

## Chapter Five

# Ecclesiology in Context: Urban Church Planting in the Netherlands

*Stefan Paas*

### 1. *Introduction*

Evangelicals have always been known for their missionary zeal. Usually, this went together with a pragmatic or even dismissive attitude towards ecclesiology. However, in a late-modern urban context ecclesiological questions are inevitable when Christians set out for mission. These questions will be the main subject of this chapter.<sup>1</sup>

Christian community formation is part of the answer that human beings give to the Gospel—we may say their “conversion”. This answer will always be culture-specific, because the “ideal”, a-contextual respondent does not exist.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in its organisation and life together the church will always reflect characteristics of the broader culture to which it belongs. This was so in the New Testament and it will always be that way.<sup>3</sup> Gradually, the fact that late-modern Europeans, if the Gospel affects them, choose different types of community than their ancestors, is gaining attention. In several countries one can witness the emergence of mostly small, fluid, flexible, eclectic Christian communities, in which a new generation seems to feel better at home than in the traditional “congregation”.<sup>4</sup> This seems to be especially true for younger city dwellers. This observation is the point of departure for this article.

---

<sup>1</sup> I have dealt with some preliminary questions in: Stefan Paas, “Kerken vormen: de gemeenschappelijke structuur van het Evangelie anno nu”, *Soteria* 23/1 (2006), 6–26.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Andrew F. Walls, “Culture and Conversion in Christian History”, in: idem, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 43–46.

<sup>3</sup> For the relationship between “secular” community types and church planting in the New Testament, cf. Andrew D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of Christ: Christians as Leaders and Ministers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 11–141.

<sup>4</sup> A rapidly growing number of websites are exploring this phenomenon. E.g., <http://emergingchurch.info>, [www.freshexpressions.org.uk](http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk), [www.encountersontheedge.org.uk](http://www.encountersontheedge.org.uk), etc.

Here, I reflect in particular on some experiences with new church formation in the Netherlands; and I ask what can be its contribution to theological thinking about the church.

For me, this is no theoretical question. From January 2006 until December 2008 I have been working professionally in a church plant in Amsterdam, called Via Nova ([www.vianova-amsterdam.nl](http://www.vianova-amsterdam.nl)). This new church, planted by the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands, is particularly focused on young professionals in Amsterdam.<sup>5</sup> More than other segments of society this group consists of people who represent a late-modern Western view of life. As such, they are a good “control group” as to questions about the future of the church in a post-Christian and post-secular society.<sup>6</sup> In the preparatory stage of the new church plant, we have dealt intensively with matters of church planting and community formation among this social group. How do they respond to the Gospel in terms of their own life? This question will be my guiding light in the remainder of this article. Without even trying to be exhaustive, I will describe three ecclesiological shifts that I observe in our practice of church formation: (1) from monopoly to marketing, (2) from the congregation to a network church, and (3) from an emphasis on confessional foundations to an emphasis on mission and values. In my opinion these shifts are crucial for *ecclesiogenesis* in a secular and individualistic context. Before discussing them further, however, I will first present some details of this context.

## 2. Young Urban Professionals in Amsterdam

In 2003 and 2004, a team of the Christian Reformed Church in Amsterdam conducted dozens of semi-structured interviews with young, unchurched professionals or “knowledge workers.”<sup>7</sup> This group consists of people, born between ca. 1970 and 1985, who have consciously chosen the city as a place to work, to find friends and to be in touch with cultural resources. They are highly educated and many of them are making a lot of money or expect to do so in the near future. These people have a

<sup>5</sup> Via Nova has been described in several Dutch studies. See, e.g., Gerrit Noort et al., *Als een kerk opnieuw begint: handboek voor missionaire gemeenschapsvorming* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2008), 136–146.

<sup>6</sup> I have discussed these terms in: Stefan Paas, “Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences”, *MisSt* 28 (2011), 3–25.

