



Protestantse
Kerk

Finding place of
faith, hope and love |



The Future is yours

living by grace
susceptibly and vigilantly

Focus for the Protestant Church in The Netherlands
on the road to 2025



A community of
WORD & TABLE



As CHILDREN
of one Father



Yours is the
KINGDOM



In the
heart of
LIFE

sets free corrects suffices motivates relaxes



GRACE
is the Keynote

*grumpily happy insecure
looking for meaning overstressed polarised*

This vision report was established in discussion with young church members, church board members, ministers, and theologians nationwide. Classes responded to the concept text.

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*This translation was carefully and lovingly made by Limwierde Taaldiensten (www.limwierde.nl).
Most Bible verses were taken from the NIV, unless otherwise mentioned, as sometimes other versions stick closer to the Dutch NBV (Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling, ed. 2004).*

Preface

This vision report articulates the calling which the Protestant Church in The Netherlands (PKN) knows itself called to. It is not a policy plan, but a substantive sitting. It offers direction, focus, and perspective for being church in the current Dutch context. It gives insight into what direction the Protestant Church wants to develop in.

The vision report is published in a time in which the Covid-19 brings along threat and all sorts of restrictions. This has impact on the way local congregations will work out the vision report in their local contexts, and on the support the service organisation will deliver there.

The Future is Yours thinks further in the line of the two earlier vision reports, *Learning to Live by the Amazement* (2005) and *The Heartbeat of Life* (2012). This latest vision report updates and crystallizes *Church2025*, the movement which the Protestant Church initiated a few years ago. The speedy and far-reaching developments in our society, in which the church faces shrinking and, simultaneously, many are searching for meaning and connectedness, comfort and footing, compel to contemplation and focus. We do so, filled with hope and in trust. The future of the church - and of our world - doesn't belong to us, after all, but to God: *The future is Yours*.

Furthermore, this vision report forms the starting point for the policy framework for the national service organisation. Within these frameworks, the focus points will be translated in tangible policy for the church as a whole and in service to the local congregations. Besides, this vision report challenges local congregations to discover what they are called to in their specific local context. Hopeful, because the future belongs to God; relaxed and joyful because we are carried by His grace. During this process, the vision report may connect and challenge.

Behind the vision report text you will find a discussion guide with questions and suggestions for discussion and processing within your local congregation. Besides, on the Protestant Church website (protestantsekerk.nl) more supportive materials can be found.

May I wish you from the heart to be inspired and blessed in the talks circling around this vision report.



*On behalf of the General Synod of the Protestant Church in The Netherlands,
ds. René de Reuver*

The context in which we are church

Before we, as Protestant Church, expose our focus for the years to come in this vision report, we zoom into the context in which we are church. It is quite a challenge to 'catch history in the act' (referring to Geert Mak) when you're with your nose at it.¹ But we're attempting to characterise our society with a charcoal sketch.

- **Grumpily happy**

We're living in one of the most prosperous countries in the world and have been enjoying seven decades of peace. There are plenty reasons to be grateful. Yet, with many there is a nibbling sense of uneasiness. "I'm doing fine, but we are not", the average Dutchman sighs. At the publication of this vision report, we are going through the most vehement crisis in times of peace since the Second World War, due to Covid-19. This brings us to expressively pause upon our most crucial life values. We don't know yet if and how this will affect [everything] after the Covid crisis.

- **Insecure**

Huge societal developments are feeding the sense of insecurity. This came to an unexpected peak due to the Covid crisis. We experience that our grip on our lives is only very limited. On a regular basis, alarm bells ring when it comes to the continued existence of our planet. The geopolitical power blocks are moving more whimsically than before, and in familiar cooperative bodies, such as the EU, things rub off. The European policy on refugees is failing. In our own country, we were already familiar with quite a few problem files, such as the ones on nitrogen, migration, healthcare, education and ageing. Many live with a sense of losing grip on things.

- **Looking for meaning**

The church and other organised religious associations seem to crumble down. Simultaneously,

our country counts countless meaning searchers, and the interest for philosophy, ethics, and spiritual leadership is massive. Many sources are being consulted, very individually or together with others. Many are searching for an interpretation and meaning of the things that happen to us. Especially young people have a strong desire of belonging somewhere.

- **Overstressed**

'Busy, always busy' used to be the default setting of many Dutch. Especially the younger generation senses a persistent pressure to get hold of happiness, not to miss out on anything and, most of all, not to fail. Stress is its fruit and a burn-out is lurking. The Covid crisis causes also other forms of stress. Simultaneously, many people experience that a life with more rest encourages a life with more awareness.

