

Models of Church Development in the Netherlands

Sake Stoppels, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

A few years ago one of my colleagues said that it would be wise to throw his books on church development into the fire. In the early nineties he wrote a series of four small books on church development in which he used insights taken from the world of management and organizational development. Twenty years later he realized that not everything can be engineered: managerial ‘ecclesial engineering’ is a concept that is too optimistic. The only volume of the four that should remain on the bookshelf, he said, was the book on biblical principles regarding being a church.¹

His confession is not one-off: churches have discovered that all their systematic efforts to build up local churches have not been very successful. “Forty years of programs in congregational development in reformed churches have had no effect at all” said a Dutch sociologist years ago.² While I do not fully agree with him, there are good reasons to look critically at approaches that are highly managerial and/or organizational.

This article seeks to provide an overview of recent developments in Dutch churches and actual trends in the field of congregational development. In general, the interest in an organizational approach has decreased and the interest in more or less individual oriented spiritual formation is growing. In parallel the focus in leadership studies has shifted to spiritual leadership and to the leader as a coach. I pay attention to a few striking developments within Dutch churches (section 2). First of all I introduce two actual models in church development (2.1). The decreasing trust in the functionality of models in the field of church development does not mean that models as such have disappeared. I will present two different models that are leaving their marks in the Dutch ecclesial landscape. Secondly, I call attention to the missional ‘revival’ in the Netherlands (2.2). ‘Missional church’ has become a real theme in the past few years. A third theme that deserves attention is the growing interest in discipleship (2.3). Although many Dutch theologians do not like the word ‘discipleship’, the concept of the church as a community of disciples or learners has attained a clear place in the mind of many church leaders.

After having paid attention to trends in church development, I will switch to a topic that is not very popular among Dutch theologians, the field of empirical research (3). While the interest in discipleship is growing, we have no clear insight into what happens to people in their involvement in church life. Do people really learn existentially in a faith community that calls itself a community of learners? Last but not least I pay in section 4 attention to the desire of churches to go ‘back to basics’. Going back might be the best way to create future. Before I start on the above themes I will sketch the actual Dutch ecclesial landscape (section 1). I limit myself to a few remarkable snapshots, mainly taken from the Protestant world. It looks like that there is more power for renewal within the Protestant tradition than within the Roman Catholic Church. Illustrative of this difference is the lack of Dutch Roman Catholic books that deal with church renewal compared to the ongoing stream of books in

¹ ‘Een mens moet door’. Interview with prof. dr. Mees te Velde, *Nederlands Dagblad*, 8 december 2012. See also Jeffrey D. Jones, *Facing Decline, Finding Hope. New Possibilities for Faithful Churches*, Lanham 2015, p. 67 et seq.

² Jan B.G. Jonkers, ‘An Evaluation of Reformed Church Development in View of the Future’, lecture held in Utrecht, May 19, 2000

the Dutch Protestant world on this topic. While some see this stream as a last convulsion of a church in death throes, I consider it as an expression of the creativity and courage of churches that know very well that the times have changed and they really have to set out a new course. Creativity and courage in books and articles however do not lead directly to church renewal. Therefore there are good reasons for theologians to get to know (and to love!) the church as she is.

1. Some facts and figures of church life in the Netherlands

In this article there is no room for a detailed and well-balanced overview of the position of the church in the Dutch society. I limit myself to seven issues that give some insight in the changing religious landscape of the Netherlands.

- *Philosophical convictions have changed in the last decades.* A recent survey came up with the following results:³
 - *Agnosticism*: ‘I don’t know if there is a god or a supreme being or power’ – 31%
 - *‘Something-ism’*⁴: ‘There has to be something like a supreme being or power’ - 27%
 - *Atheism*: ‘There is no god or supreme being or power’ – 25%
 - *Theism*: ‘There is a God who is personally involved in the life of each human being’ – 17%

Theistic believers are nowadays just a small minority. The majority of the Dutch people is atheist or agnostic.

