



Protestantse
Kerk

Faith · Hope · Love

CHURCH 2025:

Where there's a Word, there's a way



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Foreword

When Jesus sent his disciples out two by two, He instructed them not to take anything unnecessary along with them. No money, no extra tunic, just a pair of sandals for the journey (Mark 6:7-9).

Nowadays, Jesus' words 'just sandals for the journey' take on a new relevance. As a Protestant church, we have become heavily laden. Along the way, we have acquired and achieved things that have influenced our way of following Jesus' path, and on that path we have experienced much of God's goodness. At the same time, we feel that the journey has become more and more difficult. It's as if we have become trapped in our own church culture. Many see us as a governing church. How can we step forward onto the lighter path on which Jesus once sent his disciples?

That is the challenge that this policy paper seeks to address. It begins with the question: why church? (Part I A) What is the essence of church identity? The church seems a distant and strange institution for many of our contemporaries, so now is an especially good time to rediscover what lies at the heart of the church and get back to basics. Think of this section as our justification, to ourselves and to the outside world, couched in suitable terms. It is an exercise in seeing the forest again through the trees, in finding joy in this ourselves and being able to radiate this joy to others. It's also an exercise in laying down our excess baggage and returning to simplicity. This will help us to return to a lighter path.

Then comes the question as to what this will mean for the Church's plan (Part I B). What should we focus on? What should we let go of, and what should we be certain to do? What is needed right now? It should be a simple plan, without a multitude of tasks. But what does matter now? Where do we need coaching and equipping in order for us to be a relevant church, both for ourselves and others? What lies ahead and which matters should take priority? In order to find sensible answers to these questions, we first need to have an idea of the world in which the church exists. This section therefore begins with a brief analysis of our culture and the impact it has on the church.

In Part II, we look at the organisation of our church. As mentioned previously, our organisation is rather heavily laden. Sometimes it seems as if that slows our steps. How can we lighten our tread? How can we lean more towards adopting the sandals for our journey that Jesus was talking about? Part II B makes suggestions for changes we can make to our organisation. Associated keywords include transparency, space and simplicity. Of course, as a church, we shouldn't occupy ourselves solely with our own organisation, but there are times when that does need to happen. A good organisation is helpful. When the organisation has become too restrictive or too heavily based on a cultural framework or church culture that is eroding as people and resources ebb away, it's time to move the markers. The challenge is to do this in a way that doesn't involve the imposition of a monolithic regime from on high, but that rather connects with the specific situation of the church, both locally and in the wider region.

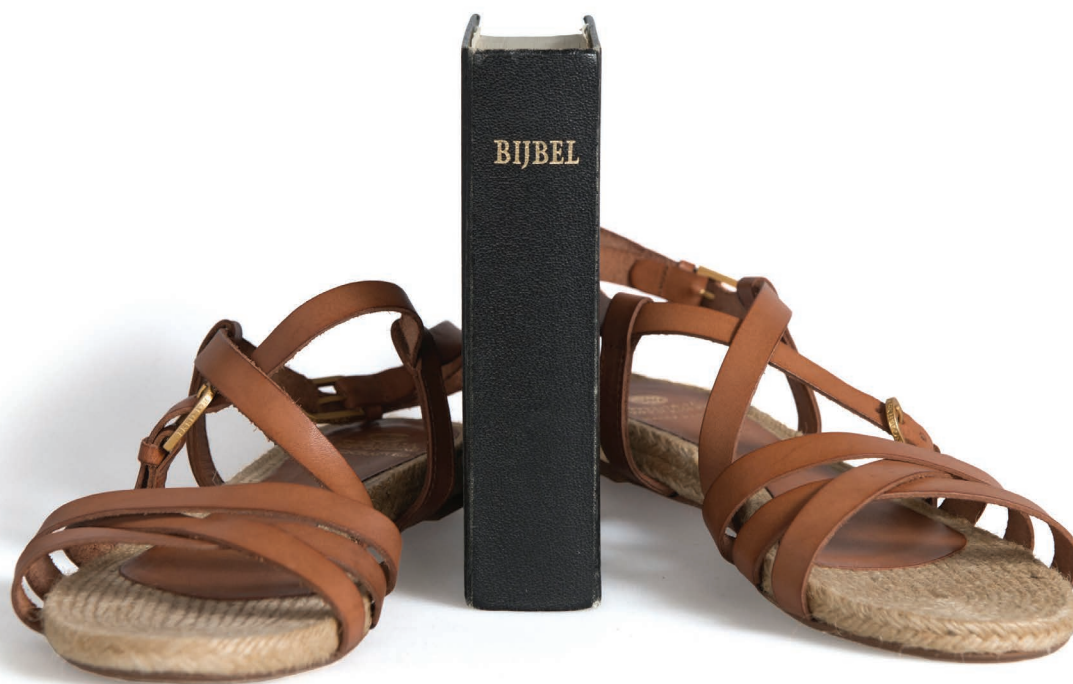
Change is a part of the church identity. However, you also have to know what your stable core is. The structure of our Protestant Church is not a facade. Therefore, before the section on change (II B), there is a section that describes the DNA of our Protestant Church (II A): this is who we are, this is how we have been shaped. These are the classical words of our tradition, but those who read and listen well can hear how much music there is in the words, and how much freedom – and that includes transformation where necessary and required.

The title of this paper is *Church 2025: Where there's a Word, there's a way*. The future of the church is questioned often enough. Given current events, the concerned tone in which these questions are asked is understandable. Ignoring those concerns would be unfair. It is important to draw upon courage and confidence, and that can be done in the knowledge that there is a living Word: Christ the Lord. Where this Word is, there is a path to follow.

Arjan Plaisier

Part I

What matters



CHAPTER 1: BACK TO BASICS

Anyone reading the New Testament can't help but notice the joy that emanates from the text whenever the church is mentioned. Think of the glorious images of 'the bride' and 'the body of Christ', images that illustrate that the church is a gift from God Himself rather than a product of laborious human effort. The church is formed by people but the secret of the church comes from the Lord Himself – hence the joy.

Nowadays, talking about the church almost automatically brings up other words and images, words such as decline and obsolescence, and the image of an ancient building coated in a thick layer of dust. The church that once formed an important part of our culture and society now seems unnecessary. In such times, the

temptation to give up on the church is therefore very recognisable.

Should we indeed give up on it? Many refuse to do so. When pressed, they say that this is not because they feel the church simply ought to be there, but because they love the church, because they feel deeply touched by the Gospel, the message through which the church lives, because they cannot imagine a life without church.

There can be no life without the church. The church was not a human project, but a gift from God. It is a gift that resists erosion and damage, tarnish and rust. Even if the church is covered in a layer of dust, the life beneath will never be completely smothered. God Himself will keep it alive by His secret ways.¹

¹ 'This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will last until the end, as appears from the fact that Christ is eternal King who cannot be without subjects.' (The Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 27, official English translation from 1991 available at <https://www.rca.org/resources/belgic-confession>)

The challenge in this is to keep bringing this life back on track, to blow the dust off the church or to let it be blown off, to rediscover and experience anew those sparkling images of the church described in the New Testament, and to go *back to the basics*², back to the heart, and rediscover what it is about.

This document may help you answer the question why you would want the church to remain – or why you would be deeply unhappy if the church should disappear. You can give this answer to yourself or each other, but also to contemporaries who may wonder what would be lacking if the church were no longer there. It should be an answer framed in language that is not esoteric, but comprehensible. That is also a way to go back to basics. A collective answer to these types of questions is good to have, and personal answers can help to formulate a collective answer. Here are a few personal answers to the question ‘why church?’:

1. I hear words in the church that I hear nowhere else.

These words are called the Gospel, the good news from God. These are words that speak to me in the very deepest core of my existence. If I am lost and lying by the road, they bring me to my feet again. They give me the strength and courage to live. That Gospel is in the name of Jesus. He feeds my spirit and saves my soul. That is why the church should remain, as a place where God is credible, as a place to learn faith and to grow more in that faith.

2. The church is a community of people who accept one another in Jesus’ name and who want to take care of each other. The thought of ‘every man for himself’ is a miserable one. However, it’s not enough just to come together as ‘like-minded’ people who share a common interest. The church is a place to laugh and cry together, to eat and drink together. It doesn’t matter here how much you earn, what you look like, how old you are, what kind of clothes you wear, or whether you come on your own or in company. There is something that transcends all differences, because you are all God’s family. That’s why you are given to each other and take care of each other.
3. The church helps me to understand what a ‘good life’ is, not only for myself, but also for society. Insight into what makes a good life doesn’t just come to me out of thin air. There is so much chaos and confusion in the world. Life is so unclear. What must I do? What should I stand for? The church is not a place for ready-made answers, but the Bible and the Christian tradition both shed light on the matters of life. I gain a deeper understanding of what a good life is for myself, for society and for creation as a whole. The church sends me out into the world to bear witness to this in word and deed, and to put it into practice.³

Going ‘*back to basics*’ – back to the heart – requires personal answers. Of course, ‘back to basics’ can also be seen or expressed in different ways.⁴ The most important thing is that this be discussed. Just addressing the question about what ‘back to basics’ means can release energy, both in the local congregation and in the national church.

