to get that difficult to trace book or article to Apeldoorn. And there were also the colleagues who regularly gave me a helping hand, including in telling me about the long journey they had taken when they themselves were busy with their PhD studies. In particular, I also mention here the support I have received during this entire study project from the circle of the Deputies for Evangelism and of the Deputies for Foreign Mission. Their support was essential, also because they made a financial contribution to my appointment at the TUA.

In my studies I have been particularly supported by my brother, Willem, and by my colleague minister in the congregation of Hoogeveen, drs. Renger van de Kamp. That is why I very much appreciate that they wanted to be my paranymphs at the conclusion of this promotional project.

I would not have been able to write this dissertation if my wife Fennie had not been willing to fully support my studies. I am deeply grateful that all these years she gave me the opportunity to return to the study. She has spent many evenings alone. Our children also contributed in that they had to do without me many times. Everyone will understand that I am expressing my gratitude to them not only in these words.

Finally, and above all and everyone, I am grateful to the Lord God for giving me the courage and energy to keep going over the years. In studying the themes of this study, I have realized again and again that I was studying things that are not ours, but His, and that I was focusing on things that we do not do ourselves, but in which He is fully engaged. Mission is God's work, and He uses us. During the years in Mozambique this was often my experience, but when studying the material for this thesis it became clear to me again and again.

I dedicate this study to the colleagues with whom I have had the privilege to work in Mozambique. In doing so, my thoughts go also out to all those pastors in the churches in Zambezi province who participated in our study program. I have seen in the way they did (and do) their work how the Lord builds His church there. That church looks different than in the Netherlands, but it is His church.

My mother-in-law is still with us at this moment. I am glad about that. The grateful remembrance of my father and mother and of my father-in-law leads me to mention their names as well. We are grateful that our parents have shown us the way of the Lord, and that they have led us in that way.

Hoogeveen, September 2021

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Question Mark

The position of the church in the Netherlands and wider, in western Europe, has changed drastically over the course of the last century. Many studies reveal that the number of people that confess to belong to a church has decreased immensely.¹ Increasingly larger numbers of people within the Netherlands are completely unfamiliar with the most basic facts about the Bible.² Secularization did and still does its job.³ Christianity has become a faith of the minority. In the private domain of life, every person is free to believe whatever he or she wishes. In the public realm, however, the influence of Christianity is something of the past. Christendom, the period in which the Christian faith and the so-called Christian culture was one of the main sources for the whole of society, has been left behind, sometimes in a very deliberate sense.⁴

¹ See BERNITS & BERGHUIS, *God in Nederland: 1966 – 2015*. The most recent publication in the series *God in Nederland* was published in 2020 (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/statistische-trends/2020/religie-in-nederland>, consulted on 2021/02/20). See further DE HART, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband*, and also DE HART & VAN HOUWELINGEN, *Christenen in Nederland*.

² For the Dutch context can be referred to the publications of, for instance, several authors in the area of social science. To name but a few: BECKER, *Secularisatie*; VAN HARKAMP, ‘Simply astounding’; DEKKER, *Van het centrum naar de marge*; PAUL, *De slag om het hart*. In the area of missiology there are also several studies to be mentioned here: the studies of DEKKER, *Marginaal*; KENNEDY, *Stad*; NOORDEGRAAF, *Vijf broden*; PAAS, *Werkers*; PAAS, *Pilgrims and Priests* deal in their own way with the changing context of the Netherlands.

³ VAN HARKAMP, ‘Simply astounding’, 43: ‘What is secularization? Let us keep it simple and view this social process as the adjustment of religion to the secular world and the decline in the meaning of religion for society *and the individual*’ (italics JvtS). In speaking of secularization, it is good to be aware of the fact that there is no single secularization paradigm. PAAS, ‘Post-Christian’, 6-9, states that there ‘is rather a collection of theories, operating on different levels of analysis, and using different definitions of “secularization” on each level.’ He lists five definitions that are currently used, viz. Differentiation, Rationalization, Privatization, Pluralisation, and Individual loss of faith, and states that the causal connections between these different types of secularization ‘are subject to ongoing debate.’

