

Farewell speech Reverend De Fijter

Moderator, members of the General Synod, other persons present,

As your former moderator I start this afternoon with the first sentence that was spoken by the new moderator. He said: *'There is now no moderator anymore that can deprive me of the right to speak'*. You understand: I am in an utterly vulnerable position.

This Friday April 24th we are still a week away from next Friday, the 1st of May 2009. On that date it is exactly 5 years ago the Protestant Church came into being.

Today is not the time to look back. But I do want to recall the date to memory on this day of my good-bye to you; because on that day also the first synod board composed of board members of the three churches entered. I was the only new member; let us say the renewing element in the synod board then. Now, 5 years later, I am the only one who remained of that starting-time of the board. With my farewell a period is closed, that I elsewhere referred to as the 'bridal days of our church'.

I am grateful that I have been allowed to do this work as the first vice-moderator of our church for three years and now these last two years as moderator. These years – and the upbeat of the origin of our church – have meant a lot to me. From nearby I have witnessed this special period in our church history. In you, the synod, I thank the church for giving me the opportunity to give my input in the search for a road for our church.

There is a lot of dismal about the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. According to some the church is 'invisible', not clear enough. Further – so they think – the church has only been busy putting a new membership administration into place and she is still doing that.

Whoever goes through the long list of themes the general synod has addressed since her origin comes to the conclusion that there is no need for dismal. Such an overview leads to another and much more balanced view. The general synod was not only discussing the questions on missionary renewal, but also the violence against women.

The synod was not only discussing church buildings, but also the concern for agriculture.

She did not just speak about the new Hymnbook, but also about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

There was an extensive discussion of article 36 of the Dutch Profession and a synod-broad discussion on the memorandum 'Christ, our hope'.

I am pleased that this afternoon there are representatives of the Gereja Kristen Indonesia Nederland (GKIN) in our midst, with whom our church entered into an association. I also think of the association agreement with the Covenant of free Evangelical Churches in the Netherlands and of the new dialogue with the people of the United Evangelical- and Pentecost congregations. During these years was spoken about the call up of Accra and on the catechism memorandum. And we could go on like this for a while.

Of fundamental importance was the acceptance of the vision-note 'Learning to live out of wonder'. With that the Protestant Church chose a specific course in view of the future; because we can approach the future of the church in two ways:

1. That of the accountant, who cuts his coat according to his cloth and takes his bearings from forecasts and research of religion sociologists.
2. The other manner is that of reflection on the own identity of the church, her content and shape.

To be clear: we need the accountants and the religion sociologists, they justly remind us that the Protestant Church can not go on being the church with 2.303.000 members, 2153 congregations and about 2200 reverents according to the level of today. But our church will – like the picture of society is changing - have to deal with greater numbers elderly people (in itself there is nothing wrong with that) and smaller numbers of youth. We should therefore think on structures for the church that are cut to size for the future.

Today you worked hard on the skilful report of Professor Veerman 'Hand on the plow'. The ongoing evaluation of the Church Order as well aims for more flexible structures to be a Presbyterian synodal church.

But if we are under the illusion that we have answered the challenges as predicted by the sociologists with that, we are wrong.

It will have to be about the church being-church. This morning Professor Veerman used the image of the binders of the church-building to indicate structures. In this connection I use the image of the foundation. If the Church is a church-building, than Christ is the foundation. And the church should do nothing else but to be obedient to her calling: the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and in such a way that the people of today are appealed by it. The church does not do that as continuation of the culture, but in discussion with the culture.

Whoever takes culture as his standard, will not get further than a pluralistic vision in which everybody has his own very private truth. There can hardly be a shared hope, a shared expectation.

In our culture as well the church dares to bring the message of the God, which let Himself be rejected and crucified in Jesus Christ. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows (Isaiah 53:3 NIVUK). In this culture as well, which is so dictated by appearance, by achievement, by charisma and glamour, the church dares to speak about our God who went the way of degradation, of mockery, yes, of death. The Lord God does not ask if people meet their targets, but He is the God who is with us especially in failure and failing. That is the only program the church has, in view of the future; and through which the church has future. Just because the Crucified One is the Resurrected One. After Easter we keep saying it: 'The Lord has truly risen'. A good thing too that even "De Volkskrant"¹ wanted to spread that message.

In the light of all of this it is important that the church ministries are also developing a new missionary passion. With a lot of enthusiasm is worked on our youth movement, JOP and so many other things. Respect for that! But should we have the illusion that this would safeguard the future of the church, we are mistaken.

The church only has a future, when she knows to be sent into this world by her Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The only has perspective, when the body which the church is, consists of members who know Jesus Christ, love Him and know of themselves to be saved in Him.

Because the future of the church does not depend on our policies, on our vision-development and on our synod reports. I say that today in the midst of your conference-circuit not to discourage you. On the contrary. I say: do your utmost to develop vision. That scaffolding work is very necessary.

But know, Synod, meanwhile we in our country have learned by bitter experience that our society is not doable. I am of the opinion that this is also a school for the church. We also have to learn that the church is not doable. I have had to learn that in my journey through the church....

In fact the church is shape of comfort. With that I do not mean to say that the church is always good at comforting people (yes that too, I hope), but most of all she is shape of the comfort in the way the Heidelberg Confession starts: 'In life and death she is the property of Jesus Christ'. That is what matters. That gives deep wonder. Because it prevents that in stead of warm blood, cold vinegar streams through our veins, here and there mixed with bile.