- *There is an ongoing decline in church membership and church attendance.* The Netherlands is in many respects an ordinary European country. In the European Value Studies (EVS) the Netherlands does not have a striking position. Church membership declined from 61% in 1970 to 30% in 2012.⁵ In 1970 church attendance (at least once per two weeks) was 67% of the church members, in 2012 it had shrunk to 32%.⁶ This national percentage conceals the enormous regional differences in church affiliation and involvement. In my own village for instance, close to the city of The Hague, the number of inhabitants who attend one of the two churches in the village (Protestant and Roman Catholic) on an average Sunday is about 2% of the total population. In some villages in the Dutch ‘Bible Belt’ this percentage can rise to 60 or 70%.
- *There is no financial support for the churches from the State.* In both neighboring countries, Germany and Belgium, churches are –at least partly – funded by the State. In the Netherlands there is no equivalent of the German ‘Kirchensteuer’. Churches have to raise money themselves. That makes their functioning and position different which is interesting from the perspective of congregational development. At least two effects from this ‘private funding’ can be distinguished. In fact they are two sides of the same coin: on one hand people who don’t feel connected anymore to the church, terminate their membership, on the other hand, direct financial support to the local church binds members more closely to the church. The lack of state support is one of the explanations

³ Research commissioned by *Dagblad Trouw* 2015 (national Dutch newspaper with Christian roots). See <http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/5091/Religie/article/detail/3830831/2015/01/16/Ongelovigen-halen-de-gelovigen-in.dhtml> (24-6-2015)

⁴ Translation of the Dutch ‘ietsisme’ (in German: ‘Etwas-ismus’), a word in 1997 introduced by the scientist Ronald Plasterk who now is Minister of Internal Affairs.

⁵ Joep de Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband. Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland*, Den Haag (SCP) 2014, p. 38. For comparison: in Germany is in 2012 about 60% of the population member of a church.

⁶ Both numbers are based on self-report of respondents in large scale surveys. I believe that counting the real number of attendees on an average Sunday morning would have given percentages that are substantially lower than the ones presented.

why church membership in the Netherlands is relatively low and why church members are in general more involved in church life than in many other European countries.⁷

- *Church mergers and growing cooperation between denominations.* After more than 40 years of meeting, discussing and organizing, three mainline Protestant churches merged in 2004 into the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN).⁸ The churches involved were the two largest Calvinist churches in the Netherlands and the small Lutheran Church. Within the largest of the three churches, the Dutch Reformed Church, there was substantial resistance to the merger and as a result, an orthodox segment of this church did not join, but formed a new denomination, the Restored Reformed Church. In the beginning of 2015 the Protestant Church in the Netherlands had almost 2 million members, about 12% of the Dutch population. The church loses every year about 3% of its members.

In general, church members are no longer interested in institutional unity. They are looking for what is called ‘an ecumenism of the heart’. This informal ecumenism is strongly stimulated by a national Christian broadcasting union, the EO (Evangelische Omroep). This union came into being in 1967 in response to a Protestant broadcasting union that was becoming more liberal. In its early years the EO was quite orthodox, conventional and defensive. The last years however have been groundbreaking. Illustrative is the annual broadcasting of the Passion on Maundy Thursday, a more or less secular performance of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Well-known Dutch actors, singers and TV personalities act in this drama in which popular, non-religious Dutch songs are used.⁹ In the first year (2011) this live event attracted about 1 million TV spectators. In 2015 this number has gone up until 3.6 million spectators, which is about 20% of the Dutch population.

The organization of the world of radio and television in the Netherlands via identity driven broadcasting unions has had a substantial effect upon the building of Christian coalition’s that go across traditional boundaries between denominations. In this respect the Netherlands with its system of national broadcasting unions is unique in the midst of other European countries.