⁴ Cf. the many publications on this subject. To name just a few: MURRAY, *Church after Christendom*; MURRAY, *Post-Christendom*; PAAS, *Church Planting in the Secular West*; ROEST, *The Gospel in the Western context*; STONE, *Evangelism after Christendom*; see further the different publications of the Gospel and Our Culture Series.

This leads to the conclusion that Europe has changed back into a mission field; a conclusion that is supported by the fact that missionaries from all over the world come to Europe to bring the former missionary countries the message of life and hope in Jesus Christ. In this situation in which the Netherlands are no exception, the churches are confronted with the urgent question of how to witness to the gospel of Christ. This question is all the more urgent because the churches themselves are fully part of the post-Christian and postmodern society, in which Christian belief is at best one of the many options in the wide spectrum of all sorts of religions.⁵ After all, postmodern and post-Christendom thinking are not only found outside the church, but also inside the church. Nicholas Healy's remark that 'about half of baby boomers believe that "[a]ll the great religions of the world are equally true and good,"'⁶ applies both outside and inside the church.

The church, therefore, finds itself confronted with a number of pressing questions regarding its existence in relation to the society in which it exists. How is this relation to be characterized, and what does this imply with regard to the identity of the church? What does this mean for the concepts the church used (for centuries) when it developed the whole idea of mission? Is it necessary to change the definition of mission, because of the situation in which the church is being called to exist? Or is it perhaps necessary to dig even deeper? Will it be necessary for the church to reconsider its existence, its essence, its reason for being?

1.2 Context, Focus and Problem

The *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (CGKN)⁷ forms a small denomination in the Netherlands with a little more than 70.000 members.⁸ Their roots lay in the *Afscheiding* (the Secession Movement) of 1834. In 1892, when the churches of the *Afscheiding* merged with the churches that stemmed from the *Doleantie* (the secession movement under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper), a small number of churches stayed

⁵ See for this aspect of secularism TAYLOR, *Secular Age*. Already in the Introduction Taylor speaks of the change 'which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.' 'Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives' (TAYLOR, *Secular Age*, 3).

⁶ HEALY, *Church*, 16, citing some statistics mentioned in: ROOF, *Generation*, 72.

⁷ On the official website of the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* the abbreviation CGKN is used, also on the English version of the website. See: <https://cgk.nl/download/christian-reformed-churches/> (consulted 2021/03/08). Therefore, this abbreviation will be used in this study also.

⁸ See BIKKER, *Jaarboek 2021*, 180.

separate and continued as the CGKN. Spiritually the CGKN connect to the movement of the Reformation in the line of Calvinism as it was professed in the 16th and 17th centuries. Next to the three ecumenical creeds, the so-called *Three Forms of Unity* (the Catechism of Heidelberg, the Belgic Confession of Faith, and the Canons of Dordt) are adopted as the confessional basis of the denomination. The spiritual atmosphere circles around a pietist slant. There is diversity in the way it is expressed, but a personal relationship with God in Christ through the Spirit is typical. Nowadays, there are 181 local congregations, organized in four regional synods and thirteen classes. The number of members per congregation varies: A few congregations have less than 40, the biggest congregation has around 4600 members. The denomination is organized in a presbyterial-synodal system, abiding by the *Church Order* of Dordrecht that has been adapted regularly to changing circumstances. The church-council is the only permanent body. The other official assemblies only meet when called together (the classes twice a year, the regional synod once a year and the general synod every third year). Ergo, there is no permanent national nor regional body that governs the denomination. The different issues that require permanent attention, such as the relation to Israel, foreign mission, evangelism, diaconate, mutual assistance between the local churches in material affairs, the pastoral care of people in the military to name just a few, are taken care of by *deputaatschappen* (church committees). These committees report to the synods, both regional and national. The denomination has its own theological university where future pastors are academically trained, the Theological University of Apeldoorn (TUA). This university is accountable to the national government according to the legal regulations regarding academic education in the Netherlands. The university is also accountable to the denomination. The main percentage of funding comes from the government, but the denomination also provides a substantial financial subsidy. The synod appoints the board and full professors in the various theological disciplines. Students from different denominations study in Apeldoorn, preparing either for work as a pastor, pastoral worker, missionary worker, academic theologian and so on.⁹