<sup>7</sup> *Resultaten van de interviews onder niet-kerkelijke jonge hoger opgeleide Amsterdammers* (Amsterdam 2004).

high degree of autonomy and many daily options are available to them. They are creative, career focused, materialistic, hedonistic, flexible, ambitious, outspoken, and competitive. Church and (Christian) faith are not very much in the picture, although many of them are willing to discuss faith-related subjects. Regarding belief in God, we could call most of these young career people “agnostic”. Usually, they do not have clear ideas about God or the divine, but they do not have strong objections either. Overall, this subject is one in which they are not very interested. Their image of the church is ambiguous. They acknowledge that the church has some use for certain people groups (elderly, lonely) and as a public service (weddings and funerals), but that is where it stops. When asked what kind of church would be interesting for them, they answer that this church should have a lot of room for debate and questions. It must be “informal and warm” (probably the best translation of Dutch *gezellig*) and it must not be too dogmatic about truth and morals. On the other hand, this church must have a clear religious profile: spiritual questions must be central. It should be about faith and religion.

This profile is very different from that of the average churchgoing Dutchman. Almost everything that is valued by church people is frightening for this group—and vice versa. Recent research into regular churchgoers (at least once in two weeks) in the Netherlands confirms that this group (approximately 5–10% of the Dutch population) is the opposite of these young Amsterdammers in almost every respect. For example, the core support group of the Evangelical broadcasting organisation in the Netherlands (*Evangelische Omroep*) reveals itself as an example of traditional, community-focused values, with an emphasis on loyalty and duty.<sup>8</sup> Other studies confirm this opposition between church members and Via Nova’s “target group”. An investigation of Dutch values and lifestyles, *Mentality*, by the marketing bureau Motivaction ([www.motivaction.nl](http://www.motivaction.nl)) distinguishes eight different social milieus in the Netherlands. Church people can be found primarily among “traditional citizens” (18% of the Dutch population). This group is characterised by conservatism and attachment to the status quo. These people are duty bound, they trust institutions, avoid risks and are involved with the care of ethnic minorities and environmental issues. Family values are very important for this group that consists of relatively more women and less younger and highly educated people.

---

<sup>8</sup> W.H. Dekker, W. Vollbehr, *De verlegenheid voorbij: onderzoek ter gelegenheid van het 40-jarig bestaan van de Evangelische Omroep* (Ede: Christelijke Hogeschool Ede, 2007).

The profile of younger “knowledge workers” in Amsterdam, however, is more consistent with the lifestyle types “cosmopolites” (10% of the general population), “upwardly mobiles” (13%), and, to a lesser degree, “postmodern hedonists” (10%). All these groups are influenced to a high degree by modern and postmodern values, with self-development, individualism and freedom as linking pins. In an important study of the Scientific Council for Government Policy (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid), *Geloven in het publieke domein*, the Motivation typology is refined further and complemented with other analyses. On this basis the SCGP distinguishes six lifestyles, defined by their different strategies to give meaning to life.<sup>9</sup> Two lifestyles are dominating the “target group” of young professionals in Amsterdam: “non-religious and humanistic” (NRH; 12% of the Dutch population) and “non-affiliated spiritual people” (NAS; 26%). The group called NRH experiences meaning in life primarily through relatives and friends. Pleasure and fun are important goals in life, with respect and tolerance as most important life conditions. This group consists of people who are flexible, have broad cultural appetites, want to keep control over their own lives, are eager to perform, and have a pragmatic attitude to life. From a religious perspective they are omnivores: they like to keep their options open, but are not especially interested in religion.

The other lifestyle group, NAS, looks the same as the first group in many respects, but is clearly much more interested in transcendence and spirituality. Within this context, its emphasis is on enrichment of life, pleasure and responsibility, rather than on rules of life and obedience. Autonomy and self-development are important values for this group as well. When these conditions are satisfied, people are open to forms of spirituality that are not (too obviously) connected to institutions and doctrines. So, this group too is very different from the “Christian” lifestyle (ca. 25% of the general population). All of this leads to the reasonable assumption that this group will find it hard to find its way in existing churches. Basically, there is a lack of “natural bridges” between the majority of church members and this group of young, secular urbanites. For us, this has been the most important missionary motivation to plant a new church, with a focus on this group. This motivation is confirmed by the reactions of attendees of services in Via Nova. One of the most frequently heard is this: “Nice to see so many people like me”.

---

<sup>9</sup> W.B.H.J. van de Donk et al. (eds.), *Geloven in het publieke domein: verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 171–207.