- *Lop-sided reach of mentality groups by the church.* In order to understand the socio-cultural composition of their population, European countries work with different mentality-groups. In the Netherlands 8 mentality groups are distinguished.¹⁰ In the context of its missional policy, the PKN used the model of the mentality groups to discover the relation between the church and the different mentality groups. The research showed that the PKN has good relations with just two of the eight groups – traditional citizens and post materialists. The relation with the other six groups such as social climbers and convenience oriented people is relatively poor. Interestingly, there is a large difference in mindset between the two groups that are well represented in the PKN. Traditional citizens and post materialists are no natural allies and that causes friction in the church. Most clergymen and -women belong to the post materialists, while a relatively large proportion of faithful churchgoers think like the traditional citizen.
- *Shift in sources of inspiration.* The German language is disappearing from the academic and ecclesial landscape. Because of the internationalization of the Dutch universities, the

⁷ Compare Michael Herbst, *Kirche mit Mission. Beiträge zu Fragen des Gemeindeaufbaus*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2013, p. 36,37

⁸ Arjan Plaisier, Leo J. Koffeman (Eds.), *The Protestant Church in the Netherlands: Church Unity in the 21st Century*, Zürich/Berlin 2014

⁹ Mirella Klomp, ‘Staging the Resurrection. The Public Theology of Dutch Production and Broadcasting Companies’, in: *International Journal for Public Theology* (2015, forthcoming)

¹⁰ <http://www.motivaction.nl/en/mentality/mentality-segmentation> (29-6-2015)

German language is pushed to the margins of the academy. Previously, important contributions to the field of congregational development came from German authors, especially Christian Schwarz. Today his insights have a very limited reach. With regard to congregational development, there is no single German author who actually does have a substantial influence in the Netherlands. At the moment the United Kingdom is a great source of inspiration for Dutch pioneers and other mission driven believers. *Fresh Expressions* are studied and mission trips across the North sea are made. In evangelical circles Mike Breen with his 3DM network is popular.¹¹ There still is interest in Rick Warren and Bill Hybels, but they have lost ground. Tim Keller is at the moment probably the most influential American theologian in the Netherlands.¹²

The shift in language use is not just a technical issue, it is also a shift in theological thinking. The Anglo-Saxon theological culture differs from the German culture, and the British culture from the American. The question that arises is: what happens to a theology if one language is replaced by another? Theology and socio-linguistics may be closer than people think!

- *Younger church members tend to be more orthodox than the older generations.* In a recent report on religious developments the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) concluded the following: “As regards the content of the faith, there is also evidence of a revitalisation of traditional Christian beliefs among younger church members. The percentage of young affiliates who regard themselves explicitly as believers or as religious people has been growing for some time. They more often believe unshakably in God than older members. (...) Young members of the congregation regard strong faith as the most important value in their lives more than any other church members. This ‘re-traditionalisation’ is a trend that can be observed in both the Protestant and Catholic Church, though in all years, young members of the Protestant faith display a considerably higher level of Christian orthodoxy.”¹³ Associated with this process is the trend that mainline churches become more ‘evangelical’.¹⁴ Both trends, re-traditionalisation and ‘evangelicalisation’, could relate to the need to develop a philosophy of life and a lifestyle that differ from the secular surrounding. Today, it looks like that there is little reason to become or to stay member of a church that does not distinguish itself from the broader society.

2. Trends in congregational development in the Netherlands

2.1 Two actual models of church renewal

¹¹ His books *Building a Discipling Culture* (2011) and *Multiplied Missional Leaders* (2012) have been translated into Dutch.

¹² In 2014 a Dutch translation of his book *Center Church. Doing balanced, Gospel-centered ministry in your city* (Grand Rapids 2012) was published: Tim Keller, *Centrum kerk. Het evangelie middenin je stad*, Franeker 2014. In order to make the book more contextual, passages that were ‘too American’ were left out and eight – partly critical – contributions of Dutch theologians were added. The same formula is used in the European edition: Timothy Keller, *Center Church Europe. Doing Balanced Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. European Edition. Editor Stefan Paas, Franeker 2014

¹³ Joep de Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband. Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland*, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, Den Haag 2014, p. 132

¹⁴ See Henk de Roest, Sake Stoppels, ‘Evangelikalisierung in den Kirchen. Zwischenbilanz zur Eröffnung einer Diskussion’, in: *Pastoraltheologie. Monatschrift für Wissenschaft und Praxis in Kirche und Gesellschaft*, 101 (2012), nr. 7, p. 260-279