- **Polarised**

The proverbial Dutch consensus society has rediscovered polarisation. Demonstrations have become frequent again. Three quarter of the Dutch are of the opinion that contrasts in society increase. Between rich and poor, between people with a migration background or without, between adherents of traditional parties and populists, between climate change advocates and climate change sceptics, etc. Fortunately, the mutual solidarity seems to have increased due to the Covid crisis, even though more attention is being paid to inequality in society, due to the Black Lives Matter Movement.

In this context are we church, at the beginning of the third decade in the 21st century. In which a lot of good things happen, too, inside and outside the church. So, let's for a start, underline and put in bold that we may be grateful for what God gives us, in freedom and (relative) prosperity.

**Now thank we all our God
with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom his world rejoices.**

(Hymn 704:1)

Worries

At the same time, we do not close our eyes for worrisome developments. Many congregations are seized by cramp due to shrink. How do we keep on going? What is our future? Other congregations present themselves with 'We've (still) got our business fixed up'. This way, they may lose sight on their position in the whole of church and society. Church diversity doesn't cause the overview to be more surveyable. A village situation with a 'people's church' differs considerably from being church in a new housing district in the Randstad conurbation in the central-western Netherlands. There are also congregations who've been through the deepest point of the crisis already. They recover themselves, as a smaller congregation, with a new, fresh identity, with missionary ardour, and a lighter shape in organisation.

Underflows

We see the five underflows of our charcoal sketch of society reflected in the church. In the church, too, we are often grumpily happy. New developments go hand in hand with insecurity. Meaning seekers are also inside the church. For polarisation, the same is valid: conflicts may become fierce in the church. Neither do stress and burn-out pass church members' doors.

Focus

In our view, it all comes up with 'empty hands' in our time and context, receptibility, vigilance, and concentration on God. We practice ourselves in a spirituality of vigilance. The church is not a business we are to save, the church lives from its connection with Jesus Christ; it is He we follow. This is why we

don't say: Jesus is where the church is, but: where Jesus is, that's where the church is. We stretch out to be where Jesus is. For by His Spirit, He is now present in this world, attentively we follow this trail. At the same time, we live in the expectation of the great future of God, a new heaven and a new earth, his Realm of peace and justice. We're living His future. Con-fidently, and filled with hope, we labour for church and world, with the prayer 'Your will be done, as it is in heaven, likewise on earth'.

Impulse to conversation

The church lives from grace. With this liberating keynote, we're starting off this vision report. This is the supporting soil for our lives and labours as church. This echoes in four themes:

1. Living in grace is fed in the fellowship of Word and table,
2. in connection with others, across church walls and cultural boundaries.
3. The liturgy, including the 'everyday liturgy', gives perspective to our existence
4. and puts the church in the heart of life, in all diversity.

We hope that this document will initiate many local congregations to a fruitful dialogue about our connectedness and common calling as Protestant Church in The Netherlands. Besides, this vision report lies the policy foundation for the service organisation of our church.

Amidst all insecurity and unruliness in a world with many good and huge evil exist, this is our prayer:

**Smother the hell in our heads
put your word upon our hearts
break the iron with hands
break the power of evil.**

**The future is Yours,
come what may.²
(Huub Oosterhuis)³**

1. Geert Mak, author and TV-maker hosted a TV-series of episodes on Europe's history on the Dutch public TV. See <https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/in-europa.html> for details.

2. Unauthorised translation by the translator.

3. For more information on Huub Oosterhuis, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huub_Oosterhuis



Grace is the Keynote

My grace is sufficient for you (2 Corinthians 12:9)

The most beautiful things in life happen to us. Your joie de vivre. Someone who chooses for you, who loves you. Experiences that colour your everyday life: beginning with a captivating sunrise to the heartfelt words of someone in your environment. These surprises great and small are what give radiance to life. You cannot organise them, you receive them.

The church, par excellence, is a place for such surprises. Experiences that get you in a grateful mood. Love and grace from God are summoned upon us. Whatever has happened or whatever evil you may be blamed for, out of grace, you may start afresh. In the church, we live from what we receive. Grace is the keynote.

The depth and width of that key word grace is immense. Without willing to be complete, we name five aspects:

- **Grace sets free**

No situation is so hopeless or God knows how to handle it. He knows our failures, our getting stuck and our blind alleys. "I have observed the misery of my people", says the God of Israel (Exodus 3:7).⁴ In Jesus Christ, His compassion comes to a climax. In cross and resurrection we see the depth of His grace. Forgiveness rules. This is square to our natural inclination to revenge and retribution.

- **Grace corrects**

By grace are we who we are, Paul says: "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God." (Ephesians 2:8).⁵ Every thought of self-sufficiency or self-congratulation is thus under criticism.