The group of young “knowledge workers” in Amsterdam belongs to the first generations that have been raised in a country where most people are no (longer) members of a church. Most of them come from non-religious backgrounds, with only vague memories of church and Christianity. As a consequence, they have only a very superficial knowledge of Christian beliefs. Moreover, they are real individualists; they are used to making their own choices and are allergic to every attempt from others to make decisions for them. Control of their own lives is crucial for them. In many respects they are the archetypes of late-modern man: critical, insecure, consumerist, very sensitive to matters of identity, with a great need of control, hedonistic, etcetera. Whenever Christian community formation takes place among this group, we can learn something about the future of the church in cities of the West in general and in the Netherlands in particular.

Now I shall turn to the description of three important shifts that to my opinion are characteristic of this future.

### 3. *From Monopoly to Marketing*

In his masterpiece *Transforming Mission* David Bosch (following Hans Küng) describes six historic missiological paradigms, beginning with the Early Church and ending with an emerging “ecumenical” paradigm.<sup>10</sup> This concept of consecutive paradigms is interesting when we consider the missionary context in the Netherlands. We can characterise this context in one sentence like this: people usually do have a certain interest for “religion”, but not for “church”. For many, faith and spirituality have received a place in their personal project of self-development. However, personal autonomy is the core condition of this project.<sup>11</sup> Which missiological paradigm would fit best this reality? In my opinion a *marketing* paradigm deserves serious consideration here. A market is an intermediary between supply and demand. The underlying assumption of the marketing metaphor implies that there is still

---

<sup>10</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991, <sup>18</sup>2003), 179ff.

<sup>11</sup> The relationship between a shift towards (post)modern values and changes in the religious outlook of Europeans is described by Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). For a case study, cf. Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead et al., *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

an unaltered demand for religious meaning in the Netherlands.<sup>12</sup> However, on the supply side things have changed: the religious monopoly of the church has been broken. People have lots of options and they use them at will. Therefore, suppliers have to distinguish themselves; they must present their products as visibly and attractively as possible, without forgetting their core objectives. In a recent study, the Dutch sociologist of religion Erik Sengers has thought through this market metaphor, with a view towards mission in the Netherlands.<sup>13</sup> In this book he points out the importance of a clear mission statement, good publicity, and an effective use of resources. Our contemporary situation is so complex and multidimensional that it has simply become impossible to be all things to all people at the same time and in the same place. This is particularly true in the context of one of the most multi-ethnic cities of the planet—Amsterdam.<sup>14</sup>

Marketing is severely criticized in the church. Very good reasons can exist to do so, but it is important to emphasize: we are talking about a *metaphor*, nothing less or more than that. Christian mission is not identical with marketing, but it serves our purpose to look at it from a marketing perspective. In this way dimensions can come into view that would not have been visible otherwise. Also, a comparison with other missiological approaches and metaphors in history can be instructive. When the Netherlands was christianized, in the age of Charlemagne and his successors, mission was—at least to a great extent—equal with *conquest*, i.e. the subjection of pagans. During the Reformation era the emphasis was on *education*—the progressive evangelization of nominal Christians. In the nineteenth century the mission of the church in the Netherlands was defined as the *elevation of the masses*, whereas in the twentieth century the missionary task was first seen as *evangelism*

---

<sup>12</sup> Of course, this assumption of unchanging religious needs is an acknowledged weak spot of this paradigm. For a criticism of “rational choice” explanations of the religious situation in Europe, see e.g., Grace Davie, *Europe, the Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002, 2007); Grace Davie et al. (eds.), *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003). However, even if this assumption is not true (something I consider very probable), I think a modest application of marketing philosophy in a church context still possible. For this, see also Norman Shawchuck et al., *Marketing for Congregations: Choosing to Serve People More Effectively* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Erik Sengers, *Aantrekkelijke kerk: nieuwe bewegingen in kerkelijk Nederland op de religieuze markt* (Delft: Eburon, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Per 1–1–2009 Amsterdam had 177 nationalities within its territory. With a population of 756,347, this makes the city one of the most multicultural, but also one of the most fragmented cities in the world. Source: [www.amsterdam.nl](http://www.amsterdam.nl).

(regaining the lost sheep) and thereafter as *service* (or *presence*). These metaphors were all inspired by changing circumstances. All of them contain certain disadvantages, some more than others. However, in a consumer's society like ours the marketing paradigm quickly jumps on the stage, and why would we reject this immediately?