² Instead of ‘back to basics’, we could also say ‘back to the heart’ or ‘return to the heart’. In recent times, the term ‘back to basics’ has become so well established when speaking about the ‘basics’ of the church that it will be used here and in documents following this paper.

³ The three basics mentioned above correspond with the three familiar aspects ‘believe, belong, behave’.

⁴ With the emphasis here referring to the confession of faith by the church. We can find concise descriptions in Luther’s Large Catechism, including an explanation of the commandment “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me”. “What does it mean: to have a God, or: what is a God? A God is a source of everything good and a place of refuge in every kind of need. Therefore, ‘having a God’ means nothing more than trusting wholeheartedly in Him and having faith in Him; as I have said so often, only trust and wholehearted faith make both God and idol. (...) I say to you, that upon which you set your heart and in which you trust, that is in fact your God.” And from The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 1: “What is your only comfort in life and death? That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ. He has paid in full for all of my sins with his precious blood and has released me from all the power of the devil (...) Therefore, by his Holy Spirit He assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and prepared to live for Him from now on.”



CHAPTER 2: THE CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH

In Chapter 1 we attempted to get 'back to basics'. What matters in the church? How can the heart of the church become steadily lighter? In this section we take the next step. How can we be a church together in such a manner that there is room for the heart of the church identity, allowing it to become lighter again? What does 'back to basics' mean in terms of the plans for the church leading up to 2025? What is needed in order to be a church, both locally and further afield? To know where your priorities lie and what you need to focus on, you need a plan, a course of action which is urgent and so focussed that it can really be used to make things happen.

In order to be able to say something intelligent about it, it's necessary to have a clear grasp on the church's current position. Without this, the plan becomes so abstract and general that there is no impetus to do anything with it. Before outlining the plan, something should be said about the status quo.

When it comes to the current situation, it should be remembered that there can be great differences even in

a small country like the Netherlands, for example between the countryside and the city, between the north and south, and between the 'Bible belt' in the east and the province of North Holland in the west. Each congregation therefore experiences different challenges from the others, and thus also has a different mission. Still, there are common features among almost all of the congregations of our church. Without attempting to provide an exhaustive list, the following are five relevant features:

- (*secular society*) In a secular society, faith has not disappeared but has become optional, just one possibility among many. Although there are villages where the majority of the inhabitants are Christian, nowhere is Christian faith a matter of course. Almost everyone comes into contact with those of other faiths or those with no faith at all. In particular types of media, 'non-faith' is the standard by which the Christian faith is measured. Still, in current secular society there is no single, robust story that everyone is bound to accept. Instead, there is a variegated 'market of faith and non-faith'. This is why some prefer to speak of a diverse society than a secular society.

- *(individual choice)* In our culture, there is a strong emphasis on the individual choices that people make: I am responsible for my life and my happiness; I have my talents and must make the most of them; the past offers little guidance for my life's undertaking. Where you come from is less important than what you make of the future. Family, tradition, habit and established institutions are more of a hindrance than a stimulus for free development. That everything you experience in life becomes your own life. At the same time, it puts people under enormous pressure. Will you always manage to find happiness based solely on your own efforts? Is it really worth it, your 'own life'?
- *(network society)* The emphasis on the person as an individual doesn't mean that people have to live in isolation. We live in a networked society. Instead of established institutions with relationships that are often structured hierarchically, people frequently participate in life through open, semi-permanent connections. In order to progress, you have to network actively. That requires flexibility, creativity and self-reliance. For many, this means an open life that enriches their existence. However, not everyone is so fortunate in their networking efforts. That is particularly a problem when a government is withdrawing from action. It's easy for a divide to open up between creative and active people on the one side, and people who get left behind on the other.
- *(digital revolution)* Our relationship with the world and with each other is becoming more and more digitally mediated. The digital revolution has brought profound changes to many aspects of life. The Internet is literally within hand's reach for almost everyone. It has radically changed the way we communicate. Information is everywhere, data is infinite and multiplying, and connections are made rapidly. This opens up abundant possibilities. But we lack a 'reading guide', an index to all that information. An excess of input and stimuli can turn people into sluice gates, letting high-speed information flow through, of which little leaves a lasting impression. With so much information, where is the reading guide to help you sort it all out? Where is the filter? With so much quantity, how do you not lose sight of the quality?
- *(globalisation)* Finally, globalisation needs to be mentioned. The world is a village and mobility is endless. We have become world citizens, cosmopolitans. Our country has become increasingly multicultural. Borders are fluid and are hardly even there at all in some respects. That, too, has broadened and enriched life, allowing us to live in a world with open horizons. A world that is so open can also induce a feeling of disorientation, however. What am I supposed to do with 'the whole world'? Doesn't that drown out the simple 'here and now'? That's why there is also a counter-movement. A borderless world is precisely where you rediscover the worth of the local and the clearly defined: from the history of your own village to the vegetables from your own city garden.

CHAPTER 3: THE CHURCH IN CONTEXT

The church finds itself in the middle of this society, this culture, with all of its possibilities and impossibilities, clear foresight and blind spots. Nobody can detach themselves from their own cultural context. What does the current situation mean for the church? What challenges are involved? The following list of terms offers an overview.

- In a *secular culture*, the church is challenged to become bolder and franker when it comes to talking about faith and God. That doesn't happen all by itself. A secular culture can lead to uncertainty about one's own faith and about the relevance of the Christian tradition. The content of faith can fade and its communication to others can falter. Conversely, in order to be rid of uncertainty and doubt, there is the urge to withdraw inside one's own circle and take flight into 'fundamentalism'. For this reason, the church's plan needs to focus expressly on the theme of faith.
- A *culture of individual choices* challenges the church to be a place of personal growth and development where your talents are valued, a place where people are challenged to choose a life with God, and a church that at the same time stands for more than just 'me and my choice'. The church should not be ashamed of this. On the contrary, many contemporaries run aground on the shores of extreme individualism, and long (consciously or



unconsciously) for more than just the individual self: they long for a life with God in community with each other.

- In a *networked society*, the church appears to be an institution that is neither manoeuvrable nor very open. Perhaps this is because the 'bond' that you form with a church is important; it's not like you can take a one-month subscription to a church. The challenge is to discover that forming bonds can go hand in hand with the formation of church communities that suit the people who live in a networked culture. Rather than being organised by an institution, the church came to be through 'networking'. At the same time, it has to be clear that the church is a place where people can be faithful to one another and are cared for by each other.
- The *digital revolution* changes how we communicate. Naturally, this will also have an impact on communication within and by the church. There is even an 'internet church' now. The digital revolution means that information is not just there for a group of insiders, but is freely available to all. That fits well with the idea of a church: an open community in which everyone participates. Furthermore, in the midst of an enormous and rapidly flowing stream of information, the church is called to keep emphasising the unique value of 'the Word of life'. The significance of meeting each other in person is also an integral aspect of the church identity. This can counterbalance the lack of physicality in digital communication.
- A *global society* is not at all strange to the church. The church is ecumenical, global. In the kingdom of God, borders are relative. Previously, it was the missionary who showed us the wider world. Today, a global and cosmopolitan flavour is evident among the Christian migrants in our society. At the same time, the church is also local: a congregation of people who know each other and share each other's lives. In the anonymity arising from globalisation (and urbanisation), the church is a place where they know your name and you know theirs.

CHAPTER 4: A PLAN FOR THE CHURCH

As discussed earlier, the church is not portraying a uniform impression. In considering the plan for the church, the differences should not be glossed over. It's not about achieving a single, unified plan or therapy. Without mapping the concepts directly into a course of action, we can use the idea of 'back to basics' and the context of the church outlined above to formulate a plan that is useful for the broader church. Where can training, equipment and coaching contribute to revitalisation and inspiration?⁵

a. About belief (see also 'back to basics' 1 and 3)

- The church stands or falls with faith in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ. That faith is the secret of the church. The time is past for frantically defending that faith against attacks 'from outside'. The time is also past for securing a jealously guarded remnant of what is still acceptable for postmodern people. The word 'still' (can we 'still' believe this?) should ideally be discarded. It's about having the open-mindedness and receptivity to invite in the rich Christian teachings and traditions and to let them be spoken anew. It is clear that do not all believe in the same manner. However, we do need each other in order to come to a renewed insight into the liberating power of the Gospel, the Word of God and the Christian tradition.
- The theme of the transmission of faith is closely linked to this. How do we transmit our faith to our children, and how do we initiate them into the world of the Christian tradition? This initiation is no longer automatic, especially since society's reference to church and faith has become marginal. For too long, that has led to speechlessness, precisely among those who are driven to transmit the faith. Because of this, young people and contemporaries have not received the legacy they are entitled to. In addition, the radical changes to the education system as a result of the digital revolution must be taken into consideration. This calls for other forms of catechism and transmission. More than ever

⁵ This could build on the vision statements 'Learning to live out of wonder' and 'The heartbeat of life', in which steps towards a similar plan were taken.

before, the transmission of faith will also have to be a 'lived' transmission. Religious parents, youth workers and catechists deserve to be supported and equipped for all of this.