Within the CGKN, the awareness of all of the developments mentioned in the previous section led to some important decisions with missionary implications. The

⁹ See for all this extensively BRIENEN, *De Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, 9-15. It is important to distinguish the CGKN from the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). Both denominations stem from the Secession Movement of 1834 in the Netherlands. But whereas the CGKN distanced themselves deliberately from the views of Abraham Kuyper, the CRCNA have from the end of the 19th century developed more in a direction in which some of Kuyper's views became increasingly influential. The theological history of the CGKN is, therefore, different from the theological history of the CRCNA.

2004 synod decided to add some special sub-articles to the current *Church Order* (*Kerkerde*), to open the possibility to establish so-called “mission congregations” (*zendingsgemeenten*) next to the existing congregations.¹⁰ A “mission congregation” is, says the *Church Order*, ‘a community of believers stemming from missionary work, and developing into an autonomous functioning congregation, that dedicates itself again to missionary work.’¹¹ The *Church Order* further states that a “mission congregation” is ‘accountable to the church council that took the initiative for the missionary work, or to another church council that has been given this task by the classis.’¹² It is also stipulated that when ‘a “mission congregation” is able to function autonomously’ within the denomination, it can be constituted ‘in accordance with’ the precepts of the *Church Order*.¹³ The synod also decided to create an official position for an evangelist with special authority to administer the sacraments and added a sub-article to the *Church Order* stating that in “mission congregations” an ‘evangelist can be given the right to administer all things that belong to his specific task and that stem from his position as “extraordinary minister of the Word”.’¹⁴

¹⁰ The Dutch designation *zendingsgemeente*, “mission congregation”, is problematic in terms of translation because it is not intended to indicate the missionary character of the congregation (despite the clear presence of this missionary character) but the origin of the congregation that stems from missionary work. The synod labeled the new communities that came to existence within the denomination as “mission congregations” in distinction of the already existing congregations, although it was articulated that the “mission congregations” fully belong to the denomination. For this reason, the distinction as introduced by the synod is used in this study, made visible in the consistent use of quotation marks in the designation “mission congregations”.

¹¹ *Kerkerde*, 30, article 21, sub-article 1a (translation JvtS; without mentioning all further translations into English are made by the author, unless specifically mentioned otherwise).

See for the discussion and the decisions taken at the synod, *Acta 2004*, 113-115, 163-166, and the corresponding appendices 25 (with especially the report ‘gelijkschakelen of inschakelen?’ at the pages 300-324), 50 (pages 497-499) and 88 (pages 693-696). See more extensively Chapter Four.

¹² *Kerkerde*, 30, article 21, sub-article 1b.

¹³ *Kerkerde*, 30, article 21, sub-article 1e. See *Kerkerde*, article 38 for the regulation of the process of constituting a new congregation.

¹⁴ *Kerkerde*, 14, article 4, sub-article 6. The difference between an ‘ordinary’ and an ‘extraordinary’ minister of the Word is that an ordinary minister of the Word (a pastor) is admitted into the ministry after an academic exam at the Theological University of Apeldoorn by the ecclesiastical board (*curatorium*) of the University, and after a peremptory exam by one of the regional classes of the church. An extraordinary minister of the Word does not necessarily need an academic preparation; a theological degree of an institute for higher professional education is sufficient.