In his book Sengers only discusses missionary activities in existing congregations and Christian organizations. However, the marketing metaphor comes into view mostly in church planting projects. As an example I want to discuss the phenomenon of the “target group”. Whoever wants to start a missionary project, must think about what he or she exactly wants to achieve, with whom, and about the resources that are available. Thus, in the practice of church planting, having a “target group” is almost inevitable. Deciding on a specific target group is not so much inspired by a desire for efficiency and success, as is sometimes suggested by Dutch critics.<sup>15</sup> It is motivated by church planters with an appeal to *missionary* reasons—they have, as it were, integrated the marketing metaphor in their missiological reflection. From my own situation I only mention the question of language. In a city with 177 different ethnic groups, as is the case in Amsterdam, the choice for Dutch as *lingua franca* in church is not neutral. Irrevocably we exclude people by preaching in Dutch. Anyone can imagine that the same is true for choices in areas of venue, music, decoration, emotional intensity and the like. Given limited resources and the vulnerability in general of a new project, that it would be possible to make choices in all of these areas with different people groups in view is hard to imagine. A new project like Via Nova must therefore focus on a target group. In our context this means that the choices we make are accounted for with respect to a certain “calibration group”, in our case: young, secular, career focused people. In no way do we want to refuse other people, but we fine-tune our choices with this particular group in view. Crucial to note, therefore, is that this focus on a specific group is not the same as excluding people. Rather, it is a matter of choosing a point of entry in the complex tapestry of the city. The big question projects like these face is: how can we gradually broaden our community, how can this community become more inclusive and become more of a reflection of the city itself? What is inevitable in *starting* a church—a certain exclusivity—is a sin in *being* a church. This tension is the territory in which many church plants have to work.

---

<sup>15</sup> Like Sake Stoppels, “Kerkplanting”, in: Rein Brouwer et al., *Levend lichaam: dynamiek van christelijke geloofsgemeenschappen in Nederland* (Kampen: Kok, 2007), 94–95.

The marketing metaphor requires some theological reflection, however. I want to give two suggestions, one starting with the incarnation, the other with the cross. As for the first suggestion: whenever the Gospel enters a new culture, making choices is necessary. From Abraham's election to the incarnation of Christ salvation always started in particularity, only to end in universality. Jesus became a *man*; he did not become humanity. We might say that the incarnation meant a choice for a "limited reach". Salvation is from the Jews; it started in a small area in Israel, among a circumscribed group of people. But that is not where it stayed. Thus, the incarnation can be used as a confirmation and as a critique of "target group" thinking: universal salvation can only start in a particular way, but always keeps the whole of creation in view.

Regarding the second suggestion, we must consider what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 about the cross as a sign of God's preference for what is weak and foolish. Just like it pleased God to save the world through the seeming failure of the Jewish Messiah, he works today through that which has no status or power. Paul applies this to his own life: he came to the Corinthians in fear and insecurity, without a respectful position. My impression is that the marketing metaphor can help churches to understand what it means to be "weak". If we can see the recipient of the Gospel no longer as someone to be conquered, educated or relieved, but as a (critical) "customer" or "consumer", the balance of power between preacher and hearer starts to shift. It is remarkable that Paul's speech about the foolishness of preaching and his own weakness is used in many churches to reinforce the traditional preacher instead of "weakening" him or her. It has been used as an excuse for a manner of preaching or evangelizing that does not seriously study the questions of modern people, for finding a power basis in theological knowledge, thus keeping the recipient in dependence. However, when the hearer does not have a high opinion of our knowledge and is not very eager to hear what we have to tell, then we will be "weak" indeed. I think that a position like that is reached primarily when a small group of Christians steps out of its "comfort zone" and sets out to plant a church among people who do not know the Gospel. Seen from this perspective church planting is a vulnerable practice in every respect—*theologically, financially, and in matters of organisation and human resource*. These are the precise contexts in which creative and innovative theology is born. This may be another confirmation that mission is the mother of theology, and the church its maternity ward.



#### 4. *From the Congregation to a Network Church*

For many Christians being church is equal to being a congregation. Also in this article I use these terms as rough equivalents. However, strictly speaking, the congregation as we know it is an institutional representation of the church, with a specific structure and origin.<sup>16</sup> According to some—among them many church planters—the congregation even is an institutional fossilization of something that originally started as a movement of disciples of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> In this context there is often a reference to the *network* as a typical urban, late-modern, flexible and “liquid” form of community. For people who live in a network it is typical that geographic location is less important to them than social location. “To live in one place no longer means to live together, and living together no longer means living in the same place” (Ulrich Beck).<sup>18</sup> To city-dwellers terms like “neighbourhood” or “district” are less determining for their identity than their (self-chosen) relationships with others. They hardly know their neighbours, if they know them at all. Those with whom they feel related and for whom they feel responsible, probably live somewhere else in the city. For many urbanites networks are far more important to their identity than their family, place of living or social class. This is especially true for the highly individualized group among which Via Nova is working. One should expect that community formation in this context will have many network characteristics.

Pete Ward mentions four advantages of such a “network church”:<sup>19</sup> (1) informal relationships are more important for being church than the institutional and organisational dimensions of church, structured meetings, etcetera; (2) in a globalized world, determined by economical laws, new religious “products” will be easier to access for every congregation (e.g., the latest worship songs). Through this, countless Christians all over the world can profit from each other’s creativity, which will enrich congregational life considerably; (3) the leadership of the church is no longer able to control or even suffocate promising new developments on a local level. Everything will take place with far

<sup>16</sup> See Israel Galindo, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations: Discerning Church Dynamics* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2004), 21–22.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003). A Dutch example is Daniël de Wolf, *Jesus in de Millinx: woorden én daden in een Rotterdamse achterstandswijk* (Kampen: Kok, 2006), 41–57.

<sup>18</sup> Ulrich Beck, *What is Globalization?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 74.

<sup>19</sup> Pete Ward, *Liquid Church: A Bold Vision How to Be God’s People in Worship and Mission—A Flexible, Fluid Way of Being Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002).

less possibilities for control. Through this the church can easily spread out in various social groups; (4) the borders of the church will become less defined and formal. Instead of membership lists churches will have a communication network and relationships in which Christian love and mutual support will be ingredients of a continuing “stream”. Thus, the church can establish contacts with outsiders more easily, and in this way more people may be involved in the network called “church”.

I recognize many of these characteristics in the practice of church formation. However, it may be a little bit naïve of Ward only to put these bright sides forward. Critical questions can be asked at every point of these advantages. For example, Third World churches do not have access at all to those networks in which the latest worship songs circulate. Poor inner city dwellers have little opportunity to build their own network. It would not be difficult (and not quite incorrect) to label this view as a typical middle class ecclesiology. However, this is not yet a theological assessment of a church that operates as a network. Here, I suggest two theological considerations, which are important in my opinion. The first can be used to support a network ecclesiology, the second to assess it critically.

From a missiological perspective the new situation in the Netherlands is unique. Every previous missionary movement in this country—Willibrord and Boniface, the Reformation, the nineteenth-century Reveil movement—could rely on a certain sympathy or even support from the ruling powers. Besides, the last two movements worked in a nominal Christian context. All of this has changed now. Therefore, I think that we, when we try to find historical models to be church in a culture that is by and large alienated from church life, as we know it, must not find wisdom in those ecclesial traditions that were supported by the powers that be. We will have to look in the margins of history. Especially, I think of the “free church” tradition—early Puritans and Anabaptists.<sup>20</sup> In my opinion ecclesiological notions have been devel-

---

<sup>20</sup> By putting these two groups together I do not want to suggest that these church traditions were completely similar. The emphasis on free church formation by Mennonites and early Baptists [cf. Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Leicester: Authentic, 2005)] originated in the context of Luther's two Kingdom theology and was influenced by the jesuology of humanists like Erasmus of Rotterdam. Free church formation by the 16th Century Puritans was far more linked to Reformed covenant theology, especially in Bullinger's version [for this, see C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Comrie: oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer van het verbond in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1994), 313–314]. Here, God's initiative in the covenant of grace was more emphasised as the context and source of the

oped here, that can be of use now. These churches share some important characteristics that can be very relevant in a modern network society.<sup>21</sup>

First, they see the congregation as a *voluntary community of believers*.<sup>22</sup> They reject the distinction between a visible and an invisible church as an artificial one, developed so that people could be seen as church members, even if they did not show any willingness to follow Jesus. With regard to the covenant, their covenantal theology has developed more along the lines of contract philosophy (“covenanting”): people decide to form a community in the presence of God and they oblige themselves to be accountable towards each other. This may be a model that can be of use in church planting in a modern city, in which voluntary community formation is the only way in which a church can emerge. For example, we can think of different consecutive stages of commitment, with vows or even signing contracts.<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, they have an *egalitarian structure*. This implies among other things a “low” theology of the offices. Having said this, a closer look at the Reformed tradition to which most Dutch churches belong would be instructive. The true church is, according to Nicaea, one, holy, catholic and apostolic. But how do we know whether somewhere in the Netherlands (say, Amsterdam) a true church is taking shape? To answer this question the Reformation has given us some specific *notae ecclesiae*: pure preaching of the Word, pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline (*Confessio Belgica*, 29). John Howard Yoder points to the fact that these *notae* first and foremost are responsibilities of the *offices*. Their application does not concern the church as a community called by Christ, but their “super-structure”. When someone wants to see whether a certain church is “true”, he or she must listen to the pastor preaching, check the Eucharist, and evaluate the disciplinary procedures. But the question how many people attend worship, the intensity of their listening to sermons, the

---

human decision for community. However, these two traditions were much more comparable in their underlining of the human will as an important aspect of community formation, in their accent on sanctification (not happy with the distinction between an invisible and a visible church), and in their confessed independence of worldly powers.

<sup>21</sup> See also Stefan Paas, *Vrede stichten: politieke meditaties* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2007), 253–262.

<sup>22</sup> For criticism on *choice* as a constitutive criterion of church formation, see Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 223–224.

<sup>23</sup> I have elaborated upon this in Stefan Paas, *De werkers van het laatste uur: de inwijding van nieuwkomers in het christelijk geloof en in de christelijke gemeente* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2003), chapters 5–9.

question whether they can forgive their neighbours, the testimony of changed lives—apparently all of this does not belong to the definition of a true church.<sup>24</sup> Presently we can witness attempts to “repair” this by underlining notions like sharing the Gospel, service and community. In this way attention can be focused again on the actual *quality* of being church. For church formation in a major city the relevance of all this is evident. Modern networks are egalitarian and they consist of self-conscious people. Church formation implies that we must stimulate people to be accountable towards each other and it requires a strong emphasis on discipleship.<sup>25</sup>

Thirdly, “free churches” are usually *not organised in denominations*. I do not want to be an advocate of congregationalism here, but I do believe that denominations cannot be so strictly organised as they used to be—at least in the Netherlands. My country has become so fragmented and pluralistic that local churches from one denomination will face very different questions in different areas of the country. There will be far fewer opportunities to arrange matters from a central location, and perhaps we should not wish to do so. The first Christians were very reluctant to be centralists, as we can read in Acts 15. From a missionary perspective, making a new project accountable to denominational headquarters in every detail is not very helpful.

In a church-planting project many of these elements speak for themselves. An urgent matter for me is that the theological climate in the Netherlands be enriched by serious ecclesiological contributions from an “Anabaptist” or free-church angle. This will further the discussion and increase our resources to respond fundamentally to a changing missionary situation.

So, this first theological consideration may be used to support network thinking in an ecclesiological context. My second theological consideration is of a more critical nature. A network is usually seen as a complex of mutual relationships. As such it is an exchange of services. From this point of view it is primarily accessible for those people who can offer something. However, what about those who have nothing to offer? Jesus said that it is not hard to love your friends (Luke 6:32–35), but the core characteristic of Christian community is the *non-mutuality* of service. The prime example of this is love for those outside

---

<sup>24</sup> John Howard Yoder, “A People in the World”, in: idem, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids: Herald Press, 1994), 76.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Wilbert R. Shenk, “Believing without Belonging? Reflections on the Consultation”, *IRM* 92/365 (2003), 234–235.