Hasn't the Covid crisis fixed our attention on our vulnerability and our dependency?

- **Grace suffices**

'You don't need more than my grace', Paul receives as response to his prayers about the 'thorn in his flesh'. Grace doesn't always rid you of life's troubles. They're not unfamiliar to God. Grace confronts and offers perspective to deal with them.

4. Christian Standard Bible.

5. New Living Translation.

- **Grace motivates**

Grace puts you into action, speeds up life. Grace grants freedom and joy to live from what you have received. 'Make me someone who knows about grace' (Rev. Barend Wallet).

- **Grace relaxes**

Grace breaks open hands that are cramped. We may live relaxedly, not out of indifference, but in faith confidence. 'Lord, it is your church, I will lay down to sleep', Pope John XXIII said in his evening prayer.

We need this grace to be freed from cramp due to shrink. Dechurching will continue without a halt. The closing down of churches is the order of the day. Only 8.5% of the confessing members of the Protestant Church in The Netherlands are younger than 40. Many who are involved in transferring the faith to the younger generation know the sense of this work crumbling down at their hands.

We also see a surprising comeback of religion. The widespread idea that a further modernisation of society, with more prosperity, and a higher education, would automatically lead to an evaporation of interest in religion, is outdated. Church may be out, religion and spirituality are in. At the same time, many feel disempowered when it comes to religion. They hardly know how to deal with it or how to give words to it. To many, old words from a rich tradition have no meaning anymore. Religious illiteracy occurs, in and outside the church.

In this situation, it comes down to grace that relaxes and mobilises us to labour joyfully and confidently for church and society.

**Our only hope,
Eternal day of earth and the heavens,
We break the silence of the peaceful
night; Saviour Divine, cast your eyes
upon us! Pour on us the fire of your
powerful grace...**

(From Cantique de Jean Racine - Gabriel Fauré)



1. A community of Word and table

Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? (Luke 24:32)

In the Bible we come across two people who have an unexpected meeting with the Risen Lord. Luke reports on this at the closing of his gospel (Luke 24:13-36). At the moment he introduces the two to us, they are at the deepest point of their disillusion. They are only able to talk about their expectation in the past tense. "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel ..." They stand with their backs to Jerusalem.

Jesus doesn't leave them to their own devices. He follows them, and as a stranger joins them. Interestedly, He initiates the conversation. He allows them room to express their disappointment. Until He takes the word and relates Moses and the prophets to Himself. He, as the Resurrected One, provides household words with a new explanation. No wonder they don't want to let Jesus go when they are approaching their home.

Grace happens to them. They hear the word that changes everything. What is more, they meet that Word. And this realisation only hits home at the table, where He takes on the role of the host, pronounces the blessing and breaks the bread with them. Suddenly, they recognise Him. Their eyes shine, they take fresh courage and immediately return to Jerusalem to have the other ones share in their joy. Their encounter with the Risen One has changed the course of their lives.

The story of the Emmaus travellers describes a cocktail filled with experiences. Disappointment, pessimism, reprimand, teaching, longing, disclosure, amazement, joy, U-turn and witnessing. The concise story contains a number of elements we may mirror ourselves in.

How easily can disillusion get hold of us? How often do we hear familiar words as if they were new? When is He unexpectedly surprisingly close to us? When do we recognise Him in the breaking of the bread, at His table? When do we experience our heart burning? When do our lives take a U-turn?

Against the soundboard of society and the current situation of today's circle of Jesus' disciples, we hear the words from Luke 24. The story may be read as a mirror story for the way we are church, and for our culture. Jesus spends time with his despondent disciples. Unexpectedly, He breaks into their lives and speaks with them from heart to heart. We are witnesses of a conversion. What is given to us in Word and sacrament puts our lives in a complete different perspective. Doubt makes way for radiant joy. New hope is dawning. Not only for the personal life, but also for the world and for creation. This turns us into witnesses.

Living from God's grace in Jesus Christ the church fulfils the task of her Lord to hear the Word and to proclaim it.

(Church order of the Protestant Church in The Netherlands, articles 1-2)

The church, as a fellowship of Word and table, lives from these gracious encounters. Not only do we hear about God's gracious presence, we also receive it as heavenly food and drink. In the Holy Communion, we celebrate the fellowship with our Lord, Jesus Christ. In the breaking, sharing and receiving of the bread, Christ Himself is in our midst. He is the host Who shares Himself, as a sacrifice, out of love.

6. Unauthorised translation by the translator.

“In celebrating the Meal, we receive Jesus Christ as the ultimate good gift from God. As God the Father gave His Son to us and for us, so the Son gives Himself to us and for us unto death. (...) In celebrating the Meal we are being connected in a special way with the Risen One.”