A model that has proved its worth over the years is called 'Living from the Source'.¹⁵ Its central and very simple thesis is that we have to turn around the order by which we organize church life. In the Dutch language it is a turn from ABC to CBA. In English: from APC to CPA. Churches are quite often activity (A) oriented: 'let's do something'. Without much reflection separate activities are started. They do not originate from an underlying and shared concept. Nowadays many churches are also consciously developing policy (P): what kind of church do we want to be? And what policy do we need to develop in order to become such a church? By policy development they try to overcome the incidental character of activities. However this asks for real communication (C) about what people believe and what they experience. This is quite often a bottleneck and the closing entry of church life. The model 'Living from the Source' turns the order around: start with open communication (C) about what people believe and experience. One should not be too 'purpose-driven' in these meetings. If the living faith becomes clear and if there is to some degree a theological coherence in what a faith community believes, there is room for policy development (P). Based on this policy subsequently appropriate activities can be developed (A). The underlying idea is that individual and group spiritual formation is at the base of congregational development. The model has found its ways mainly in more evangelical circles. The author himself has evangelical roots and that colors the tone of the book. While the model itself is 'neutral' (the reversal from APC to CPA can be applied in every organization!), the language used appears to be a barrier for a wider application of the model in Dutch churches.

Much more recent is the model of the so called Appreciative Inquiry (AI). Its origin is in the USA. The sociologist Jan Hendriks introduced the model in the Dutch churches.¹⁶ As the name of the model already says, appreciation is the very heart of the model. It focuses at what is positive and valuable in people and organizations. In doing that, it contrasts to approaches that are primarily critical and problem oriented. AI is strength-based and wants to discover what strengths and positive memories are present in an organization. These positive elements are very instructive if they are collected and analyzed. They can be signposts in the process of policy making and finding future. AI consists of five steps:

- *Collecting*: what positive stories can be told about (our experiences in) our congregation?
- *Deepening*: if we look at the stories carefully and more analytically, what factors were decisive and made the experiences positive?
- *Imagining*: what might happen to our congregation if in the future these factors are given space? What dreams might come true?
- *Shaping*: what do we need to realize our dream? What are conditional factors?
- *Connecting*: can we covenant and make promises about our attitude and involvement?

AI has already proved its worth in the beginning of processes of church renewal and change. Concentrating at positive experiences is always constructive, certainly in situations of stagnation and decline. Struggling churches tend to be problem oriented, so AI is somehow a countercultural approach that can be a tool to create a new mindset. The fruitfulness of AI on the long term however is not yet clear. In Dutch churches the model is still in its infancy.

¹⁵ Marius Noorloos, *Leven uit de Bron. Via geloofsopbouw naar gemeenteopbouw*, Utrecht 2014 (eight Edition, first Edition in 1999)

¹⁶ Jan Hendriks, *Goede wijn. Waarderende gemeenteopbouw*, Utrecht 2013. Jan Hendriks is in the Netherlands the most influential author in the field of congregational development. Three of his books have already been translated into German: *Gemeinde von Morgen gestalten. Modell und Methode des Gemeindeaufbaus* (Gütersloh 1996), *Gemeinde als Herberge. Kirche im 21. Jahrhundert – eine konkrete Utopie*, (Gütersloh 2001) and *Unterwegs zur Herberge. Schritte zu einer gastfreundlichen Gemeinde* (Waltrop 2005). Hendriks in 2016.

One of the serious issues in the application of AI in the church is the question how to evaluate experiences from a theological point of view. To give an illustration: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” (Matthew 16: 24,25, NIV). What do we appreciate here?

2.2 A missional revival?

The historian Alfred Toynbee wrote that the margins of a society are the best sources for renewal. Renewal does not come from the very center of a society, it comes from the margins.¹⁷ What can be said about society in general, can also be said about Dutch churches. Missional renewal in the sense of *Fresh Expressions* or *Emerging Church* did not start in the largest denominations. It started elsewhere, among smaller churches that have never been part of the ecclesial establishment. Within the Calvinist tradition smaller Dutch orthodox Protestant churches were the pioneers in terms of missional renewal. In some ways they organized their own opposition by planting experimental new communities outside the traditional patterns of the denomination. These denominations gave room to practices that were foreign to their traditional way of being a church. Understandably, there is opposition to such revolutionary practices, but these churches continue their search for contextual communities that are able to reach out to people who will never be reached by the traditional mother churches.