- How do we learn to conduct the conversation in an authentic and relevant manner with our contemporaries, with people of other faiths – Muslims in particular come to mind –, with the non-religious, with seekers of sense and 'spiritual people', with those who have left the church and those who have not been brought up in the Christian faith at all? Too often, an inwardly-directed religiosity clings to us, prompting us to answer questions that no one is asking, but failing to answer the questions that are asked. How do we learn to bear witness to the fact that faith in God matters and that it gives our lives meaning, depth, lustre and salvation? That should be high on the church's list of priorities. Being a witness means recruiting people for the church without embarrassment. 'Start now, or start again!' The taboo against 'winning souls' has had a crippling effect for too long. For precisely this reason, it is important to emphasise in a missional context that the church is also open to non-churchgoers, that there is real interest in them, that we can also learn from them, that there is a wide variety of things available to newcomers and people who are simply curious, and missionary courses with follow-up programmes.

b. About the congregation (see also 'back to basics' 2)

- The core question here is how we are a brother- and sisterhood, recognisable to each other and to others. When it comes to the forms of Christian congregation, a diverse range of options is important. There is the 'traditional' church community into which many have been initiated into the faith, and which therefore deserves continuing support. There are also '*fresh expressions of church*' coming into existence. These are congregations that are accessible to contemporaries who, for one reason or another, do not join established congregations. These new types should not be unnecessarily burdened with existing church habits, structures and organisation. They should be given the

chance to emerge and flourish in a manner that does justice to the people who participate in them. Particularly in cities, these will often have an international composition. There is also room for *house churches* or *church circles*. These are groups of people who gather together in the name of Christ. Such gatherings could resemble a Sunday church service, but may also be more informal. Finally, there will be *residential communities* that emerge that may or may not include a structured daily regimen for those who belong to them. They share daily life with each other in a variety of ways and may adhere to rules that give form to how they meet in community. Not infrequently, they will have an ecumenical character. All of these forms are part of Church 2025, and equipping and leadership should accommodate the full spectrum.

- An important question is: *what is necessary locally in order to be a congregation?* Given that the pressure to meet and the degree of organisation is more likely to be too high than too low, it's tricky to find the minimal structure necessary to hear and share the Gospel, to be a congregation, and to be a witness for God in this world. What can we discard, and what do we want to preserve or even acquire? When it comes to pioneering areas in particular, care should be taken to avoid saddling them with rules that do not suit a new situation. Life comes before rules, even though rules can help to give life form and content.

c. About diaconal activities and social presence (see also 'back to basics' 2 and 3)

- The church is a diaconal community, not only for itself but for all those who cross its path. In the society we live in, this takes on fresh meaning. Where the government withdraws and the limits of individualism come closer, the value of organised society becomes obvious once more. People experience problems relating to work and money, with marginalisation and poverty as the result. Older people in particular feel lonely, and caring for the vulnerable is also an urgent issue. The diaconal presence of the church is especially relevant in these areas. The new social legislation in the Netherlands



(Social Support Act/Youth Act/Participation Act) offers new opportunities for this diaconal presence. A realistic plan will need to be established: you can't do everything, so choices will need to be made. Otherwise you risk overloading the congregations and parishes with nothing to show for it.

- Belonging to the Christian community and converging in community around the Word help you to get an eye for the good life. That gives you a new perspective on yourself, your fellow humans, and the world. Perhaps the conversation in the local community is about what this new perspective is and what it means for your daily life. It's important not to forget that the church is also a 'political body' (*The heartbeat of life*). It is a community that assembles around our Lord Jesus and that has consequences how you interact.

Because Jesus is also Lord of the world, this also says something about worldview. With regard to our globalising world, there are three themes that will be important in the coming time:

- Migrations: without resorting to cheap one-liners, the church will stand up for a society that shares what it has, and will battle the hardening of perceptions about foreigners.
- Violence: weapons move freely around the world, local conflicts are almost always international, and terrorism is in the news every day. What does this mean with respect to safety?
- Climate: possibly the greatest challenge facing humanity today. As global warming increases, caring for God's creation will be a high priority.

Ecumenism

This plan for the Protestant Church and its congregations will also need to be an ecumenical plan. There are still too often congregations of our church that are isolated from those of other churches. In our own country, we want to

keep seeking encounters and conversations about faith with brothers and sisters from other churches. That also applies to further collaboration and unity. Many new religious communities of the future will have an ecumenical character. There is no need to plant a Protestant Church flag in every new thing that comes into existence. It is short-sighted to think that you alone can give form and content to the church's call to missions. In fact, others will often be there ahead of us. In particular, this could include migrant communities in our country. They often show a vitality and enthusiasm that could inspire us and carry us along. It is already remarkable in our multicultural society that Protestant congregations are often exclusively white. A common plan might help our church to become 'multicoloured'.

Local collaboration is also supported when we advance national ecumenism. The ecumenism of the heart is important but requires further unification. Federal forms of cooperation and association can help with this.

Finally

The plan for the church requires commitment. These are the challenges, these are the things we want to achieve; let's sign on the dotted line and support each other in these endeavours. We also want to invest in this. We think too much and too often in terms of paring off thin slices to make it all come out even. There is sufficient money available and people are willing to give!⁶ Let's go for it. For this, we very much need everyone at all levels to be involved in order for this plan for the church to also become the plan *of* the church.

⁶ This is apparent from a recent report: *Shrinking resources and yet still vital. Report on the financial situation of the Protestant Churches in Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen, Groningen, PThU/CCC 2015.*

Part II

Where we are heading

About the structure of the church

Part I is intended to give a fresh view of the church and to go back to basics. It is meant to clarify that the church is not a tiring and repetitive routine but a fascinating and unfolding event. Rather than being first and foremost an institution and a management organisation, it is a living body that we are an active part of. This means that we in the church should be especially concerned with what really matters. Part I, Chapter 4 outlines an agenda for the church based on a vision of a church that is relevant in society.

Church 2025 is a hopeful process. We must believe that the Holy Spirit will help us to be a church. We must expect that the church will lighten up and remain light, in old and new forms, and in trusted and non-mundane forms. This means working with the Holy Spirit. The contours of this partnership are already outlined in the agenda for the church. *This* is our confidence and trust, and that's why *this* is what we must do. Church 2025 is not a signal to become gloomier and whinier, but to devote ourselves with joy to God and his church. It is not a signal to go and sit in a corner, but to be willing to answer the call to God's mission in this world.

In Part II, we focus on the *organisation and structure of our church*. How we structure the church is not a separate issue; it follows from how we are Church and how we want to be Church in future. The organisation follows the 'organism', the church as the living body of Christ. It is that living body that has a particular structure and organisation. Structure and organisation are clear topics that aren't anything to be ashamed of. A good structure helps us to be a good church. There is no need to be furtive about it. It is about good order!

This structure and organisation has always been subject to change. These changes are necessary in order for the church to keep up with the times. The Protestant tradition has never sworn to keep to one form. There has always been openness to 'time and circumstance' and a deep realisation that many forms are not sacred. Change is also necessary with regard to Church 2025. The current organisation suits a culture that has largely disappeared, a culture that could be defined as 'bourgeois'. This bourgeois culture is being subjected to erosion by the five changes outlined in Part I B. The structure of the church will need to be adapted accordingly, as the current structure is becoming more and more of a straitjacket. This adjustment is necessary precisely to lighten up the essence of the church identity, or in any case, not to obstruct it. Part II B will further describe what kind of changes are necessary and what they will look like in actual practice.

However, not *everything* should change. In order to be able to change, you need to know what the basic structure of the church is. Change without referring to this basic framework is likely to lead not only to haphazard, ad-hoc policy, but also to estrangement from the church's own tradition. What is the 'central core' of our order and organisation? *What is part of the DNA of our Protestant Church?* How has our church been moulded? Part II A gives a short description: this is what kind of church we are, and these aspects are essential for our Protestant Church. A more extensive description can be found in Appendix 3.



II A The DNA of the Protestant Church⁷

1. THE PROTESTANT CHURCH IS A MANIFESTATION OF THE ONE CHURCH

The first thing that needs to be said about the Protestant Church is that it is a *church*. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands is a manifestation of the one Church, with its own Church Order, separate from other churches⁸. That 'own' church order is not the essence of the Protestant Church, however. The essence of the Protestant Church is that it is a church, part of the body of Christ, together with all other churches

- Christ is the supreme authority in the church. He who has humbled himself to die upon the cross has risen from

the dead and is Head of the church. Without obedience to Christ, the church becomes a depraved community. It is important that the church remains 'Christian', living in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. No matter what the church organisation looks like, this obedience to Christ and his Holy Spirit is the guiding principle and must stay that way in order for us to be a church at all.

- The church lives by the *grace of God* which is continually bestowed upon us anew. These are wonderful words that can be heard in this world, sometimes as a whisper, sometimes loud and insistent. Words such as 'peace be with you', 'I know you, you are Mine', 'your sins are forgiven', 'get up and walk'. These words especially ring out

⁷ This part is based on the Church Order of the Protestant Church and is fundamental to our church's confession of faith, as stated in the profession of the general Christian Church, the Lutheran tradition and the Reformed tradition.