(Prof. dr. Jan Muis, De Maaltijd van de Heer, pp. 8, 9)⁶

The Holy Communion binds us with God and with each other. We receive bread and wine personally, together with ‘brothers and sisters’, as members of that one body of Christ. The bread Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and shares, symbolises the life of church and faith. In imitating Him, we are given unto each other. With this meal, dividing lines between people are removed. We are one in Christ. As body of Christ, we will also be broken to go into this world. We, too, are being called to be a guest at the table, and to receive and to share, just as Jesus was Levi’s and Zacchaeus’ guest (Mark 2:15 and Luke 19:5-6).

**For each of us a place at the table,
damaged or whole, righteous or bad,
and despite the pain: a place of forgiveness,
gracious beginnings of justice divine.
For each of us a place at the table,
with reverence filled, delivered from fear,
a place to be, a place to become
witness to Him, a living proof.**

(Hymn 388:4 and 5)⁷

7. Translation of Hymn 388 from Liedboek, © 2013 Interkerkelijke Stichting voor het Kerklied, 's-Gravenhage. This hymn in this Dutch hymnal was already an edited translation in itself of *For Everyone Born, a Place at the Table*, by Shirley Erena Murray (words) and Ron Klusmeier (music).

Focus

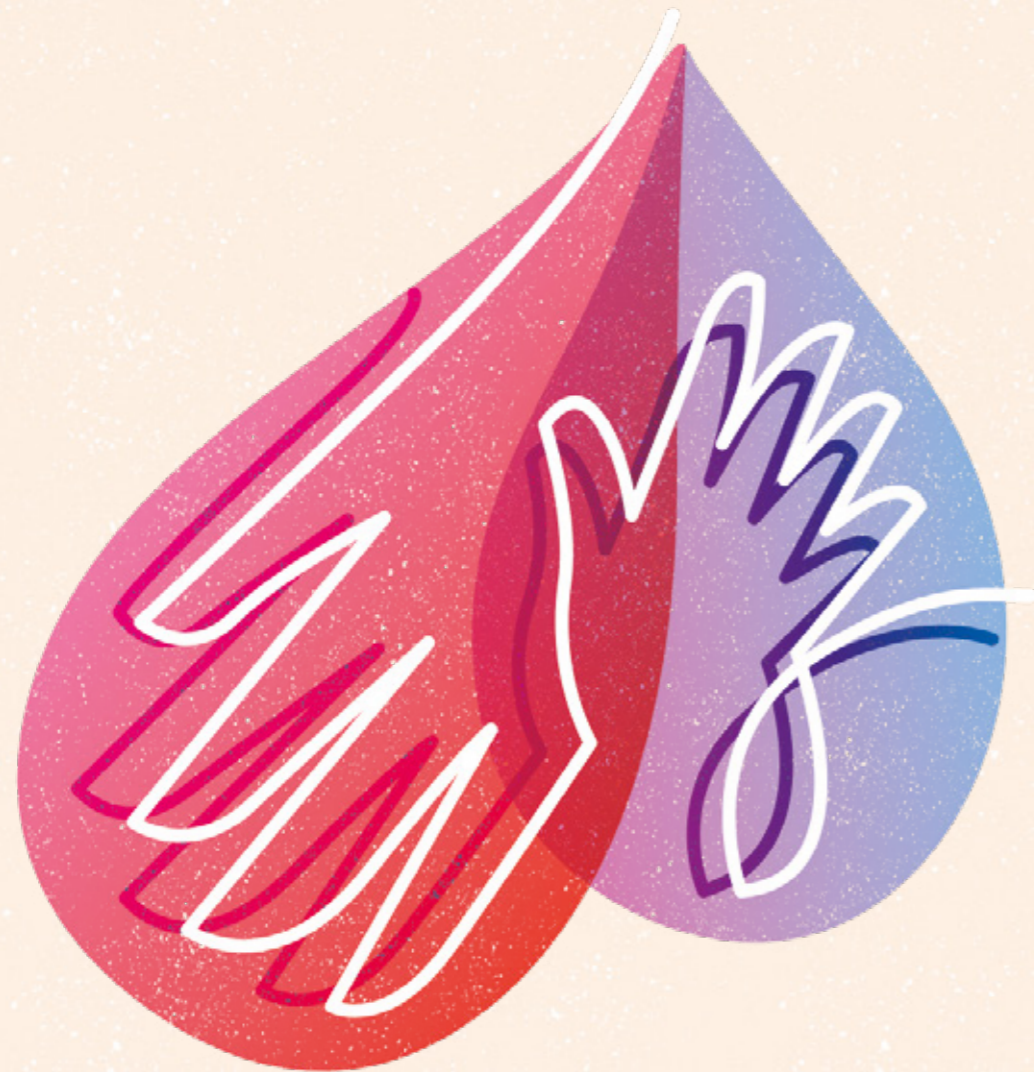
In the coming years, the Protestant Church in The Netherlands will invest in strengthening the local congregation as a community of Word and table. With this, we connect with the ‘turn to the church’ in theology. As body of Christ, the church is a sign and instrument for the connection between God and His world. In church, we learn to live from grace and are we moulded as people of God with our eyes on our position in society. This happens especially in the liturgic life around Word and table.

We long for the Word to be heard and interpreted in such a way that in our time, it sounds as a discovering, liberating and hopeful word of grace. This requires attentive hearing in order to come to a deepening of the Gospel proclamation, in a multitude of forms and in all kinds of places. Sometimes this will also lead to public theology. After all, from its own sources, a unique light falls on reality, with which the church participates in the debate on current social issues, such as care for vulnerable life, everything related to the Covid crisis, climate, migration, meaning, loneliness, and polarisation. In doing so, the church also gains wisdom from other traditions.

When we think of a church as a table community, first of all we think of the supper table. In close connection with that are also other tables in the church and in the neighbourhood. Eating together, taking time, paying attention to each other and sharing are essential for the church. This raises the question of how we can form a connecting community in a society where many are victims of loneliness, exclusion and abuse. Unfortunately, the church itself is sometimes a place of disfavour or insecurity. That is why we are working on a church that is made up of inclusive and safe communities.

In the circle of the Holy Communion we are continually drawn to grace. There, with open hands, we may receive life in Christ as a gift. The fact that the Holy Communion is no longer experienced as existential by many, calls for deepening and reflection on the frequency of celebration. The church as a fellowship of Word and Table needs initiation, incorporation and dedication. This process, starting with baptism, circles around lifelong learning, conversion, letting go, serving and sharing. Or, in other words, about the imitation of Jesus.





2. As children of one Father

You may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:18-19)

We agree to the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in the communion of the saints." Here, 'saints' refers to 'holy things' such as the Word (Holy Scripture) and the Sacraments (Holy Baptism and Holy Communion), as well as people who have been 'sanctified in Christ' through baptism, have become part of the body of Christ. Thus, the community of the saints also includes you and me.

This confession connects us to the church of all times and places. That is a dazzling thought. We stand in a long tradition of our parents, grandparents, people from the age of the Reformation, the Middle Ages, the first centuries and Israel. A great 'cloud of witnesses' who, in an image from the letter to the Hebrews, encourage us to persevere on the road following Jesus. We are part of a worldwide community. When participating in the liturgy in a congregation on Sunday, you maybe rely on the fact that at that very moment, people all over the world are singing the praise, confessing the faith and praying together.

This worldwide perspective protects the church from provincialism and sectarianism. We belong together and we need each other. Only together with all the saints will we be able to understand the length and breadth, the height and depth, yes, we will know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge (Ephesians 3:18-19). For each one of us is valid that in the company of all those millions of people about whom this is said, I too may take my place.

'We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.' (Nicene Creed-Constantinople) The unity of the Church reflects the unity of God Himself. 'Listen Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.' (Deuteronomy 6:4) It is the fundamental confession that we too have received, through Israel. The fact

that the unity of believers is a matter of concern, is shown by the position it takes in the prayer that Jesus uttered shortly before his suffering and death. Note the passion as well as the missionary thrust. Unity has a purpose:

... that they may be one as we are one - I in them and you in me - so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me ... (John 17:22, 23)

Through that one baptism, received as a baby or as an adult, we are united with Christ and with each other. All baptised people belong to the one church, the body of Christ, of which He is the head. It is a high and urgent calling to give visible shape to this unity, as a public witness and unifying force in society.

The movement set in motion by the National Synod is one of the many signs of a growing spiritual longing for unity across church walls. Many church members experience this unity at national events, such as the Pentecostal *Opwekking* conference.⁸

For the younger generation, the name of the church hardly matters anymore. They join a faith community where they feel at home. This can lead to much border traffic and tensions between churches. Partly for this reason, it is important that we look each other up. We see in many places that Christian unity thrives on spontaneous personal encounters at the grassroots level. The awareness that we need each other in our secularised society certainly contributes to this. However, Jesus' desire for unity among his followers remains the deepest reason.

⁸ *Opwekking* may well be compared to Spring Harvest.

On the basis of our calling and given the context, we welcome every encounter between Christians. For too long, far too long, we have remained under the radar for each other as individual Christians and as communities of faith. Unjustly, we often pass each other by. Do we really know each other? Do we dare to refer to each other generously? Do we cooperate where possible or do we see each other as competitors? It is high time to reach out to each other and find out together how we can give shape to our common calling locally.

Fortunately, there are good examples of cooperation. To name a few: the annual Week of Prayer for Unity, A Taste of Church, the Food Bank, youth trips to Taizé and pastors meetings.

As churches, only do things apart from others if your conscience does not allow you to do them together with others.⁹

(Prof. dr. Henk Berkhof)

An impulse for the renewal of the church in The Netherlands may well come from the world church we can meet in many places around the corner, in faith communities of people with a migrant background. We experience their arrival as a gift from God to our culture, society and church, thus also to the Protestant Church. It is now time to work on the mutual encounter of Christians across church walls and cultures, to take account of our common, even painful, past and our calling in the present.

**In Christ there is no east or west,
in Him no south or north,
but one great fellowship of love
throughout the whole wide earth.
In Christ shall true hearts ev'rywhere
their high communion find.
His service is the golden cord
close binding humankind.**

(Hymn 969:1 en 2)

9. Unauthorised translation by the translator.

Focus

We continue to participate in ecumenical relationships. In the years to come, we will especially stimulate and facilitate meetings and cooperation of Christians on a local level: in their own living environment and also between local faith communities and neighbourhood congregations. We support supra-local initiatives that serve this purpose. Concrete unity in faith talks and missionary or diaconal activities, across church walls.

This certainly also applies to unity with migrant Christians. We know that we are called to deepen the relationship with migrant Christians. From the unity in Christ we meet each other as equals and we want to serve and enrich each other. This becomes concrete in practical matters, such as joint efforts for the neighbourhood, in theological reflection on our common past, in our understanding of the Bible and in working on our common calling.

We realise that there can be great cultural and theological differences between Christians with different backgrounds and from different traditions. But then, unity is never easy or cheap. It is not about levelling out differences or finding forced compromises, but about seeking concrete and spiritual unity in Christ, in all diversity. As this is no easy task, the calling becomes all the greater. Much grace is needed to make progress here.





3. Yours is the Kingdom

... Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)

This line from the Lord's Prayer is a prayer for heaven on earth. When we give our thoughts free play about heaven on earth, we quickly get a distant paradise on our retina. But when Jesus, in the Lord's Prayer, mentions heaven and earth in the same breath, He stays much closer to our reality. He connects heaven and earth with the will of God: '... Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' Here, Jesus speaks about the earth from the perspective of heaven.

This prayer is not a non-committal phrase, a kind of pious wishful thinking. It is part of the Sermon on the Mount, a long speech in which Jesus focusses the Torah on everyday life, as a constitution for the Kingdom of God. From grace he puts life on the edge. Prayer is not without obligation; it creates obligations and makes us watchful. By praying these words, we indicate that we want to be involved in God's Kingdom and are willing to dedicate ourselves to doing His will. The heavenly light over our reality, the focus on God's Kingdom, sharpens our view on our responsibility for our fellow man, for creation, for our living together.

The cross is the focal point where the vertical and horizontal lines of the Christian faith converge. One cross beam requires the other. In the early church it was already said that the church has two altars. Here it is about the balance and connection between being church, which takes shape in the community of faith, and being in the midst of life; these two poles put a healthy, sent pressure on our life and work as the church.¹⁰ This sets us in motion; between the liturgy in the church and in daily life.

**The church has two altars.
One stands in the church,
the other one amidst the poor,
of those who suffer and are in need.**
(John Chrysostom, 4th century)

Prayer and worship (prayer and song) put our lives in the right perspective. It sanctifies life. With prayer and song we bring our whole life before God, in thanksgiving and surrender, lament and intercession. The Psalms connect us with Israel and with Christians from all centuries, worldwide. In prayer and song, we open ourselves to learn how the prayer 'Thy will be done' takes shape in our lives, here and now. In this way, God trains us to live a sanctified life, focussed on His Kingdom. We are encouraged and sharpened to 'true worship', to put our lives at the service of God. This is the worship of our everyday lives, in our relationships, at school, in our daily work and in our dealings with money and property.

**Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of
your mind. Then you will be able to test
and approve what God's will is — his good,
pleasing and perfect will.**
(Romans 12:2)

We saw an example of the connection of prayer and tangible action in the church asylum of the Tamrazyan family in the *Bethelkapel* (Bethel Chapel) in The Hague. In the period from the end of October 2018 to the end of January 2019, a continuous church service was held, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The songs and prayers gained unprecedented depth and wide application in this context.

**The power of man is prayer.
Prayer is drawing breath from God.
Prayer means confiding in God.
Prayer is the heart of Christian life.**
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

¹⁰. The Dutch text has a wordplay here with [sent] which was impossible to preserve in translation. - translator's note

The whole of creation is, as Calvin says, "the theatre of God's glory"; "heaven and earth sing together and praise the Lord's name" (Hymn 149:5). We are invited to hear this song of praise and to join with head, heart and hands. The whole world is God's creation. We know that we are called to keep the song of praise of God's creation going, especially in the frayed edges of life where people suffer injustice, are not seen, and their deepest dignity is injured.

**When we stand in the circle together
for what Thou givest us:
teach us then to hold
who has no hand in hands.**

**If we sing again the song of praise
for what thou givest us:
teach us to cry out for him
who has no more voice left.¹¹**

Essential for a missionary church, in the midst of life, are the two altars. They call for dedication to God and to the other. In the church and in concrete life, where Jesus allows himself to be found and where God calls us to be witnesses of his Kingdom. Receptive and vigilant.

11. Unauthorised translation by the translator of Lied 387:3 and 4, from Liedboek, © 2013 Interkerkelijke Stichting voor het Kerklied, 's-Gravenhage.

Focus

In the years to come we will focus on living in reverence. In prayer and song we bring our lives to God. This shapes our whole life and directs us towards God's Kingdom.

Because of this high purpose, it is not a matter of what we pray, sing, and what music sounds. The selection of songs and music, the performance, the weighing up of the words require care and dedication. There is something at stake.

We are committed to a church as a community of prayer. We strive for a renewed culture of prayer. In worship, at church meeting tables, in small groups and in personal prayer. This can be expressed in all kinds of forms.

In addition, we work towards a high quality and broad music and song culture. We draw on the rich tradition of the church of all times and places, which has undergone a tremendous expansion in recent decades. The range of instruments has also broadened. In view of the great importance of the liturgy, continuous reflection in this area is desirable.

From our praying and singing, we as a church take our responsibility in society. The connection between the liturgy in the church and the "liturgy of daily life" is characteristic of a receptive and vigilant spirituality. In here, we want to practice ourselves in the coming years, around the question where Christ allows Himself to be found and where He calls us to follow Him. How do I serve God in my everyday life? The Church supports members of the congregation to serve and receive at both altars. It is about everyday practice, how we can be religious people at work, in our relationships, in the formation of our convictions, in dealing with our worries and joys, stress, fears and sorrows. We are called to be people of prayer in places where the world is in pain." (Thomas Wright) To groan with creation, prompted by God's Spirit. We seek ways to be of service in our surroundings, to our neighbours near and far. We are called to contribute to peace, justice and wholeness. We also allow ourselves to be surprised by the truth, goodness and beauty that we see around us, where Christ allows Himself to be found. From the grace that has been bestowed upon us, we live graciously, we share freely of what we have been given and we draw inspiration from what we encounter and receive.





4. In the heart of life

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Genesis 1:2)

In the overture of the Bible, the Spirit of God hovers over the water of the primordial flood, the chaos.

She sits like a bird, brooding on the waters, hovering on the chaos of the world's first day; she sighs and she sings, mothering creation, waiting to give birth to all the Word will say.¹²

A beautiful image of the Spirit, brooding on new life. The Bible book of Acts is called the 'book of the Holy Spirit'. The Spirit has an important part in creation and re-creation. She blows the gospel into the world. She opens up, renews, fulfils. Without the creative power of God's Spirit there is no life, no church. The Spirit is the driving force behind the *missio Dei*, the work of God in this world. That is why the Church has been praying throughout the centuries.

The Holy Spirit always surprises us. Anyone who studies the history of the Church is impressed by the creativity and perseverance with which the Spirit always seeks and finds new ways for the Gospel. In all times and places, in all cultures, with an unprecedented variety of forms. The Spirit always has more strings to Her bow than we suspect. Today, too, She blows the seed of the Gospel wherever she wills, like dandelion fluff.

For she is the Spirit, one with God in essence, gifted by the Saviour in eternal love; she is the key opening the scriptures, enemy of apathy and heavenly dove.¹³

The fact that the Spirit goes in unexpected and unprecedented ways is instantly apparent in the Bible book of Acts. When the first Christians in Jerusalem hear that a large group of people in Antioch have come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, they are confused. They are mainly pagans and they speak Greek. They are not 'our kind of people'. Can this just be? Barnabas is sent to investigate. His reaction is telling: he rejoices at what he sees. The context and the cultural background may differ, but they share the same faith in the same Lord. It is these believers who are the first to be called Christians (Acts 11:26).

A few chapters later we read about the first 'synod'. The tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians has risen so high that the young church is on the verge of a break-up. The Spirit leads the assembly to a wise compromise, in which unity and diversity are safeguarded.

Sometimes, the Spirit also blocks roads. For example, Paul is prevented from travelling further into Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). He must go the other way, cross over into Greece, the present-day Europe, to preach the gospel there (Acts 16:7-10).

It is an encouraging knowledge that the Spirit always finds ways, even when we have lost track. The diversity in our society is great. The church is shrinking. We have many subcultures and lifestyles. The situations in which congregations find themselves vary immensely. One congregation is not like another. We believe that the Spirit brings the church where people are, in the midst of life. In all kinds of places, in all kinds of shapes and colours. Be alert and keep your eyes and ears open along the

12. Hymn 701:1 in *Liedboek*, © 2013 Interkerkelijke Stichting voor het Kerklied, 's-Gravenhage. Adapted translation of the original, ©1988 Wild Goose Resource Group, The Iona community, Glasgow.

13. See footnote 12. In both cases, this concerns an unauthorised translation by the translator.

way, to understand all Her signs. To your surprise, sometimes you suddenly see something of God's Kingdom in the most unexpected places. In all those places where life becomes our calling: at the kitchen table, in the street where we live, the place where we work, on the schoolyard and the sports field, in the hospital, on stages, in public meeting rooms, and so on. The Holy Spirit fans out widely, inside and outside the church.

**Let, then, my heart belong to You
and let me go through the world
with open eyes, open ears
to understand all Your signs.
Then the earthly life will be good,
Because heaven will greet me.¹⁴**

The church is called to be where the Spirit is at work and where Jesus is found. In His name, we are called to be and to remain close to others. Even if that requires us to go far, into the darkness, into the world of evil and suffering, where others fail. We can only persevere in this in the belief that Jesus leads us in this and in the confidence that the Spirit knows how to deal with chaos. We know ourselves united with all those who stand up for human dignity and work for justice, peace and the wholeness of creation.

The creative presence of the Spirit in the world leads to a diversity of church forms around two altars. A multi-coloured church mosaic emerges where all the individual gems together form the image of Christ in the heart of life.

Now, let's go back to Barnabas for a moment. One of the reasons why the report of his visit to Antioch seems so beneficial to us is his open-minded, unselfish attitude. Any thought of competition is foreign to him. He sees what God is doing in others. Indeed, different from what he saw in Jerusalem. He rejoices in this and urges believers in Antioch

to "remain faithful to the Lord" (Acts 11:23). Blessed are you if you know how to make room for these differences.

**Just because the institutions are a falter,
doesn't mean that the community is also on
shaky ground. I am convinced that a primal
form of community, prayer, song and Word
will continue to exist. In what form, we don't
know yet. For that matter, every new form
will also institutionalise again, that's how
sober science teaches us to be.¹⁵**

(Prof. dr. Mechteld Jansen)

**How good, O Lord, to be right here,
with word and water, bread and wine,
where all things do forecast a day
when hell and death will be cast down.**

**Thou makest us travel through time,
united in fellowship,
in joy and wonder,
in hope and love reciprocal.**

**Thank Thee, Thou wilt agree to take
the thing that lifts man from the earth:
a harvest, service of sacrifice.
we give to Thee from Thine own hand!**

**Thou, Spirit, who giveth life to words
so that our ear will meet the word
with which Thou callest forth what is to be,
Thy future and Thy history.**

(Hymn 972: 1, 5, 6 and 7)¹⁶

**Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful
and thankful.
(Colossians 4:2)**

14. Unauthorised translation by the translator of Hymn 978:4 in Liedboek, © 2013 Interkerkelijke Stichting voor het Kerklied, 's-Gravenhage.

15. Unauthorised translation by the translator.

16. Unauthorised translation by the translator.

Focus

The church is called to be where the Spirit leads and Jesus allows Her to be found. In our complex society, that is in very different places outside and inside the church framework. Where possible we seek cooperation with partners from outside the church.

We participate in various forms of diaconal presence. In professional pastoral care and nearness, the church is present in the capillaries of society. By means of new church locations we seek contact with target groups that are no longer connected to the church.

In their context, established congregations are also looking for new ways to remain in the midst of life. In doing so, they can count on the support of the national church.

With all this renewal and diversification, the Protestant Church is increasingly developing into a church mosaic. This requires an ongoing theological reflection on our church and anchoring of the various new ways in which our church is shaped. It also requires a suitable diversity of qualified pastors and other workers who are well attuned to each other and receive the support they need. In the coming years we will dedicate ourselves to this.



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