In their slipstream the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN), has started an ambitious missional program that should lead to more than 100 ‘pioneer-places’. After years of focusing at internal affairs associated with the complex process of a church merger, the PKN has set out a new course and is investing a considerable sum of money and manpower in creating new Christian communities. While almost all church budgets are falling, more money is being spent on pioneer projects. So missional presence is not just lip service, it is a serious attempt to find new ways to reach the secular Dutchman. The first years the PKN invested much in fulltime academic pastors, the church followed the model of the traditional parish. But this approach is not sustainable. The newly founded communities will normally never be able to pay a full time, academic trained pastor.¹⁸ The pioneer projects of ‘the second generation’ are therefore less based on professional input and more on volunteers. This shift illustrates that it takes time for churches to adapt to new paradigms of being church. They are in the midst of a transitional period in which traditional and sometimes stubborn ways of thinking and doing have to be replaced by new approaches.

In 2015 the synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands discussed a policy document about the Church in 2025. One of the proposals is that in the future there will be room for house churches and small communities as full manifestations of the church.¹⁹ That does not sound very spectacular – house churches are as old as the church! – but it is a mind shift that will take years to settle in a church that is strongly Sunday morning and church building oriented.

I want to highlight two complicating aspects of this missional revival in Dutch Protestant churches. The first has to do with the preferences pastors have in their work and the second has to do with the theology behind the missional initiatives.

In the summer of 2014 the PKN had a survey among all the pastors of the church. One of the questions was about the enthusiasm with which they worked in specific domains of their work. The result was as follows:

¹⁷ Alfred Toynbee, *A Study of History, Volume 1*, London 1934

¹⁸ See Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every context. An Introduction to Theology and Practice*, London 2012, p. 409

¹⁹ *Kerk naar 2025: een verkenning*, Protestant Church in the Netherlands, Utrecht 2015, p. 5,14

*Enthusiasm of local PKN pastors about domains in their work*²⁰

<i>Domains in the work of a pastor</i>	%
Leading Sunday services	83
Pastoral work	60
Leading 'casualia'	49
Spiritual formation of church members	42
Studying	25
Keeping in touch with the broader society	20
Youth	19
Leadership and management	17
Missional work	15
Diaconal work	8

The figures make clear that missional work is not high on the agenda of most pastors. That means that there is an enormous gap between the national headquarter of the Protestant Church and the pastors in the local congregations. This is not a Dutch phenomenon. The German theologian Ulrike Wagner-Rau writes that most pastors do not see themselves as missionaries. They consider themselves primarily as pastors and preachers. She adds that in parallel most congregations do not perceive their faith community as a missional driven congregation.²¹ We find a similar situation in the Netherlands. What does that mean for the ambitious missional program of the national department for Missional Work and Church Growth of the PKN? How promising is it, given the dominant non-missional orientation of local pastors and local churches?

A second point is the theology, or more specific, the soteriology behind the missional agenda. In most local churches the soteriology is not an explicit theme in missional reflections and practices. Implicitly, every missional activity is in one way or another based on a specific soteriological position, but there is little conscious reflection on it. In presentations in local congregations about church renewal I often use the example of a local church that presents itself at a spiritual or paranormal fair. I challenge the attendees by asking how they would react if their congregation was invited to present itself on such a fair. What would they offer? And would that offer be different compared to other spiritual providers? And if so, in what way would it be different?²² Quite often people are shy with this question. There is an uneasy silence and if answers come, they have mainly to do with elements that can be offered by other (secular) groups and movements too. In a managerial language: is there a unique selling point in the missional presence of the church? Of course there is no single reason to misprize the contribution of the church that is general human. In many ways the church is just one of the partners in humanity and justice. She is an unobtrusive ally of lots of other groups, movements and institution and that is good. However, the question about her possible unique contribution is important nowadays.²³ If the church is not able to answer that question, her missional presence easily becomes an instrument in self-preservation.