⁸ The Church Order of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands is available online in English at <http://www.protestantsekerk.nl/overons/protestant-church/Paginas/Church-Order.aspx>

during the preaching of the word of God. They are human words that are spoken to us and that we speak to each other, but through these words God Himself speaks to us.⁹

- The grace of God is tangible in *baptism and communion*. Baptism is the sign of incorporation into the body of Christ. Bread and cup are shared around the table of the Lord, and the words ‘the body of Christ, broken for you’ and ‘the blood of Christ, shed for you’ can be heard. So may we know ourselves to be one with the risen Lord and united with each other in the one body of Christ.
- The church is a church with a *mission*. Or rather: God has a mission. This began with the election and mission of Israel. The purpose is the dawn of the kingdom of God in our world. The church is engaged in this mission. As a church, we are called to be ‘servants of God’. Because it’s God’s mission, this mission is focussed on the world. Because it’s God’s mission, it will not subside until the kingdom of God has dawned. A church that turns inward to focus on itself is ‘separate from God’. A church that doesn’t know of the turmoil of the Kingdom of God and has lost the desire for the ultimate coming of this Kingdom has become a pillar of salt.
- The church is a church *that acknowledges God* as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Only a church that professes this triune name of God is a professing church. This profession of faith in and by the church needs to happen today. It is a profession of faith that is relevant to the world of today and is focussed on the people of today, in language that can be understood. However, it does not come out of nowhere. It is a continuation of the profession of faith by all those who have gone before us – children, women and men. As a Protestant Church, we are bound to the profession of faith by the ‘general Christian church’ and within that, with the profession of faith by ‘the church of the Reformation’. A church that becomes detached from the profession of faith made by its predecessors is defenceless in the present and empty-handed in the future.

- *The Bible* (the Holy Scripture) is the reference text of the church. It testifies to a just and loving God who follows his path with Israel and the nations of the earth. We never grow weary of the Bible; we continue to be surprised by it. Through the Holy Spirit, the words of this book become words for the lives of people today. It is only by remaining faithful to the testimony of the Bible (the apostles and prophets) that the church is able to stay on the path in this lifetime. The Bible is therefore not only a source but also a touchstone. Whatever is done and said within the church must be tested against the testimony of the Bible.

2. PRESBYTERIAL-SYNODICAL

The Protestant Church is church. It is also Protestant. That Protestant character comes principally from the presbyterial-synodical nature of our church. First and foremost, this means that the heart of the church is in the local congregation. Wherever two or three people gather together, Christ is among them. The local congregation consists of *the faithful in communion with each other*. The faithful are the disciples of Jesus. They are the living body; they live through God’s Holy Spirit. The church is therefore not a service-based institution where professionals serve a public audience. The church is the congregation of the faithful, the followers of Jesus who are called by Jesus himself and who are privileged to be a part of his body.

- What do these faithful do? How do they form a community? What do they do and how do they live in communion each other? Without trying to provide a comprehensive list, here are seven aspects of this community:
 - Gathering around the living Lord as a community of people who share their lives with each other, practice their faith and learn to be disciples of Jesus.
 - Celebrating in worship services on Sundays, but also on other days, to hear the Word and worship God.

⁹ Regarding the merciful character of the church, see in particular also *Unaltered Confession of Augsburg, Article IV about justification and The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23, question 60: ‘how are you righteous before God?’*

- Learning, which draws its substance from teaching and equipping as well as religious instruction and catechism. As followers of Christ, we are lifelong students who immerse ourselves in the sources of our faith and their meaning for daily life.
- Providing pastoral care and caring for each other. This is the help we offer to each other in following God's way in all of life's circumstances.
- Diaconate: being a church means that we share the gifts that God has given us, especially with those who are less fortunate than us.
- Being a witness: part of being a Christian is having the courage to talk about your faith and to profess God's name.
- Being sent: you gather together in order to be sent forth again. Those who are sent out have a mission in this world.
- The core of a congregation consists of baptised members. Baptism is the sign that you have become one of Jesus' disciples. You become baptised. It is a gift, a gift from God that connects you with Christ and his body, the church. The boundaries of the church are fluid, however. The centre of the church is the radiant, living Lord. We do not need to define how His radiance travels, nor how far. There are sympathisers, visitors who are connected with the congregation in one way or another, but without being baptised. They also belong to the congregation and are taken seriously.
- In a local congregation, each is called to become a living member of the community. The church is the Lord's, and the church is formed by the believers themselves. Everyone receives gifts from God that are necessary for building the body of Christ. This is called 'the ministry of all believers'. Within this ministry, the church recognises particular offices. Under 'the invocation of the Holy Spirit', they received hands laid upon them and so are entrusted with their offices.

In our Protestant Church, the ministry is described as 'ministry of the Word'. We specify the offices of preacher, elder and deacon, with some elders also being church stewards.

- Together, the holders of these offices form the church council. They are thus 'the church officials'. The church council gives direction to the life and work of the local congregation. It does this by convening meetings where the members can come together and speak with each other. The church council ensures that the congregation remains Christian, that the congregation remains connected with the source, that the congregation is a community of brothers and sisters working for and with each other who allow themselves to be sent out into the world by God. Leadership serves the unity of the congregation. Spiritual leadership therefore also implies highlighting unity in Christ and also giving this expression as a church council.
- Local congregations are independent and have their own church council. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands is the continuation of the Netherlands Reformed Church, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Netherlands. In its current state, it includes all the congregations: Protestant congregations, Netherlands Reformed congregations, Reformed congregations, Evangelical Lutheran congregations, and Walloon congregations.¹⁰ Local congregations, however, do not exist in complete separation from one another. This shared church identity is expressed in:
 - Meetings between congregations, mostly within a region;
 - Visitation: the 'church' visits the local congregations as a sign of togetherness and friendship, encouragement, support and constructive criticism.

As well as the church council meeting, there is also the 'conference meeting'. 'Conference' does not mean

¹⁰ See the *History of Unification on the Protestant Church in the Netherlands* online for more details: <http://www.protestantsekerk.nl/overons/protestant-church/History/Paginas/History-of-Unification.aspx>



more important or powerful; the Protestant Church is not a hierarchical church. The conference means that the scope extends beyond the local congregation. Under the invocation of the Holy Spirit, these conference meetings discuss what the church as a whole needs, and decisions are also made about this. The current structure consists of the classical assembly (intermediate layer) and the general synod.

- ‘Being together in communion’ also takes form in this aspect. The congregation that gathers around the table of the Lord is a congregation called to lead a life in line with the Gospel. This applies particularly to church officials. After all, the congregation has entrusted them with a special ministry. The church conducts a review of its own members and in particular church officials. This last is carried out by independent boards.

3. ECUMENISM

The Protestant Church is a ‘manifestation’ of the one catholic church. This one church is a fragmented church. It is part of the DNA of the Protestant Church to mourn this fragmentation, and to make efforts to seek and promote unity.¹¹ It is gratifying that the Protestant Church itself is a united church composed of diverse denominational legacies. However, this union needs to be one chapter in an ongoing process, both locally, nationally and internationally. The Protestant Church devotes itself to this wholeheartedly. There is also room for collaboration where it concerns local ecumenism. Part I B, paragraph 3 addressed this theme in more detail.

¹¹ ‘For the true unity of the church, it is sufficient to agree about the teachings of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.’ (Unaltered Confession of Augsburg, Article VII)



II B Continuing differently

Introduction

As mentioned earlier, the question of the organisation of the church does not stand alone, but is a follow-up to the question of *how we are as a church and what we want to be like*. The organisation follows the 'organism', the church as the living body of Christ. It is that living body that has a particular structure and organisation. The current structure has served well and the essential elements of it are worth retaining. At the same time, it should be noticed that the shoe is beginning to pinch at various points. Among other things, this relates to a lack of resources and people. However, this is not the most important reason. It lies rather in the desire to be a church that highlights the basics. It's about adjusting the organisation in such a way that the life of the Holy Spirit within the church and the congregations gains

space to develop, rather than becoming weighed down by an organisation that poses obstacles to this Spirit-filled life. Rather, that energy is released so that the church can occupy itself with its intended purpose. The reorganisation of the church is directed by three principles.

- In the first place, the organisation of the church should express the basics of the church as *transparently* as possible. It is for precisely this reason that we should keep asking what the basics are. For one reason or another, the organisation has become too 'bloated', threatening to become a goal in itself. A lighter form is necessary that remains relevant to the heart of the church identity: the Gospel, the congregation of faith, and the mission of the church. Young people in particular find it difficult to identify with the church in its current

form. They prefer to do so with something that is directly involved in experiencing and living the faith together, both in word and in deed. This is an identification with the *basics* of the church.

- Secondly, the structure needs to give the greatest possible space to the church and particularly the *local congregation*. In principle, this space already exists in the current church order and will need to be further established. This can be done by reducing the organisational and regulatory burden. Space is necessary to facilitate and stimulate new discoveries about church identity. Space is needed to give room for creative or necessary solutions in a local setting. We are therefore not suggesting a 'regime imposed from on high', but one which both comes from and serves the local congregation. Incidentally, space does not mean 'absence of attention'. Space also means giving the *people* in the church the opportunity to do what they need to in carrying out their care and responsibility for the congregations of our church.
- Thirdly, the organisation will have to be *simple*. The current structure cannot be maintained in its current quantity, even though this is not felt to the same degree everywhere. Those organisational goals that we cannot bring to fruition any longer should be let go. Simpler means more realistic, while guaranteeing *quality* and focusing on what is available in terms of gifts, people and resources.

In short, *transparency*, *space* and *simplicity* are the key words for the reorganisation of our church. In addition, there are two issues that remain important:

- The *local congregation* should be given space and burdened as little as possible with rules that do not directly serve the preaching of the Gospel, community, the diaconate and the mission in the world.
- At the same time, we are a *church in communion*, we will need to take care of one another and recognise that we are witnesses to the Gospel together in our society.

CHAPTER 1: HOW WE FORM A CHURCH TOGETHER

This chapter addresses the way in which congregations co-exist and how they form the Protestant Church together. How can we do this in a way that best serves the essential nature of the church identity? That is the focus of this chapter. It is an urgent focus, because it is precisely here that many feel we will become bogged down and – rightly or wrongly – give the impression of being a governing church. The following matters will be addressed:

1. General church council and community church councils
2. The intermediate level
3. Supervision
4. Visitation
5. Jurisdiction

1. General church council and community church councils

Many congregations in our church experience an interaction between community congregations and a general church council.¹² Sometimes this interaction goes well, but not always. Here, too, it is important to ask how serviceable this model is for the church basics and the impact of the congregation. The relationship between the general church council and the community church councils can turn out in two ways, in practice:

a. The primacy lies with the district congregations.

The district church councils are accorded as much independence as possible. The general church council is primarily a platform for meeting. This model assumes that the district congregations have sufficient vision and administrative capacity to arrange their own affairs.

b. The primacy lies with the general church council.

The district church councils assign many tasks to the general church council and have limited powers themselves. This model assumes homogeneity between the districts and a general church council that is capable of making policy that suits the district congregations.

In practice, it is unclear where the primacy lies. The consequence is confusion and sometimes frustration. The following remarks are intended to clarify matters:

- When the ownership of congregations becomes an increasingly important matter, the question becomes whether or not a general church council is close enough to the life and works in the district congregations to justify having great powers.
- The general church council makes decisions about buildings and pastors that can be easily contested by district church councils or congregation members who disagree with the decisions. There are also other areas in which district congregations would like more control over how the income from their own congregations is allocated.
- The interaction between the general church council and the district congregations doubles or triples the pressure to hold meetings.
- It could be considered arbitrary that districts within a city or a large town are required to gather together in a general church council, while smaller villages that lie close together and often belong to the same civic municipality are not.
- There are district church councils that are administratively weakened or incapable of looking beyond the borders of their own district congregation, so that the ecclesiastical presence in the town or village is compromised. Is it responsible to keep giving these district church councils great powers?

Recommendation

It would be advisable to find greater clarity locally. Criteria include ownership, simplicity (with regard to meeting frequency), shared church identity, and having clear and strong governance.

Model 1 could be more radically defined by further expanding the independence of the district congregations. This could result in the emancipation of

¹² In any case, no matter what form this interaction takes, matters to do with property law or legal position have been entrusted to the general church council.



the district congregations. These district congregations subsequently meet in a single platform that is intended to ensure that the ecclesiastical presence in a city or village is taken seriously. This is very important.

Model 2 can be more radically defined by assigning greater responsibilities to the general church council. This could result in the elimination of the independent district congregations. What is now known as the district church council would thus become known as the church council commission or pastoral division.

There is room for both model 1 and model 2 in the current church order. In other words, it's about vision, good arguments and a clear plan.

2. The intermediate level

As congregations, we belong together. The Protestant Church as a church order has chosen the classis as the 'foundational meeting' of the church. At the moment, the country is divided into 74 classes. As a result, the classis simultaneously functions as the intermediate layer between the local congregation and the general synod. Earlier, in the Dutch denominations of the Netherlands Reformed Church and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, there was also a provincial level, but this has been abolished. The question should be posed as to whether the classis has met the high expectations of the church order in the last ten years. It appears that the congregations have not yet come to the ecclesiastical discussion of the big questions regarding church identity in these times. Delegates are difficult to find. The classis is often a compulsory point on the church council agenda. Expectations are high when there are problems, but that assumes a powerful and expert broad synod. This often asks too much.

The *three criteria discussed in the introduction above* suggest another interpretation of 'congregations in communion'.

- Instead of the current 74 classes, around eight classes will be formed and will be known as 'regional classes'.¹³ The regional classis will be made up of the congregations in each region. It's not about policy being imposed 'from above', but about a shared ecclesiastical life in the region that arises from that region. The regional classis emphasises the responsibility of the congregations for each other and with each other in the region. The most important task is to lead the life and work of the church in this region. In addition, numerous tasks that are experienced as bureaucratic can be abolished, so that attention can be given to supporting the basics of the church. Delegation to the regional classis will be determined by an arrangement that has not yet been established. This classis has a synod (executive board) of five to seven members chosen by the regional classical assembly.¹⁴
- The Chair is the *personal face* of the regional classis. He/she is responsible for the congregations and pastors in the region, and embodies the cohesion of these congregations. Conversely, the regional classis monitors the good functioning of the Chair. The Chair is not a 'rule-driven slave-driver' but someone with a pastoral task. He or she is *pastor pastorum*, pastor of pastors.¹⁵ Important points include building the ecclesiastical life and establishing a missionary presence for the church in the region. The Chair will be chosen by the regional classis through an as yet to be determined process, according to criteria that will be generally applicable for all Chairs from the region. The Chair of the synod is exempt. His appointment has a finite end. The work of the Chair, who is in principle a pastor, is embedded in the official meeting of the regional classis. In that context, he/she is empowered to make decisions (*see section 3*).

¹³ Regional classis, to avoid confusion with the current classis. There is nothing wrong with continuing to use the name classis after the suggestions made in this chapter have been implemented.

¹⁴ The Walloon congregations that now still form a classis will continue to meet together. A delegate from one of the regions will be chosen for the General Synod from those congregations.

¹⁵ Instead of Chair, the term pastor pastorum can therefore also be used, or another title that emphasises the pastoral nature of the work.

- The regional classical assembly is an official assembly with a number of clearly described functions entrusted to it. The organisation is simple and is particularly focused on church identity in the region. It is the sounding board for the synod. The regional classis meets at least twice a year. The regional classical assembly is responsible for the *delegation to the general synod*. The electoral system hasn't been determined yet. For example, congregations could be given the opportunity on a rotational basis to nominate a church official. There are also other possibilities. The goal is to achieve an accurate reflection of the church in the synod. There is a budget for the work of the regional classis.
- The Chairs of the regional classes form a collective association in which the secretary of the General Synod also plays a role. This association functions as a consultative body. The National Service Centre supports the work of the regional classes with its expertise. It also facilitates the meetings of the Chairs. It is therefore not the intention that the regions receive small service centres themselves. That would be a waste of people and resources.
- *The meeting between congregations* is essential to our way of being a Protestant Church. This will also have to be the case in the future, even more than it is now. More than in the current classical assembly, it will be about the congregations meeting with each other. It is possible that the scale at which this happens will coincide with the current classis. Some classes already function very well in this respect. However, smaller scale is also worth considering, for example at the level of the civic municipality. This encounter will allow empathy, mutual encouragement and reflection on church identity to take form. In an atmosphere of openness, congregations will be able to help each other with critical self-reflection. These meetings will not involve administrative tasks. The organisation of this encounter is simple. At least one meeting per year will be arranged, in which as many local church officials and interested congregation members as possible will take part. These meetings can also have a festive character: we gather together, and we have something to celebrate. Church day in the region! The

meetings can lead to all kinds of collaborations between congregations. The synod of the regional classis will take charge of ensuring these meetings take place.

3. Supervision

Supervision is something that is part of the Protestant Church. This has nothing to do with interference or dominance, but everything to do with the task of the church to walk together in the footsteps of Christ. It becomes more tense when conflicts arise. These will always come up, and the way conflicts are resolved matters. We are hearing loud and clear from all sides, for all the good that it does to say it, that the current procedures are sluggish, time-consuming or half-hearted. One of the causes of this is that a number of agencies are involved in managing a conflict or a 'case' without it being clear who the designated owner of the process is. This approach was chosen to ensure that care would be taken, tunnel vision avoided, and support would be available. At the same time, it leads to the aforementioned sluggishness and a lack of persistence and drive. The church of tomorrow will still need to be a careful church, but it will also have to be more vigorous. The emphasis will therefore shift from the 'number of agencies' towards a more personal authority entrusted to the clergy called to this purpose. Transferral is different from exchange, but it does imply a trend. A number of suggestions are provided below.

- The Chair of a regional synod is authorised to make decisions in conflicts that are under consideration by the synod of the regional classis, *in consultation with* the synod of this regional classis.
- When conflicts come to his or her notice, the Chair is authorised to arrange an extraordinary visitation and seek counsel after discussion with the visitor who is a synod member.
- The Chair may also bring in a regional or national committee to address extraordinary concerns. Such committees have in the past played an outstanding role in the matter of a rift between congregations. These situations involve experienced managers who are capable of analysing a problem within a short time and making concrete suggestions on this basis.



- The Chair is also authorised to seek professional assistance in resolving administrative problems among the congregations, at the cost of the regional classis, which has reserved room in its budget for this.
- The National Service Centre supports all of this by providing its expertise.

Advantages of 2 and 3

The eight regional classes constitute a *simplification* compared to the current 74 classes. This lightens the organisation and frees up energy for the basics of church identity. It also makes room for another church understanding and the accompanying *commitment*. The synod has the necessary *quality*. The synod is responsible for the congregations in the region. Partly thanks to the contribution of the regional classical assembly, a vision for the region has been developed: what is necessary, what requires support, where are new initiatives possible and desirable? Which forms of congregation are necessary and what sort of equipping is appropriate to each form? How does the missionary presence take form, particularly in the regions where there are 'open places' (see II B chapter 2)? It is more about the regional classis having a controlling function than being an agency for a 'rigid framework'. An exempt Chair of the regional classes also suits the need for a *personal face and personal authority*, more than that of boards or assemblies. The unity and togetherness of the congregations is better embodied in a single person than in an assembly or a board. That gives greater visibility to the church in the region than an assembly or board that is perceived as anonymous. At the same time, embedding the Chairs in an official assembly and in a consulting body of Chairs prevents autocracy. Finally, this structure makes more *effective decision-making* possible, as an alternative for the procedures now, which are often experienced as being sluggish.

4. Visitation

Visitation, 'visits', emphasises the solidarity between congregations. Visiting each other characterises the task of loving one another as brothers and sisters and doing good for one another. This allows us to give substance to our care for

each other's spiritual wellbeing. Speaking encouragement in God's name plays an important role in this, but also exhortation and 'admonition': we also give each other constructive criticism.

In our church, we are familiar with the ordinary or regular visitation that is in principle carried out every four years by the members of the regional visitation. There is varying appreciation of this visitation. Completing questionnaires and checklist in advance is often not seen as useful. There are certainly successful visitations, but they are also sometimes seen as compulsory, even though they involve a great deal of time and effort. It is difficult to find visitators and the quality of the visitations is disputed. There is therefore a strong case for dispensing with this visitation in its current form. Instead of this visitation, the Chair of the board of visitators of the regional classes would visit a cluster of congregations together with another visitator, at least once every six years. Variations on this form are possible. This visit could potentially give rise to extraordinary visitation.

The extraordinary visitation is essential. This special visitation is entrusted to people who are especially suitable for the task, and who are appointed by the synod of the regional synod. This means about six visitators per region. The Chair of these extraordinary visitators is also a member of the synod of the regional synod. All extraordinary visitations are discussed in advance and agreed upon with the Chair of the regional classis. The visitation gives urgent advice. The 'power of determination' rests with the synod of the regional classis and its Chair.

Together, the Chairs of the regional visitation form a general board for the visitation. A visitator-general is added, who is the Chair of this general board. The Chairs of the regional visitation are partly relieved of their duties for their task. This also applies to the visitator-general.

5. Jurisdiction

The church has its own jurisdiction. According to Paul, it is shameful for internal conflicts to be brought before a civil court. In addition, the church is obliged to maintain

oversight over the lives of its members and over the teachings and lives of the church officials, particularly the ministers. The internal jurisdiction guarantees the independence of the church from the state and is also valuable from this viewpoint.

In line with what has been said about monitoring, it is also desirable to eliminate sluggishness in the administration of justice. It goes without saying that this must not be at the costs of the quality of the judicial boards. In the current structure, there are regional boards and a general board of justice, as well as regional boards and a general board of complaints and disputes. These boards could be merged into a single general board of ecclesiastical justice with two chambers, and three or four regional boards, each also with two chambers. There is also a general board for dismissals from office.

CHAPTER 2; ABOUT THE PRESENCE OF THE CHURCH

The church is the worldwide body of Christ. At the same time, the church is also local. Wherever two or three people gather in His name, Christ is with them. The Protestant Church has multiple congregations all across the Netherlands. In all of these places, people come together in the name of God, to hear the Gospel, to break bread, to pray, to serve each other and receive a missional calling. ‘All across the country’ has long been taken literally, even where this is actually no longer the case. This chapter acknowledges this last fact. It suggests a different approach to the presence of congregations of the Protestant Church. This different approach certainly does not have to be only a loss. On the contrary, it offers new opportunities, and that is a profit.

1. Parochial system

The Protestant Church adheres to what is known as the parochial system. This means that there is a congregation of the Protestant Church everywhere in the Netherlands.

No matter what your postcode is, there will be a congregation of the Protestant Church near you. It also means that, as a rule, there cannot be two Protestant congregations on the same territory. The whole country is therefore covered by a network of congregations.

Just a little history: the parish started as an extension of the bishop’s city cathedral for the sake of missionary work, and later for the pastoral cultivation of the countryside. One of the most important criteria for the formation of a parish is that the parish church had to be accessible to parishioners in the winter. Secondly, parishes were not supposed to be so small as to endanger the financial maintenance of the parish clergy. The parochial system was designed to serve a specific purpose. It was a territorial division of labour within the church for the sake of pastoral care. The Reformation kept the parochial system intact within the organisation of our church. Echoing the church order of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands from 1951, the Protestant Church adheres to the idea of a ‘church for all the people’.

The current practice is to keep to this notion, even if a local congregation can no longer operate independently. In that case, this congregation will be merged with a neighbouring one.¹⁶ This is sometimes, but not always, a solution. Scaling up can stretch the connections between congregations to such an extent that pastoral care is only possible on paper. In addition, a congregation can become too overburdened with the problems of a neighbouring congregation that can no longer function independently. The question that must then be asked is whether it is still realistic in a post-Christian society to imagine a network of congregations that covers the whole country.

2. Open areas

It is recommended that we accept that there are ‘open areas’. An open area is a territory where there is no local congregation led by a church council or served by a minister or religious worker.

¹⁶ In the case of a merged or regional congregation, a local congregation maintains its independent existence.



The acceptance of 'open areas' makes it obvious that in some parts of the country, the Protestant Church is no longer present in the form of 'normal' religious life. It makes clear that the Netherlands is in many ways a post-Christian society. It is a fair statement that the idea of a people's church in the sense of omnipresence is no longer tenable. It is not good to maintain the camouflage of the parochial system. In a positive sense, 'open areas' say something about the missional calling of the church and the explicit responsibility of the church for areas where there is no longer a 'normal' religious presence.

Responsibilities

Accepting the presence of open areas does not mean that the Protestant Church will no longer take responsibility for people who live in these areas.

- In the first place, these members of our church could be invited to take part in church life in the vicinity and to join one of the congregations there. Among these are members who have spent years of perseverance and commitment dedicated to supporting the local congregation. A cold, detached note telling them to join a congregation elsewhere is the last thing that should be used in these instances.
- In the second place, attention can be drawn to the ecclesiastical life of another church with which the Protestant Church is connected through an ecumenical relationship. On the one hand, that is painful. We should not tone down the meaning of the Protestant Church too much. On the other hand, such an ecumenical attitude fits perfectly with our church. We are not out for self-preservation, and we open ourselves up to our ecumenical partners. It is good to remember that this suggestion calls for regulations on guest membership with respect to the 'mutual relationships' between churches. Such regulations already exist in part, but they can only receive a new impetus through this.
- In the third place, they will remain in the national membership registry. This implies that people can be members of the Protestant Church without always being registered with a local congregation. This requires a form of contact from the national church

to these people, which might include offering them access to information. Naturally, this will require further thought.

Opportunities

Open areas can also offer other forms of new opportunities. Even if there is no parochial religious life any more, there can still be a form of religious presence.

- Wherever two or three people gather together in Christ's name, He is with them. A *home congregation* (or home church or church circle) may arise, whether spontaneously or not. It is possible that this home church might give more 'ownership' than some forms of regular church life. This home congregation is a community of faith in communion with the Protestant Church which can carry out the celebratory gatherings with the necessary freedoms. Leadership can be offered from within the region (for example, from a neighbouring congregation, or encouraged by the regional classis and supported by the national church). Just as in pioneering places, further thought will have to be given to powers and responsibilities. It is clear that due care needs to be taken, especially where the sacraments are concerned.
- In addition, collaboration with Christians from other churches can also be sought. The possibility of becoming a guest member of existing congregations within other churches has already been mentioned. There is also the possibility of forming ecumenical religious communities or residential communities. The Protestant Church will have to be prepared to take some form of responsibility for this, without laying claim to these congregations. We already see these communities in unexpected places. We can recognise this as the work of the Holy Spirit, which continues to surprise us in new ways.
- In the third place, open areas are a challenge to the congregations in the neighbourhood or region. When larger areas open up, that is the moment to send people out, as is already the case in new suburban areas. This could be a missionary pastor, for example, who is sent out by the regional classis (in the person of the Chair).

It is also possible for a neighbouring congregation to adopt an area without this district officially joining the congregation. This already happens in the city sometimes: a vital congregation with capacity and missionary consciousness adopts a district from which the religious life has disappeared. The national church or regional classis should perhaps invest more in such vital congregations. Wanting to keep everything 'in the air' for too long quite often leads to things sinking still further. By making choices, we can give the possibilities described above a chance.

3. Territorial and 'unity in diversity'

In our church, the rule is that a single congregation is responsible for the religious presence in a certain area. You will not find two Protestant congregations within the same area. At the same time, the practice is that not everyone in a particular area is a member of the local congregation. Through 'perforation', members can choose another congregation than the one in the area where they live. In addition to the local congregation, the 'church of choice' has come into existence. More and more members are taking advantage of this. Within the breadth of the Protestant Church, local congregations establish their own profiles and have their own colours. As well as having the feeling of 'naturally belonging', you also have the choice of finding a congregation where you feel at home.

Whenever there is, in a city or region, a diversity of congregations that are not clearly territorially defined, and there are also open areas, the question arises as to whether the territorial principle should be adhered to. It is proposed that another system be made possible. According to this system, there are congregations that are diverse in nature, colour, modality and profile in the city or region, which together emphasise the ecclesiastical presence in the city or region. This is unity in diversity, not based on territorial boundaries. Frameworks will need to be developed for this within the church order. Such a system gives form and substance to the collective pastoral and missionary responsibility of the church for the city or region in a different manner than the territorial method.

CHAPTER 3: OFFICES, PASTOR AND MOBILITY

1. About the church offices

In June 2014, seven letters were written about the offices. They elaborated on the offices of all of the faithful, the church council, the church officials, the pastors, the classis, the relationship to an episcopal church structure, and the pioneers/missionaries. These letters are intended as pastoral texts. They ask about the perception and function of the offices. The appended questions led to discussions in church councils and congregations. There were many responses to these letters, which still need to be processed. In any case, it is important that reflection on the offices continue.

With regard to Church 2025, we look in particular at *flexibility* and *space*. In this context, the primary issues involve terms of office and participation. The most prominent are the following.

1. Should the rules regarding the term of office in the current church order be maintained?
2. Is it necessary for all church officials to take part in the church council meeting?
3. What is the minimum number of members for a church council?

Re: 1. The Church Order (Ord. 3.7.1) refers to the first term of office of elders and deacons being 'four years as a rule'. *Re-election* is for a term of at least two and at most four years. The maximum term of office is twelve consecutive years. The reason for limiting the term of office for church officials is to prevent them becoming too used to an easy life. When someone is invited to take up a position, the approach is not 'you have to do it for at least four years', but 'your term of office is for no more than four years, after which re-election is possible'. The phrase 'as a rule' is intentionally included in the church order. This indicates that there are exceptions. Congregations may take a flexible approach to this criterion. On the other hand, the phrase 'as a rule' indicates that there are usually good reasons for the term of four years. The church officials are, after all, called to give spiritual leadership to the congregation. This would be difficult with a very short



term of office. It is important for the progress of policy that church officials serve for longer periods.

Re: 2. The church council is formed by the church officials of the congregation (see Church Order VI-3). It is difficult to see what this means when they do not hold meetings. Shared responsibility can only exist when they do meet. By working with a small and large church council, some church officials may find that the meeting pressure decreases significantly already. Furthermore, quite a lot of work can be undertaken outside the context of an official service. It is better to have a smaller church council with members who give guidance to the congregation together, than to endorse church officials too easily. Perhaps more important than the question of whether all of the church officials are present at a church council meeting, is that the meetings concern 'salvation' and what really matters to us as worshippers and congregations. A church official will be eager to attend meetings to take part in a conversation about those topics.

Re: 3. According to the church order (Ord. 4.6.3a), a church council from a small congregation (fewer than 300 members) or a church council in extraordinary circumstances may have three members, consisting of a pastor, an elder and a deacon. This is subject to the cooperation and approval of the broad synod of the classical assembly. However, this is the absolute minimum. A congregation that can no longer meet these conditions cannot continue to function as an independent congregation. Under normal circumstances, this congregation would then be merged with another congregation. When the general synod chooses this option (see II B Chapter 2), a home congregation can be established following the discontinuation of the congregation.

2. About pastors

Church worker and pastor 2025

The church worker now has an official place in our church. A church worker is not a cheap version of a pastor. The work of the church worker and the pastor complement each other. Where the classical role of the pastor is concerned with the service of the Word and the sacrament, the church worker focuses more on the

impact of the Word in the congregation and the lives of its people. This takes place especially in pastoral care, youth work, missionary work and community work. The more practical orientation and the ability to align theory and practice mean that the church worker is ideally positioned to respond to changes in society. That is an important service to the church of the future.

Alongside pastoral workers who are college-educated, academically trained pastors will continue to serve the church in the future. The pastor is *verbi divini minister*, called to serve the divine word. Much has changed in the way that this calling takes form, and much more will change. It is already no longer the case that each congregation has its 'own' minister, and that will be even less so in 2025. Much of the shelter provided by a church culture in which the minister has a defined and recognisable position is disappearing or already lost. This leads to questions and uncertainties. Many pastors feel at risk. Therefore, concern for the pastor is an important theme in the coming time. However, it would give the wrong impression to only talk about concerns. In 2025, the pastor may feel called to use his or her gifts in a post-Christian culture, in a missionary situation. More than ever before, in addition to the shepherd and the teacher (which will remain important), the image of the apostle will come to mind, a person who is called to spread the Gospel in this world. It is then that the 'exemption from duties' for pastors gains new meaning. They are not employed as such; rather, the congregation/church makes them available to the congregation/church and the contemporaries they encounter along the way. Effectively, it is more like supporting missionaries than employing staff. In this context, the pastor is not so much the manager as the witness focused upon the basics of the church, who continually reminds the church and the congregation about these basics.

The church is served by pastors and pastoral workers. In return, that same church should care for them. Of course, this care is provided in the framework of care for the whole church and the congregations. This care

takes form in the figure of the Chair of the regional classis (see II B, Chapter 1, sections 3 and 4). This pastoral figure builds up a good relationship with the congregations, pastors and pastoral workers in the region.

Mobility: considerations

Mobility also plays a role in this relationship. Mobility is a part of the pastorate, related to optimal deployment of pastors within the church. Mobility arises as part of a wellbeing and motivation interview between the Chair and the pastor and congregation. The following can be said about mobility:

- Mobility is normal for the pastorate. The office of pastor is for life, but the bond with a congregation (or as pastor in the general service of the national church) is temporary. Unlike other church officials, the pastor is called 'from outside'. It is precisely that external source that underscores that the pastor follows in the tradition of the *apostles*, and as a result is familiar with 'the restlessness of the feet of the apostles'. At the same time, the pastor is also shepherd and teacher. For this reason, there is a bond between the pastor and congregation. Certainly, there needs to be a trust relationship between the pastor and the congregation with regard to this pastoral role. *Spiritual leadership* requires the pastor to grow into and become familiar with the life of the congregation.
- There is not a direct correlation between career and personal development and the ideal duration of a pastor's term with a congregation. Staying somewhere longer can offer more opportunity for deeper growth than continually moving around. In the latter case, there is a risk of repeating oneself in each congregation. On the other hand, staying in the same congregation for a long period can make the interaction between the pastor and congregation predictable, with the risk of stagnation. The pastor loses his or her 'foreignness' and is therefore no longer able to offer an 'outside perspective'. Routine can take over, smothering inspiration and creativity.
- In addition to a pastor's ties to one or more congregations, there will also be space in the future for pastors to work in a *team*, together with pastoral

workers. This requires a flexible system and mobility is definitely an important aspect. It is conceivable that pastors in a region (possibly under the auspices of a regional classis) will be sent out on missions for a certain period of time.

- From the perspective of the congregation, the trust relationship with a pastor is immensely valuable. Many congregations have experienced it as a blessing to have a shepherd and teacher in their midst for an extended period. From the same perspective of the congregation, however, it is also important for the bond with a pastor to be temporary. The richness and depth of the Gospel calls for variation in pastors. Even if the pastor is popular, there will be members of the congregation who cannot get comfortable with the pastor's approach. Nor should it be forgotten that the pastor as spiritual leader has a certain degree of power. This can increase as the bond with a congregation continues. Finally, on a sober note, attention should be drawn to the shrinking resources of congregations. Mobility helps with this better than a forced reduction in work hours.
- We need to take a sober look at mobility, and that includes the reasons why mobility may be restricted. Consideration can be given to:
 - the needs of the pastor's partner and/or children;
 - home ownership;
 - uncertainty about a new situation, compared with the familiarity of the current one;
 - frustration about previous applications or pastoral calling procedures.

These factors will need to be taken into account whenever mobility is promoted. It is therefore conceivable that the residential proximity requirements for pastors will be abolished. If there is a good workplace for the pastor within the congregation, it is manageable if the pastor lives within a radius of a maximum of three-quarters of an hour travel from his or her dwelling.

- At the moment, the average term is about eight years. This average is not coincidental. Apparently, a period of eight years is long enough to experience the positive aspects of a longer commitment, and limited enough to honour other positive aspects of pastorhood. Being



a pastor in one place for longer than twelve years is difficult to tolerate with the maximum term of elders and deacons, and the idea that they are those who stay while the pastor is passing through.

- On the basis of the above, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions about the ideal term in office. If *compulsory* termination is used, the advantages of mobility are realised naturally. Moreover, rotation provides greater opportunities for those pastors who would like a calling but do not receive one; this a matter that often receives too little attention. However, there will need to be a safety net for pastors who do not receive a new calling in a new system. The disadvantage of a compulsory termination is that there is no 'ideal' period for attachment to a congregation. This depends on multiple factors that do not always suggest the same term. Furthermore, compulsory termination can lead to stress, the feeling of being subjected to a new regime, and the idea that one's 'calling' is very much being controlled from outside.

