

MISSIONAL CHURCH AND LOCAL CONSTRAINTS: A DUTCH PERSPECTIVE

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Attribution License.**ABSTRACT**

The missional church concept promises to guide local churches in the direction of a new identity and mission. It is a response to a sense of ecclesiological and congregational urgency that is felt all over the world. In Africa, North America and Europe, churches and local faith communities have been challenged by the changes in the religious state of affairs since the 1960s. Whether we still call it 'secularisation' or rephrase it as 'differentiated transformation', the face of religion is changing globally. In many parts of the world, this raises a feeling of crisis that gives way to the redefinition of the mission and purpose of the church. 'Missional church', however, is a precarious concept. Nobody disagrees with the intention but can it be more than an inspiring vision? In order to realise this vision, a multi-layered and multi-dimensional analysis of 'culture' is essential. We should move the analysis beyond the philosophical interpretation of relatively abstract and evasive macro-level processes, such as 'modernity' and 'post-modernity'. The future of the missional church depends on a differentiated and empirical, informed perspective on culture. For this purpose, this article proposes the concept of ecology: A system of diverse populations, including populations of congregations and faith communities, that interacts with these populations and with their specific environments. Preparing a missional congregation for the future should be accompanied with a thorough empirical investigation into the ecology of the congregation. We should be thinking intensively about and looking for vital ecologies.

INTRODUCTION

There is an anecdote about a meeting between Hans Hoekendijk, on the one hand, and Peter Beyerhaus and Donald McGavran, on the other. Dutch theologian Hans Hoekendijk (1912–1975) was a professor of practical theology and missionary theology in the 1950s and 1960s in the Netherlands. In 1966, he transferred to the Union Theological Seminary in New York and, during those years, became a leading missionary theologian within the World Council of Churches. He was, for example, one of the (more important) authors of *Church for others*, a study on missionary ecclesiology published in 1967. Hoekendijk died in 1975 but, a couple of years before his untimely death, he met Beyerhaus and McGavran: In 1973, just a year ahead of the Lausanne conference on world evangelisation, Hoekendijk was invited for a discussion with the two 'big shots' of the evangelical movement. During that session, he expressed his thanks to his parents for raising him as an evangelical. His father had been a missionary in Indonesia and, after their return to the Netherlands, a minister in an evangelical congregation. Hoekendijk took pride in his evangelical background. To him, 'evangelical' and 'ecumenical' were no opposites. But Beyerhaus and McGavran repudiated him as a suspected ecumenical and blamed him for preaching a secular gospel of humanisation. Hoekendijk, so the story goes, was hurt by this accusation; he may have been naïve but he had thought that he was among friends.

This story is worth telling for two reasons. The first reason is that, in my view, Hoekendijk is a forebear of the missionary and even missional church movement (Bosch 2005:9). The second reason is that any report on the missional church in the Netherlands has to deal with Hoekendijk's ecclesiology against the background of the broader Dutch apostolic theology, the so-called *apostolaatstheologie*. This missional theology, represented by Hendrik Kraemer, Arend Th. van Leeuwen, Arnold van Ruler and Hoekendijk, was relatively influential in the Netherlands from the 1950s through to the 1970s (Rasker 1986:317–330); many Dutch Reformed congregations in the 1960s endeavoured to be a missional church for the world.

This article presents a case of such a Dutch Reformed congregation and sheds some light on how this congregation developed from its beginnings in the 1960s into the 21st century. The case study shows how difficult it is to stay truthful to the intentions of being a missional church in a continuously changing social, cultural and political context. More than 40 years ago, the local church that I studied started off with a missional intention in the spirit of Hoekendijk (Brouwer 2009). But, for some years now, it has, in fact, been withdrawing from its parochial context and has been forming a 'niche' within its immediate neighbourhood. The reasons for this are multidimensional and complex. An analysis of the empirical situation of this particular Dutch Protestant congregation during the last 40 years poses a powerful challenge to a naïve perception of culture. Guder and others in the Gospel and Our Culture Network have, in fact, recognised the difficulty in defining post-Christendom culture (Guder 1998:9; Hunsberger & Van Gelder 1996:53–56). We should, however, go beyond recognition, since the future of the missional church depends on a differentiated and empirical, informed perspective on culture. That is the point that I wish this article to make: A thorough empirical investigation into the ecology of a congregation is a prerequisite for the preparation of a missional congregation of the future.