(“enemies”), as well as inside, the community. The first Christians “had everything in common”, but this did not exclude that some of them gave more and others received more. A network that also wants to be a church must show who Jesus is. This means that there is a surplus of love: there is more to give than to receive. He, who did not come to be served but to serve, is the highest model of this unmutual love that is the characteristic of a Christian. Therefore, a new church in a city like Amsterdam must be a network to the extent that it relies on personal relationships and an egalitarian structure, with an emphasis on expertise and personal charisma rather than traditional authority.<sup>26</sup> However, this is only one side of the matter. A church that wants to be a network will be different than usual: typical of this network is that all relationships are triangular relationships—Christ mediates them. It is a network of people who have been liberated from their idols and who consider other people not as a means to their own ends. They have received more than any human being can give them.

How can we break through this almost natural mutuality of a network community? I mention two examples. First, from the very outset a strong diaconal emphasis should belong to every initiative of church planting. Attention within such an initiative cannot only be focused on people who attend its meetings. The inevitable decision for a “target group” must also lead to “local rootedness”—a vision for the place where one lives and gathers in worship.<sup>27</sup> Only in this way one can get involved in the lives of people who cannot afford the luxury of a network. Secondly, giving without an ulterior motive also means something for counselling. Especially new churches tend to attract all kinds of people with a sad ecclesial history. There is a real risk that those people will absorb all your time and energy, and you will drown in caring for people. When this happens, an important mindset to have is: “I will give these people only part of my time and attention. I do this without creating obligations. They do not have to pay me back in whatever respect”. Doing this also helps you to create boundaries for *yourself* and thus protect yourself. A leader, especially in church, must

---

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Henk Witte, “Van systeem naar netwerken: de sociale gestalte van de oecumene”, *WeZ* 33/2 (2004), 19.

<sup>27</sup> Commission on Urban Life and Faith, *Faithful Cities: A Call for Celebration, Vision and Justice* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2006), 3: “[T]here are still many ‘churches of place’ with strong local connections. This local rootedness is often very longstanding, encouraging a commitment to people that is tolerant of slow progress and assigns importance to particular relationships and the needs of specific people and groups”.

be free from the need to let his or her confidence be bolstered by people who *need* you so much. Pioneering is a vulnerable job and leads to constant attacks on your sense of comfort and security. There is a huge temptation to let yourself be confirmed by people who admire you and seek your attention. The consequence of this is a structure in which leaders and followers keep a firm grip on each other and drain each other slowly. However, when I give my time *freely*, without expecting attention, admiration or respect in return, I can also limit this relationship. I can process the possible anger or disappointment of the other person, when I let him or her know that I do not have time now or that other tasks need priority. Whenever the other is aware that he or she does not have any *power* over the leader, a deep awareness can grow of grace—what it means really to receive and really to give. Free leaders have free followers. This freedom can be lacking in a network. Often modern people experience that they can only gain their freedom by breaking out of mutual obligations. I believe that a Christian network community can show what freedom is within the field of relationships: freedom as bonds that are lovingly accepted. The key to this lies in the unconditional gift.

##### 5. *From Confessional Foundations to Mission and Values*

In our contemporary missionary context, and particularly in the practice of church planting, we also see another ecclesiological shift—from an accent on foundations to an accent on vision and values. At its core this concerns questions like: “What is a Christian? In which way are Christian practices all over the world related to each other?” In church history such questions have often been applied to even more specific matters: “What does it mean to be Reformed? How do Protestants and Catholics differ?” These questions have always been asked, but their answers are changing. Kathryn Tanner points to the fact that Christians usually gave answers that defined certain *contents* and *practices*. Christians believe different things than non-Christians, and they have different customs. Tanner shows that those answers seem very logical, but on further reflection they cannot be sustained easily. Christians very rarely agree on what they believe, even when they acknowledge each other as Christians. Moreover, Christian standpoints shift in the course of history. For example, was Cyprian’s view of conversion the same as Billy Graham’s? And what about their opinions of the last things? If they would not agree, how then can we determine whether a

theology of the eschaton is “Christian” at all? Regarding practices, we can ask: are there truly things that can only be done by Christians and not by anyone else? Even if this would be true: is it possible to define such Christian cultural characteristics, apart from the context in which Christians live? Is, for example, eating beef “Christian”? Perhaps in India, where eating beef can be a strong symbol of Christian freedom for someone who is converted from Hinduism. But in the Netherlands this practice is obviously not Christian at all. Some would say, on the contrary. Tanner thinks that views of Christianity that present it as a clearly bounded group identity with its “own” practices are typically modern. It is impossible to render her very sophisticated statement here, but it is interesting to see where she seeks the typical “Christian” identity of postmodern Christians. For her, this identity is a matter of *style* rather than *content*. Christians distinguish themselves by a particular way of dealing with creation and each other and by a shared interest in items as the cross, the sacraments, and etcetera. However, they do not necessarily think the same about these shared objects of interest. Christian identity “is more a matter of how than of what”.<sup>28</sup> Thus, this identity is not something solid and eternal, but it needs elaboration and reshaping on the road.

For many church planters this is familiar (and not only for them). Our age is the age of post-Evangelicals, post-Reformed, etcetera.<sup>29</sup> This is partly due to a general cultural shift to a more contingent and fragmentary worldview. But in terms of church planting, it is also due to the two previous shifts I mentioned. The dominance of the marketing metaphor makes it more important to agree on targets and a mission to be achieved than on foundations or a point of departure. The shift to a network ecclesiology renders relationships and social skills more important than knowledge and confessional solidity. Therefore, in new church types more energy is invested in defining a clear mission statement and some values than in a detailed confessional statement. The emphasis is more (although not exclusively) on “how?” and “whereto?” than on “what?” and “from where?” Someone I know, from a strict Calvinistic background, works in a flourishing church planting project in Rotterdam. This church explicitly links itself to the Reformed tradition.

---

<sup>28</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Guides to Theological Inquiry; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress 1997), 112.

<sup>29</sup> A good example is Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Cf. also Noort et al., *Als een kerk opnieuw begint*, 278–281 (“Is the denomination passé?”).

However, he wrote to me: “In my opinion a larger urban network in our time can hardly consist of people who cross the same doctrinal *t*'s and dot the same doctrinal *i*'s. In our church I am aware of a multitude of theological opinions, especially in the minor points. We clearly distinguish type-A truths and type-B truths. Unity is kept by a common vision on the major points of creation, fall, salvation by Christ, the work of the Spirit, expectation of God's future. But on details of the last days, theology of baptism, healing by prayer etc. we think differently and we let this happen. We even encourage it, in order to teach people to look for tolerance and love, rather than similarity and uniformity”. This is very familiar in our own community in Amsterdam. New participants give a brief vow. The text of this promise does refer to a theological core content (basically the Apostolic Creed), but most of it is filled with specific references to the style we expect members to cherish in their relationships with the Bible and with each other. What is central is not what someone believes exactly about the Bible, but everyone promises to be accountable on a Biblical basis. This means that everyone will take arguments from the Bible very seriously; he or she will not stop conversation on this point. As for mutual relationships, this is not about avoiding conflicts, but about what one will do when conflicts happen (and they will happen!). The vow contains promises referring to a culture of peace, dialogue and reconciliation, but not so much to a culture of agreement on all kinds of issues.

In my opinion, the strength of a traditional congregation is exactly this large extent of agreement and a certain uniformity. This means stability and clarity. However, the dark side of this is a regular lack of loving relationships, because of the eagerness to define who is or is not “Reformed”, “Evangelical”, or “Bible believing”. Traditional congregations often find it hard to deal with the “other”, with someone who is different. Another downside is that many congregations can easily tell what they believe exactly about a number of issues, but they find it much more difficult to say where exactly they are going. We could say that there is a lack of evangelical style and Kingdom-oriented mission. Perhaps traditional churches can learn something here from missionary pioneer projects. As long as everyone must agree on all possible points of argument, the church will not move forward. A common search for a shared goal, with the explicit intention to further Christian virtues of grace, humility, dialogue and forgiveness, will not solve every difference, but enables movement.



## 6. *Conclusion*

Missionary pioneering in cities such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam is important. In order to theologize creatively we must make ourselves vulnerable. We have to enter new contexts in which old, well-known answers are not so relevant anymore. I am convinced that we, to stay fresh and inspired, need to look very purposefully for those contexts, to live and work there. Seen from this perspective, church planting is the Research & Development department of the church. Eventually, there can be a unique contribution to the global church. It appears that Western individualism will determine our world more and more, especially in the cities. If this is true, it is crucial for the church—in the Netherlands and in other countries—to attempt seriously the contextualization of the Christian faith in this urban culture.