Principles for policy

On the basis of the above, the following is a proposal with principles for policy. In this regard, a *culture of mobility* is chosen instead of compulsory termination.

- Before a pastor's eight-year term with a congregation is due to expire, the Chair of a regional classis has a discussion with the pastor and the congregation. This Chair, acting as 'pastor pastorum', carries out a full, official discussion, and not the conversation of a business manager occupied with 'job rotation'. However, during the discussion, the topic of mobility is raised openly. A 'normal' guiding principle in that context is that after eight years is a good moment for a new calling. (Of course, pastors are free to be called earlier and to accept.) Should pastor and congregation (or church council) indicate that they would like to stay together, there is room for this. Given the abovementioned consideration, a second decision point is after a twelve-year term. At that point, there may also be reasons to continue together, although these will need to be explicitly expressed and shared by the pastor and the congregation. The

pastor and congregation can still be alerted to the help offered by the church for a new calling. The desire of a congregation to seek a new commitment with another pastor should count for more, however. If a congregation indicates that it is ready after eight years for the pastor to follow a new calling, it is up to the pastor to loyally cooperate, with the help of the church and supported by the congregation. From the congregation's side, there is the possibility of a commitment of twelve years being ended at its request (which, incidentally, is not considered a detachment in the sense given by Article 3.20). This doesn't necessarily have anything to do with tension or discontent, but above all with the fact that after twelve years, another type of pastor is needed. A great deal can change in twelve years. Also in that case, the pastor concerned will be supported in finding a new office. It is quite clear that the discussion about this requires care (good working conditions) and that a blame culture is not allowed to emerge in any way. Pastors must not feel like lame ducks. On the other hand, we can have faith that the congregations will also follow this path of friendship and trust. There is no reason to distrust the congregations on this matter beforehand.

It is obvious that all of this will need to be *phased in*. It is gratifying to note that young pastors are at the forefront when it comes to a culture of mobility.

The possibility will be expanded for the congregation and pastor to enter into a temporary commitment with respect to a calling, in which financial issues may also play a role. This is necessary considering the current financial situation for many congregations.

- There are already pastors who are working in temporary employment. These are, among others, interim pastors and pastors included in the mobility pool. Serving pastors may also ask to be included in this pool. This might include older pastors who are willing and able to put their experience to use as a sort of locum pastor, for example for small congregations or in temporary situations, to bridge a gap in the case of sickness or an unfilled job opening.

- The national church supports the pastor through work guidance and the Mobility Office. More and other tools for mobility can be developed, for example a collective exchange such as that which has recently been put into practice in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated), another Dutch denomination.
- A separate question concerns how the above relates to pastors in general service. A maximum of twelve years for this type of service is an obvious term.

CHAPTER 4: ABOUT ADMINISTRATION

1. Principles

Managing finances and goods is just as spiritual as providing pastoral care and worship. There are good reasons why we have church stewards who are elders and belong to the church council. Deacons also manage finances and sometimes goods. These are intended for the diaconal work of the congregation and must remain separate from the money used to maintain the congregation. Congregants raise money for the edification of the congregation, the continued preaching of the Gospel, and the service to our 'neighbours'. Income from property and possessions is also earmarked for this purpose. All these different sources of revenue need to be managed meticulously. For that reason, financial management must comply with general guidelines for sound and careful administration. This requires that the board of church stewards and deacons have both expertise and experience in these matters.

Congregations are not separate from one another. This also applies to financial management. For this reason, in our church we are familiar with the supervision of the supra-local church. This is not interference; rather, it is an aspect of caring for the needs of both the local congregation and the church as a whole. It provides confidence not only to the members but also to the outside world, to the public and the government. As well as supervision, the supra-local church provides advice and support to local financial administrators. Our church recognises the supervisory body known as the

Regionaal College voor de Behandeling van Beheerszaken (RCBB) (the Regional Board for the Management of Administrative Matters). Further support is available from the National Service Centre and the supporting organisations; see below.

2. Challenges

In light of Church 2025, there are a number of challenges relating to administration and supervision, as follows:

- Management is a fully spiritual matter. At the same time, it goes against the nature of church identity to burden congregations with excessive rules that make administration disproportionately cumbersome. There are indications that this is the case. Lightening of the burden is necessary in order to free up energy for the basics of church identity and to avoid over-burdening congregants.
- Administrative efficiency is decreasing, both for local and supra-local administration and supervision. How can we arrive at the simplest possible approach to local administration, so that administration and supervision can be carried out responsibly by fewer people? This should not jeopardise the accuracy and soundness of financial administration. This applies all the more due to the tax advantage the church receives from the government as a result of being a registered charity (ANBI legislation). It will take careful balancing to allow congregations as much freedom as possible while still guaranteeing the necessary care by the church as a whole.
- The services provided to the congregations are not identical across the board, particularly with regard to financial administration. How can efforts be combined in such a way as to avoid wasting energy and to support the congregations as efficiently as possible?

A number of proposals follow which address these challenges.

3. Local administration

- Financial administration remains a task for the local congregation, with the church council being ultimately responsible. Supra-local support or intervention is aimed at



supplementing these local bodies. Responsibilities should only be invested in supra-locally for valid reasons.

- The management of diaconal matters remains separate from non-diaconal matters.
- The administrative processes within the congregations will be more standardised. This can be implemented by switching to digital administration. As a result, the annual figures for congregations could be delivered in a single, simple table. This would be helpful in preparing longer-term budgets for the church or for supervisory purposes, as well as quota calculations, statistics and accountability to the government, e.g. with regard to registered charity status (ANBI).
- Customisation is necessary. Under certain conditions, small congregations or congregations with a limited budget will be exempted from the requirement to have separate boards and/or legal entities for the congregation and diaconate. It goes without saying that the funding streams (for congregation and diaconate) will remain separate.
- In IIB Chapter 1 (How we are a church together), attention was already drawn to the potential for conflict between local congregations and a general church council with regard to sources of income and how they are spent. It is important to be clear about who is responsible for these decisions. On the basis of previous experience, it is possible that greater powers will be given to the district church councils.

4. Supra-local supervision

- Supra-local supervision has to deal with decisions made by church councils regarding long-term contracts with ministers and other staff members, decisions about church buildings (such as major renovations and sale), and management of considerable financial assets.
- Congregations send their annual reports, signed by the church council, to the supervisory authority. The supervisory authority uses a classification system that clarifies the extent to which congregations meet the standard rules for supervision (including the rule that accounting and financial management are not done by the same person). In congregations where this is the case, checks are marginal.

- If the quality of management within a congregation is not sufficiently guaranteed, the supervisory authority takes appropriate action, ranging from identifying a problem, giving a warning, and calling in outside support all the way to imposing the requirement to carry out management tasks in cooperation with other congregations. If desired, the supervisory authority may provide information about the management of a local congregation to the synod of a regional classical assembly.

- Arrangements within the church order will need to be made for congregations that have little to no management (due to the lack of available congregation members) and still remain independent, despite major interests being at stake due to the presence of personnel, buildings and/or financial assets. These arrangements must make it possible for delegated administrators or managers to be appointed who are granted the authority by a regional classical assembly and the Regional Board for the Management of Administrative Matters (RCBB) to represent the congregation's administration and/or management on a temporary basis.

- To promote the quality of supervision and to guarantee it in future, the number of RCBBs has been designated at one such supervisory authority per regional classis, possibly eventually rising to a total of four, distributed across the future regions. The synods of these RCBBs (or a delegation thereof) are collectively the general body for handling management affairs. This body is responsible for promoting the quality of supervision and guaranteeing equal treatment for congregations in all regions.

5. Advice and support

Management advice and support for congregations is available from the National Service Centre and the RCBBs. Flanking organisations also operate in this area: the Vereniging Kerkrentmeesterlijk Beheer (VKB), the Kantoor voor Kerkelijke Administratie and the Kantoor voor Kerkelijke Goederen (KKA/KKG). They provide paid and unpaid services to congregations in the areas

of church stewardship, church administration and church property. Research needs to be done to explore whether and how these various forms of services can be combined into one overarching collective organisation. The church heads the activities, while the various collaborating parties contribute autonomously and independently. The aim is to provide services in the various management areas from a single office. That prevents redundant work and avoids any lack of clarity about where to send a management-related question or request, as well as promoting the provision of expert services. The guiding principle here is that these services are provided by volunteers where possible, only relying on paid professionals where strictly necessary.

EXPLANATION

The road goes on

This policy paper maps out a course of action. It starts with going back to the basics and ends with management. All this is intended to follow the path of the Lord. Centuries ago, Christians were known as ‘people of the path’, and with good reason.

We live in a world in tumult. Old assurances seem less certain than before, and it’s not clear what will happen next. What will World 2025 look like? How about Netherlands 2025? And what does that mean for Church 2025? Long ago, Jesus sent his disciples out into the world. They had no belongings, only sandals for the road. Just heading out into the unknown... It is written of the disciples:

They went out and preached that people should repent.
(Mark 6:12)

Whatever the future may bring, as disciples of Jesus, we are now called to head down that same road, in faith that the Spirit will come to our aid. That is why we pray to the Holy Spirit: *Veni Creator Spiritus*, come fill us with your wholeness, oh Holy Spirit.

Colophon

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