The argument starts with Hoekendijk and his influence on Dutch missionary theology. I then present the case of a Dutch Protestant congregation against the background of the transformation of the Dutch religious landscape. The article finishes with some exploratory thoughts on ecology, ecosystems and biodiversity.

THE CHURCH INSIDE OUT

Hoekendijk intended to turn 'the church inside out', as the collection of some of his writings is

called (Hoekendijk 1964). According to Hoekendijk, the church is missional by definition, it is a function of the apostolic and it is an instrument of God's redeeming work in and for the world (Hoekendijk 1964:50–51). 'Missional' is not the same as promoting the church and church growth. 'Missional' is about God's *shalom* for the world, which is represented in *kerugma*, lived in *koinonia* and demonstrated in *diakonia*. The eschatology therefore precedes the ecclesiology. The Christian congregation should be a *paroikia*, a group of nomad people, free to relate to whatever form or structure; *koinonia* means an open and flexible community, directed at establishing significant signs of the kingdom of God in this world (Hoekendijk 1964:21–31).

Hoekendijk put down these thoughts more than four decades ago, when he was a prominent figure in the missionary and ecumenical discourse. Theology students in the Netherlands nowadays, however, hardly know who Hoekendijk was. The reason for this may be that they are more on par with Beyerhaus and McGavran but it may also be that Hoekendijk's apostolic theology was too radical, according to his Dutch colleagues Berkhof and Van Ruler. The former criticised him for his 'functional ecclesiology' and the latter emphasised, against Hoekendijk, the special character of the church as a creation of the Spirit (Brouwer 2003). Hoekendijk was furthermore no empirical theologian. He was a keen missional theologian and an influential visionary in the ecumenical movement but he was not well versed in social scientific enquiry. This could well be the reason for his underestimating the counter-pressure of Christendom and the ability of the church to endure. 'Morphological fundamentalism', a concept calibrated by Hoekendijk, is still a relatively manifest ecclesial reality in mainline Dutch Protestant churches. One could argue that Hoekendijk should have paid more attention to a 'thick empirical description' (Browning 1991:105–108; Geertz 1973:3–30; Hopewell 1987:3–18) of the contexts of missional congregations. Instead, however, he presented an inspiring vision that was not fully realised by any means. But an inspiring vision it was. And this was also the vision – and the intention – with which the congregation that I studied started in the 1960s.

After World War II, the Netherlands entered the so-called *wederopbouw* period (Kennedy 1993; Schuyt & Taverne 2000). This meant, materially, rebuilding the houses and churches and other important buildings that were damaged during the war and, socially, reconstructing society both culturally and politically. This period of redevelopment lasted nearly two decades. They were years of soberness throughout Western Europe; Dutch society was kept together by strict rules and paternal authorities. The 1950s could be seen as a period of innocence – people cherishing community and closeness – but it could also be seen as suffocating. This may well be the reason for the 1960s to have been hailed as liberating: The economy took off, social divisions were turned around, the world belonged to the young and imagination ruled. 'The times they are a-changin'', according to one Bob (Dylan) Zimmerman; 'The Great Society' (Hoekendijk 1964:35–41) reached the Netherlands and the 'fourth man' – beyond Christianity, the church, the bourgeoisie, the self, religion – announced his advent (Hoekendijk 1964:56–71).

A CASE STUDY OF A DUTCH PROTESTANT CONGREGATION

During the 1960s, a city in the middle of the Netherlands – Amersfoort – entered a new era by building new city quarters after the war. Until then, housing shortage had been a huge problem. Most people in Amersfoort lived in old and small houses – if they were fortunate enough to have a place of their own and not compelled to lodge with family or with strangers. Everything in these newly built quarters was new and fresh and full of hope. The inhabitants felt as if they had the world at their feet. The same post-war ardour was discernible in the Amersfoort churches; they even went so far as to build new residences for their faithful in the new city quarters. The Dutch Reformed Church, however, not only intended to build a

church for the local Dutch Reformed; in the spirit of Kraemer, Hoekendijk and Van Ruler, it heeded a calling to be a church for the whole population, to be an inclusive church. Optimism about the future of the church and of society was prevalent. The church believed that it should play an important part in society by challenging the drawbacks of the post-war era, namely the individualism and the anonymity in the new neighbourhoods, the loss of community, the loss of sense of direction.