The embarrassment we can see at this point in local churches, can have its equivalent at the national level of a church. Symptomatic is a folder of the Protestant Church in the

²⁰ Source: Survey among PKN-pastors, Protestant Church in the Netherlands, Utrecht 2014 (not published)

²¹ Ulrike Wagner-Rau. *Auf der Schwelle. Das Pfarramt im Prozess kirchlichen Wandels*, Stuttgart 2009, p. 91

²² See also Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every context*, p. 334,335

²³ cf. Harry Kuitert, *Kerk als constructiefout. De overlevering overleeft het wel*, Utrecht 2014, p. 143

Netherlands about missional work. In that folder 30 possible models of being missional are presented.²⁴ Local churches are invited to choose one or two of these models in order to develop a missional focus. In the first draft of the folder there was no reflection at all on the theological base or bases underlying the presupposed missional presence. Later on this reflection was added, but very briefly and without a clear theological direction. The lack of a clear soteriology is understandable in a very plural church, but if it leads to soteriology becoming a ‘non-issue’, churches are in real danger.

One of the Dutch Roman Catholic bishops, Gerard de Korte, states that his church is suffering from ‘speechlessness’. Believers cannot express in words what they believe. It is not just the Roman Catholic Church that is speechless, many Protestant churches have the same problem. Therefore, religious literacy is one of the major challenges for Dutch churches. I will come back to that in the closing section of this article.

2.3 Discipleship

Parallel to the growing interest in missiological issues, we see in the Netherlands a growing interest in discipleship. Missional presence is like a boomerang: it returns to the pitcher. It challenges churches to reflect on what they believe, on the quality of their communal life and on their transformational potential. Many leading theologians in the Dutch mainline churches do not like the word ‘discipleship’ – too evangelical, too elitist (and therefore schismatic), too compulsory – but the basic idea behind it, the idea of being learners or pupils of Jesus Christ, is widely accepted. I want to pay some attention to this discipleship ‘revival’ and start with an anecdote.

In my home church we were in a process of identity building and of developing a mission statement. In a small group we worked on this issue for quite a long time. During the process the word disciple came up as a possible key word in our self-understanding. So we came to a concept of a mission statement of which the first sentence reads as follows: ‘we are an open community of disciples (Dutch: leerlingen) of Jesus Christ in Nootdorp (my village)’. This concept was presented and discussed in a church meeting for all members. The first person who reacted did it the Dutch way, quite blunt: ‘did you really need one and a half year to make up this sentence?’ To him this sentence was too obvious and had totally no power to help us in finding a fruitful future. Was he right?

In 2013 my book *Oefenruimte* (‘Exercise Room’) was published.²⁵ It is a book about discipleship in a time in which religion is often seen as a consumer good that is available in case of emergency. One of the keynotes in the book is the thesis that by asking more involvement a church can give more to its members. Ask more in order to be able to give more. Dean Kelley said it years ago this way: “What costs nothing accomplishes nothing. If it costs nothing to belong to such a community, it can’t be worth much.”²⁶ He summarizes his position in a calculation: *Meaning = Concept + Demand*.²⁷ Meaning comes into being in the combination of a clear concept of what is a meaningful life and of the communication of an urgency to commit oneself to that concept. A concept alone will not make people move. It will be clear that such an approach is not compatible with a people church that does not ask serious involvement of its members. One of the main points of discussion about ‘discipleship’ in the Netherlands can be summarized with the help of the concept of ‘vicarious

²⁴ *30 kansrijke modellen voor de missionaire gemeente*, Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN), Utrecht 2009

²⁵ Sake Stoppels, *Oefenruimte. Gemeente en parochie als gemeenschap van leerlingen (Exercise Room. Congregation and Parish as Community of Disciples)*, Zoetermeer 2013

²⁶ Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are growing. A Study in Sociology of Religion, with a new preface for the ROSE edition*, Macon 1986, p. 53.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

religion': to what extent can people lean on the faith and the commitment of others?²⁸ Is discipleship the calling of every believer? What can churches expect regarding commitment to the church and regarding a lifestyle according to the Gospel?