Belonging to Jesus Christ is a matter of deep surprise, eternal gladness, joy! To my regret I have to say that we are sometimes loosing sight of this in various institutions of the church.

We have to question one and other critically, of course. We are even called to wrestle on the truth. We do not let go of each other in this, because we are not for nothing Jacob's children, who hold on, because of the blessing. But in our wrestling with each other for truth, for wisdom, for understanding, we sometimes loose the surprise and the gladness.

One of the most important issues in our being-church is that we do not arm ourselves with willingness to listen and the sincere desire to really listen to what the other has to say to me, to us. On the contrary, there is – before you realize – mistrust, cynicism and sourishness. If we sometimes treat the other like that, how could we hear the voice of the Lord God Who, in His Son, cared for us.

Together we stand for the same cause; I want to emphasize that today.

We have the same calling.

We face the same challenges.

We may live from the same sources.

Yet we often do not succeed to wrestle with one and other as Jacob's children.

I wonder: could it have something to do with the deep, vague displeasure that has come sneaking into our society?

A society in which is spoken more and more about 'them' in The Hague, who have 'to sort things out among each other'. A society where you are obviously only heard if you put your one-liners forward as sharply and bluntly as possible? Where 'they' and 'we' are more and more opposite of one and other?

Unfortunately I sometimes see the same tendency in church. That tendency becomes visible when the synod starts to look like a parliament following the government critically. However the synod is not parliament and the synod board is not the council of ministers or the cabinet. **The general synod is a place of encounter of the church.** There office bearers from the base of the church – that is from Groningen to Limburg – meet with each other. In that official meeting we come together under invocation of Gods Name and the prayer for guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the ultimate place where is sought and wrestled together for wisdom, understanding, truth. The other sound the office bearer makes to be heard is not a 'strange' sound in advance if it does not fit my theological point of view immediately. The 'other voice in the synod' does not sound false in advance.

Because we can not manage to listen to and speak to another in a great part of our church-history, so many separated churches originated from Reformation. Within one denomination there are modalities² as an attempt to

¹ De Volkskrant is a Dutch news paper.

² "Modality" is the Dutch ecclesiastical term for diverse faith-based movements in the Protestant Church.

join voices, to strengthen visions. The danger is that all sorts of compartments develop. Something similar to the chained railway coaches, where everyone is mainly occupied with the travelers in the own compartment.

How are we synod?

To my opinion we are synod, we are church together, by clean cut discussion. Raising firm objections, but from the trust: finally it is not up to me, nor to the other, but to Him who is our Head. On that trust in Him depends our being-church.

That way we can be open to the society around us: not convulsive, but open and without fear. Also society, the world, is not in our hands, but in His. That way we can be church together with the other churches: curious about what they have to offer from their relation with the Lord God.

I am grateful for the good and open conversations we had with the Pentecostal- and the Evangelical movement; I am as well grateful for the positive responses to the idea to form a forum in the Netherlands of protestant churches, a 'National Synod'. On the base of our churches – of our church as well – developed a search for each other. I see that also in the many, friendly contacts with many in the Roman Catholic Church. How good it is to have cardinal Simonis and the bishops Van Burgstede and De Korte present this afternoon. I very much appreciate the presence of Archbishop Vercaemmen of the Old-Catholic Church.

If now even a lector from the Gereformeerde Bond³ says that a 'National Synod' which only exists of the children from the Reformation is too little catholic and calls up to include the Roman Catholic Church/Old-Catholic Church than I look at first surprised. But at the same time I realize that *after* the National Synod we will have to make a start for **a broad National Ecumenical Ecclesiastical Council of all Christians in our country**. If the first has to be in Dordrecht (as in 1618-1619) and the second in Noordwijkerhout (as in 1968-1970) will remain to be seen. Clear is that we need each other as Christians in this country more than ever.

Synod, I am always touched by you, and in you all those office-bearers and congregation-members who devote themselves with heart and soul for Gods church and for His Kingdom. In the past years I had a lot of support from all those volunteers who devoted themselves with so much love for our church. I want to thank you with all my heart for that.

When I entered as moderator I advocated for the battle against analphabetism of Christian faith. Retiring I advocate to make the intense joy visible which belonging to Jesus Christ in life and death brings with it. I plead for the – as it is called in mission – 'the ministry of encouragement'. I know how difficult it sometimes is to keep your head over the water as a congregation. How hard it is to persevere and go on with passion. Brothers and sisters, encourage one and other. Tell the reverend who is hardly keeping up in the congregation, to an office-bearer in his or her devotion in the local congregation and the over-local work: we are in the hands of Him, Who conquered the powers.

Finally: Synod, I thank you for the trust you put in me during my vice-presidency and subsequently as moderator. Take good care of your new moderator and synod board. I wish them well. Thanks to the synod board. You have always carried me. Yes, I know I have not always been the easiest and quietest of your company. Thanks to the employees of the church-ministries.

Dr. Sjaak van 't Kruis, I mention your name and that of Mr. Margreet Willemse separately. Without your affectionate involvement and devotion I would not have been able to do my job. Margreet, I am happy that you are able to be here this afternoon while I know that you are not well yet. Gods blessing be with you.

You are not aware of it: but if my dear wife Riet and our children would not have helped and encouraged me – yes, they all have the gift of encouragement and with it that of evident criticism – I would not have been able to hold on for these 5 years. Many thanks dear Riet and children.
Synod, may the Lord God be very near to us all.

Gerrit de Fijter, 23rd of April a.D. 2009

³ Gereformeerde Bond is one of the modalities.