In 1970, the Dutch Reformed in Amersfoort established in one of the new quarters a place where the congregation could worship on Sundays. The building looked more like a community centre than a church. For instance, a bell tower was lacking. Furthermore, the name of the centre did not include the suffix 'church', as had been the case with all the previous Dutch Reformed church buildings in Amersfoort. The intention was to establish a congregational meeting place that was an integrative part of the nearby shopping area, a place that people should not be discouraged to enter. And, indeed, all kinds of welfare and neighbourhood organisations made use of the facilities during the week. The church centre was one of the few larger venue halls in the city and it was therefore also host to musical and vocal performances. The place was known by all.

In a recently published empirical theological study, I reported on the culture and theology of this Protestant congregation (Brouwer 2009; see also Brouwer 2008). The culture of a local faith community is perceived as the comprehensive configuration of four congregational study perspectives: context, resources, process and identity (Ammerman *et al.* 1998; Brouwer 2005). The nature and essence of congregations can be grasped by an empirical research through the use of these perspectives as analytical tools. Theology, as the theological interpretation of the congregational description, is seen as part of the culture of a local faith community (Ammerman *et al.* 1998:23–39; Schreiter 1985; Tanner 1997:63–93). The theological interpretation of the thick description of congregations is an elementary component of congregational studies.

Part of the above-mentioned ethnographic study of the Protestant faith community in Amersfoort was an overview of the history of this congregation. In the beginning, the congregation wanted to be an 'open' church and the building was supposed to be an 'open door, an open house and an open heart to the neighbourhood', according to a policy document from 1970. The centre was called 'The Bridge' to indicate a place where people could meet and bridge their differences and strengthen the local community. 'This center is built because we believe that God wants something with people. God builds a bridge to the earth, through Jesus Christ, the Pontifex, the pontiff, the builder of bridges,' said the then minister. The church was to be a church for others in the post-war culture of estrangement and societal upheaval – a missional church, according to the meaning that Hoekendijk attached to it.

When I started to study this congregation a few years ago and made a more profound exploration of its origins, I was surprised to learn about these beginnings. The congregation that I familiarised myself with initially through participant observation seemed to differ from its founding principles of the 1960s. In 2007, there were indeed some sincere attempts to attract people from the neighbourhood to the church, to organise easy accessible activities, to let people know that God loves them and that every Sunday morning the gospel is proclaimed in the church. But the congregation was in no way a missional church. The church did try to adhere to the new policy of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN) in respect of becoming a missional church but it was a long way from realising this aim. So different from its original intentions of the 1960s.

In 2005, one year after the merger of three Protestant churches into one, the synod of the PCN welcomed a document titled *Learning to live out of wonder* (PCN 2005), announcing a missional

change in the denominational policy of the PCN. There were criticisms on the too-optimistic pitch of the text optimistic about missionary opportunities and on the influence of the evangelical movement that seemed to be present in the document. Overall, however, the congregations responded benevolently to this synodal plea – before they carried on with business as usual. Agreeing with a missionary vision is one thing; changing into a missional church is something else.

The synodal report presents the congregation as missionary; there is a missionary calling and there should be a missionary presence: 'The Word to life should be translated and brought over the borders of the church and Christianity' (PCN 2005). The church wants to be many things to many people:

A powerful community of faith where people discover the purpose of their life; to represent and bear witness of the life-changing message of the Gospel in a contemporary manner; a community where God's presence is being celebrated; a community of prayer; a centre of values and spirituality; a caring community, where people may feel secure; a movement of hope and anticipation, across limits of poverty, injustice and hopelessness.

(PCN 2005)

According to the document, people, society and culture are estranged from the gospel; the solution is to communicate the gospel in a new way to a culture of experience, an *Erlebnisgesellschaft*.

This is what the congregation that I studied tried to do – without success. The evaluation of the empirical research showed that the congregation could be characterised as a 'congregation of difference' (Heelas & Woodhead 2005:17–23); the congregation is not attuned to its surrounding civic community. Although it has not declined significantly since its early days and the average number of worship attendees has been stable for a while now, the faith community is not very successful in drawing new and younger members. The congregation is relatively strong in bonding social capital but it is unable to invest the existing networks of trust and reciprocity in strengthening the neighbourhood and in bridging the social, cultural and economic tensions between the old and the young, the affluent and the marginalised, the indigenous residents of the neighbourhood and the migrants, the Christians and the Muslims, the religious people and the secular ones (Brouwer 2009:372–383).

This diaconal and missional 'captivity' comes as no surprise. The synodal report and the perspective of the PCN on its missional future are somewhat superficial; they are a projection of a vision that very much resembles a form of wishful thinking. A sound empirical foundation is lacking. The church policy does not account for the societal complexities, the political intricacies or the cultural quandaries that make becoming a missional local church a very delicate enterprise. Most of the time, reality is different from what we hope it is.