At the moment there is growing interest in discipleship. Christians try to bridge the gap between Sunday and Monday and between private and public. Churches are – judging from the average intercessions in church services – concentrated on the one hand at the private inner circle of family life, health and disease, personal joy and sadness and on the other hand at the outer circle of worldwide issues like injustice, poverty, war and natural disasters. The world in between – where Christians live, work, go to school, where they are unemployed or retired and where they are members of all kinds of unions and participate in the civil society – is a world that is quite often not fully in the picture. In Dutch churches however, we see a growing interest in this intermediate life circle. Discipleship offers a framework to incorporate this intermediate circle in the Christian life.²⁹

3. Are lives transformed in the church?

The theme of 'discipleship' gets more and more attention in Dutch churches, but there is not much knowledge about discipleship in practice. What happens to people who participate in faith communities? Do the lives of believers change because of their participation in a religious community? And if so, how, to what degree and in what way? And what do they learn where?

Systematic theological books are quite often full of thoughts about spiritual growth, transformation of lives, character formation and renewal of faith communities. For instance, in the preface of the recent WCC-report *The Church: towards a Common Vision* ongoing growth of Christians is presumed: "As Christians experience life-long growth into Christ, they will find themselves drawing closer to one another, and living into the biblical image of the body of Christ."³⁰ This phrase is just an illustration of the ease with which development, progress and transformation are assumed (and not only in WCC reports!). However, from a practical theological point of view immediately a crucial question arises: how real is that statement? Is there any empirical base for such an assumption? And then we are back at the questions I just stated: do the lives of believers really change because of their participation in a religious community and if so, in what way? I tried to find some empirical research results in this field in the Netherlands, but I could not find them.

The famous Willow Creek Community Church in the USA did some research in this field. The church grew from a few hundred members in 1975 to more than 25.000 in 2011. They lived with the unspoken assumption that increased participation in church activities would increase a person's love of God and others. "Said another way: Church Activity = Spiritual Growth".³¹ By organizing a survey among the members in 2004 they tried to discover which activities produced the most spiritual growth. The response was 40% and that was encouraging. The results however were not: "(...) we learned three shocking facts about our congregation: (1) Increased participation in church activities by themselves *barely moved* our

²⁸ Grace Davie, 'Vicarious Religion: A Methodological Challenge', in: Nancy T. Ammerman (red.), *Everyday Religion. Observing Modern Religious Life*, Londen 2006, p. 21-35.

²⁹ Some Dutch theologians who work on discipleship are inspired by the book *Imagine Church. Releasing Whole-Life Disciples*, written by Neil Hudson (Nottingham 2012)

³⁰ 'The Church: Towards a Common Vision', in: *Resource Book, WCC 10th Assembly, Busan 2013*, World Council of Churches, Geneva 2013, p. 4

³¹ Greg L. Hawkins, Cally Parkinson, *Move. What 1.000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*, Grand Rapids 2011, p. 16. See also Michael Herbst, *Kirche mit Mission*, p. 178,179

people to love God and others more; (2) We had a lot of dissatisfied people; (3) we had a lot of people so dissatisfied that they were ready to leave.”³²

Willow Creek is a church with a clear mission: “Willow Creek exists to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.”³³ Conversion and spiritual growth are explicitly part of their mission. This differs from many mainline churches in the Netherlands. If they have a mission statement and/or a policy document, quite often in the wording of these documents we do not find words like ‘growth’, ‘turn into’ or ‘learn’. In the culture of many mainline churches spiritual growth is not a dominant theme. Unspoken, a maintenance mode prevails. If a church like Willow Creek that is concentrated at spiritual growth and changing lives, does not realize that growth to the degree they thought they would do, how do mainline churches without an explicit growth philosophy do in this respect?