This was already the case in 1970, when the Protestant congregation that I studied built its church centre. The Protestant congregation then anticipated that the building of new houses in a new developed quarter in the city of Amersfoort would guarantee a continuous stream of church members. The empirical situation, however, differed. Secularisation in the Netherlands in 1966 dealt a hard blow to the Dutch Reformed church, although this was not the only church affected. The numerical increase in church members did not equal the growth percentage of the population. In 1958, for example, a quarter of the population mentioned no affiliation with any church; in 1966, this had risen to a third (33%). In 1979, the percentage stood at 43% and, in 1996, more than half the population (53%) had no church affiliation. In 2004, it was nearly two-thirds; the estimate for 2020 is even worse (Becker & De Hart 2006:94–96).

Churches are finding it increasingly difficult to stay connected to changes in Dutch society. The missional vision with which the congregation that I studied started was, in fact, already outdated

in the 1970s. The congregation wanted to be a church for others but 'the others' wanted something different; people wanted to decide for themselves if and how they would include faith and spirituality in their life plan. The local Dutch congregation in Amersfoort was not up to this challenge; for a long time, in fact, the congregation did not even realise that there was a challenge.

This challenge is indeed a very complicated one. It is too easy to state that we live in a culture of modernity or post-modernity. And it is also too easy to suggest that Western culture is resistant or even hostile to the Christian faith and that the church should therefore be a distinct social community as the Gospel and Our Culture Network (Barrett 2004:xii–xiv; Guder 1998:142–182) and theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder assert. What we need is a differentiated concept of culture. When we state that a missional church is incarnational (Bosch 2005:512), we should be as concrete and specific as possible about the context of a local congregation. It is not very useful to confine an analysis of the culture of a local church to a philosophical interpretation of modernisation or to the modern way of life or to the post-modern definition of the self. It is equally not very interesting to reduce the cultural analysis to the macro level of society (rationalism, individualism, materialism, pluralism). In order to understand the local context in which a congregation intends to be a missional church, we should instead grasp the empirical situation in its complexity. The further development of the missional-church concept therefore requires a fundamental theological reflection on a scale of thick descriptions of local communities of faith, otherwise missional ecclesiology will suffer from theological reductionism. Empirical congregational studies determine the credibility of a theological account of the church by its concrete appeal to history and sociology, that is by providing realism (Haigh & Nieman 2009:585).

ECOLOGY

The empirical context of a local congregation is a multi-layered texture that consists of influences at the macro, meso and micro levels of society. Nowadays in the Netherlands, it is more precise to use the concept of 'transformation of the religious landscape' instead of 'secularisation'.

In 2009, about 1.7 million people with a non-Western ethnicity were living in the Netherlands, a little more than 10% of the Dutch population. About 1 million of these new Dutch women and men are presumed to be Muslim and about 600 000 or 700 000 to be Christian. The influx of migrant workers and asylum seekers and their families is therefore forcing Dutch society to deal with the subject of religion again, one (the Christian version) which many thought had been dealt with in the 1970s. The debate about the separation of church and state is, however, back on the political agenda.

Three Dutchmen and one woman have recently, for different reasons, become international household names with regard to the multicultural debate in Western Europe. Intended Member of Parliament Pim Fortuyn and film maker Theo van Gogh were murdered in 2002 and 2004, respectively: Fortuyn because of his radical criticism of Muslim extremism, Van Gogh by the hand of a radical Muslim extremist. Politician and publicist Ayaan Hirsi Ali exchanged the Dutch climate that she electrified with her controversial thoughts on Islam and women's rights for the United States with its freedom of thought and speech, and Geert Wilders, leader of a populist political party, caused some international commotion with his anti-Islamic movie *Fitna*. Religion may not be said to be making a comeback in Dutch society but it may be said that both Muslims and migrant or international Christians have put religion back on the political and cultural agenda.

In addition to this renewed political and cultural interest in religion, there is another factor that influenced and continues to influence the religious landscape in the Netherlands: the

enormous growth of the Dutch economy in the 1960s and 1970s, again in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century up until 2008. Economic growth, increasing levels of welfare and the explosion of communication media have made the world a global village. These globally induced international and national developments, which are all intertwined, have resulted in changes in spatial planning in the Netherlands. Holland is a small country and space is a valuable asset, as, for example, is water in parts of Africa. The allocation and destination of space therefore has to be carefully thought through. The national and regional governments have to plan and order in detail the use of available space. Agricultural, urban, industrial, infrastructural, environmental and recreational objectives all compete for the limited availability of Dutch soil. Amidst these conflicting demands, the Dutch government tries to balance the maelstrom of the economic market with the future of both our children and our habitat; 'planning for profit, people and planet'. The outcome is that spatial and physical planning is in a permanent dynamic. Unexpectedly, this dynamic is important for the chances and the possibilities of local missional congregations.

The dynamic of spatial planning leads to ever-changing urban and rural ecologies in the sense of geographical spaces where people live, work, meet and entertain themselves and each other. These changing ecologies influence the congregations that are part of these ecologies. Some ecologies are full of potential for churches, such as those with many new housing estates, young parents and children, a vibrant economy, cultural diversity and a reasonable level of homogeneity. But it is not difficult to perceive ecologies that offer hardly any opportunities for churches to develop and grow, such as those of the congregation that I have researched: a post-war quarter that is now, euphemistically, characterised as a 'quarter in need of social and political attention'; many of the buildings in the neighbourhood have grown old and are out of fashion, the housing is cheap, the residents are mostly old or young and moving through or ethnic (Brouwer 2009:164–185).

The concept of ecology is borrowed from Ammerman (2001:36–40, 310–321), even more so from Eiesland. In her book *A particular place*, Eiesland (2002:13–17) described how faith communities respond to changes within their ecologies. There is an analogy to biology and to the evolution theory. Like a biological species, communities of faith form a 'population' within a specific environment, habitat or biotope. They differ from each other but also interact with each other. The populations of congregations also, however, interact with other populations, such as those of voluntary associations or governmental agencies, civic initiatives, schools, businesses and public health organisations. These different populations interact with each other and with their social, political and cultural environments. Together, these populations and environments give shape to ecosystems or ecologies. Ecologies differ according to their geographical location, degree of urbanisation, regional economic situation, political culture, religious diversity etc. Where there is only one faith community, such as in a small village, there is no biodiversity. In vital ecologies, with great biodiversity in a rich (nutritious) environment, there are different active faith communities that both compete with and/or support each other. Communities of faith therefore form a religious population within an ecology that is continually changing and evolving.

This biological analogy gives reason to change focus from individual congregations to a population of faith communities in a specific environment and to attend to the shifts in the relational pattern of the population. International economic developments with national and regional consequences can lead to radical changes in the infrastructure, demography and particular culture of a region. Cities and villages are transformed as a result of changes in spatial planning. And, with the transformation of habitat, congregations also change from macro level down to micro level. Shifts in religious populations are therefore caused not only by the restructuring of the religious landscape but also, if not more, by the ecological effects of spatial planning, such

as sub-urbanisation, ex-urbanisation, urban renewal and rural fringes.

Eiesland added the importance of spatial and social development to the analysis of religious transformation. These developments may even be more influential on ecologies and religious populations than changing religious landscape. It is as a result of this that religious populations have changed and become more diversified (Eiesland 2000:203–209). For instance, the status of a congregation nowadays is determined by its size and public dominance and no longer by its denominational tradition and history. The appearances of faith communities have also changed. This can be illustrated with the changing ecology of the Dutch Protestant congregation that I have researched (Brouwer 2009:186–220). The neighbourhood started with three Christian congregations, according to the 'pillarisation' of Dutch society: a Roman-Catholic parish and two different Reformed churches. Next to these longer-existing Christian faith communities, the neighbourhood has been enriched during the past two decades with a Turkish Muslim mosque, a Chinese migrant Christian congregation, two different Christian Reformed churches, a spiritual centre, a youth church, a Church of the Nazarene, an evangelical congregation and possibly different (post) denominational house churches. Faith communities relocate, innovate, start afresh or find a niche within their ecologies. All in all, a vibrant habitat to some and a hostile environment to others.

CONCLUSION

Eiesland's research showed the importance of an interest in changing ecologies. Religious diversification and spatial planning rearrange ecologies and, consequently, congregational populations. Congregations should adapt to these rearrangements. Adaptation leads to dynamics and differentiation; it leads either to decay or to vitality. Preparing a missional congregation for the future should be accompanied by a thorough empirical ethnographic investigation into the ecology of the congregation (Brouwer 2009:397–439). We should be thinking intensively about and looking for vital ecologies and even for vital potential within less vibrant ecologies. Only then may the missional church have a chance beyond local constraints.

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