Empirical research has given us some insight in the impact of participation in Christian faith communities in the Netherlands. In general church members are more than other citizens involved in volunteering, both religious and secular. The regular churchgoers among the church members are the champions in volunteering.³⁴ A comparable pattern exists in the field of donating money to charities. Church members have top positions in the ranking of giving to religious and non-religious charity. Researchers are in discussion about the question whether this has primarily to do with believing or with belonging. Many of them choose the second option: belonging is the decisive factor in volunteering and donating, not believing. Being a regular churchgoer is ‘risky’ because of the danger of getting involved in beneficence. Religious community in fact is more important than religious conviction. The Dutch sociologist Joep de Hart writes that from the perspective of social capital praying alone is at least as alarming as bowling alone.³⁵

Recently in the Netherlands a so called Micah Monitor was published. Inspired by Micah 6:8 this monitor researches the attitude and behavior of Dutch Christians in the field of social and ecological justice: do Dutch Christians differ from the average Dutchman? Regarding social justice they do, but regarding ecological justice they do not. Despite their believe in God as the Creator of the earth, from an ecological point of view Dutch Christians are just like their non-Christian neighbors. There is no significant impact of their belonging to a church on their attitude and acting towards ecological issues.³⁶

Based on these quantitative and survey based data, one can say that participation in the church has a real impact on people in some fields of life and hardly any or no impact in other fields. Large scale survey based researches inform us about what Christians think and how they behave, but we do not get information about what they have learned existentially during the years of believing and in their participation in the church. If social scientists, who state that certain characteristics of Christians are not primarily triggered by the content of their faith, but by their being involved in a social group, are right, we are still empty handed regarding the question what individual Christians learn and how their lives are transformed *because* of their faith.

Empirical research on the process of religious learning and character formation is not easy and that might be a reason that not much research is done. There are many books on religious education, but there is not much empirical knowledge about the influence of local churches on the lives of their individual members. This gap is intriguing: while the church is

³² Hawkins, Parkinson, *Move*, p. 15

³³ See <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/what-willow-believes> (03-07-2015)

³⁴ Joep de Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband. Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland*, SCP Den Haag 2014, p. 44

³⁵ Joep de Hart, *Zwevende gelovigen. Oude religie en nieuwe spiritualiteit*, Amsterdam 2011, p. 209

³⁶ Micha Nederland, *Rechtvaardigheid: waarom doen we dat (niet)? Resultaten Micha monitor 2014*, Blauw Research BV 2014, see <http://www.pkn.nl/Lists/PKN-Bibliotheek/Micha-Monitor-II.pdf> (27-5-2014)

called a community of disciples and the interest in genuine discipleship is growing, not much is known about the contribution churches make to the lives of their individual members. Judging from my experiences, social scientists are in general interested in this topic, but many theologians are not. Why not? Could it be their sense of faith as an *arcanum* (“Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.”, Mark 4,27 NIV). Or is it a lack of interest in the empirical church? In other words: do they suffer from ‘ecclesial docetism’? Or is it yet something else: do they fear that the results of such a research will be disappointing? I don’t know the answer, but anyway it is important to know the real church, especially if it all falls short.

4. Back to basics: do we dare?

At the end of this article I return to the model ‘Living from the source’. It is not without reason that this model is one of the few that has survived in the changing Dutch ecclesial landscape. We really should go back to fundamental questions and issues in order to discover or rediscover the core and the value of the Christian tradition. In several churches we can see a desire to go back to these basics. But what does it mean and in what way can churches go back to basics? The desire is clear, but the path that leads churches back to basics is not. I think it is necessary and fruitful to question widely accepted theological convictions and biblically motivated statements. To give an example, what do we mean when we quote the beginning of Psalm 127 that says that “unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (NIV). These motivational words are often used in congregational development, but what do we mean if we use them for the church? What is trust in the Lord? Do we experience that there is ground for this trust and if so, in what way does it color our efforts to come to vital churches? One of the threats to churches and church development programs is the gap between theological convictions on the one hand and a theologically drained managerial practice on the other hand. Bridging this gap is one of the major challenges for Dutch churches. And not only for Dutch churches...

Dr. Sake Stoppels is assistant professor in Practical Theology at VU University Amsterdam and policy officer in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN)