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The Netherlands

REFORMED AND LUTHERAN CHURCHES: Netherlands Reformed Church; Reformed Churches in the Netherlands; Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands

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Since 1969 two Dutch churches (the NRC and RCN) have been participating in the so-called "Together on the Way" (TW -- in Dutch: "Samen op Weg") process. In 1985 the synod of the ELC decided to join the negotiations. The future name of the united church is to be United Protestant Church in the Netherlands (UPCN). Historical information can be found in the last survey (The Ecumenical Review, vol. 47, 1995, no. 1, pp.78-86) and in the report of the Jamaica 1995 consultation (T.F. Best ed., Built Together, pp.100-105). The international news quarterly of the NRC, RCN and ELC, Uniting reports on recent developments in English, Spanish and Indonesian. This article is mainly based on the Uniting issues of 1995 and 1996.

I should like to give an update about the church order and organizational developments, of which those at the local level deserve special attention. I will conclude with some reflections on the present situation.

Secularization

The context of TW is characterized by secularization. The membership of all three TW churches has fallen in past years. The total number of NRC members (communicant, baptized, other) dropped from 2,623,414 in 1990 to 2,311,190 in 1995, a decline of 11.9 percent. The number of "their members" especially dropped sharply: from 751,487 in 1990 to 578,319 in 1995. This category is largely formed by the so-called "birth members", those who are born of one or more NRC parents but have not been baptized or confirmed (this is a category unknown to the RCN and the ELC). Another main cause of the decline in NRC membership is ageing, which has taken place a great deal faster than in the total Dutch population. The number of RCN members has been falling since 1974, when there were 879,038. In one year, 1994, the number dropped to 740,468, representing 17.1 percent. The ELC has 57 congregations, in all about 20,000 members.

Of course secularization is not just a matter of membership figures. For instance, the Dutch know little about the meaning of Christian festivals. Many believers are themselves unaware of what their religious festivals commemorate -- let alone those people who have not been in touch with the gospel for some generations now! A recent survey showed that no less than one in three believers do not know what is celebrated at Pentecost. The other Christian festivals are more familiar to most people in this group: 91 percent know the meaning of Christmas, 71 percent that of Easter, and 69 percent that of Ascension.

The church order process

After the preliminary approval of a new church order (November 1993 in first reading) a next "trio synod" (i.e. a joint assembly of the NRC, RCN and ELC synods) to deal with church order issues was planned for May 1995. Its purpose was to have a first discussion of the ordinances (by-laws, implementing regulations) which went with the draft church order for the UPCN.

But in March 1995 problems arose and the plans had to be abandoned for the time being. The NRC first wanted to arrange matters concerning the "Together on the Way" process at their own synod meeting in June. The two other TW churches agreed with this, because there seemed insufficient support at that moment, mainly in the NRC, for TW. The immediate reason for the postponement of the assembly were letters from 24 NRC "classical assemblies" (explanation to follow), requesting that discussion of the ordinances be deferred until NRC positions on the TW process had become clear. Discussions were originally postponed until January 1996 when it was to be clear how people in the three churches had reacted to the draft church order of the UPCN as such. Later on, plans had to be changed again due to ongoing unrest in the NRC (see below).

Thus, the June 1995 assembly of the NRC synod was entirely dominated by Together on the Way. After an elaborate discussion -- in which the differences were once again all too apparent -- synod decided to meet the "concerned" NRC members half way by promising that at the end of that year there would first be an internal NRC discussion on the advice of the Commission for Church Order Affairs regarding the reactions from NRC congregations to the draft church order. This discussion would have to make it clear how much support there was for TW in the NRC, and what this meant for the NRC itself. Another decision of the NRC synod was that the

"unification decision" would have to be taken by a two-thirds majority of the synod. This unification decision, the final decision on the way towards unification of the three churches, will only be taken when the church order with corresponding ordinances for the future united church has been completely approved. It was already laid down in the NRC church order that the approval of this new church order must take place in a synod with double representation. But the NRC church order does not yet contain a provision for taking a decision on unification. It has now been decided that an "additional clause" will be drawn up which prescribes a two-thirds majority. This clause has to be submitted "for consideration" to the classical assemblies. Then, if so desired, it will be ratified in a second reading by the synod. At this moment, therefore, it is not yet certain whether the unification decision does indeed need to be taken by a two-thirds majority of the NRC synod.

In May 1995 the new general synod of the RCN decided to meet in June, shortly after the June assembly of the NRC synod, in order to evaluate the outcome of the deliberations of the major TW partner. Many members of the RCN synod voiced their concern about the possible slowing-down of the unification process, arguing that delay in fact could decrease the commitment of local congregations and demoralize staff employees on the national and regional levels who have been working for unification for so long. Eventually the synod took several unanimous decisions in line with the outcome of the NRC synod, but underlining the need for unequivocal and clear objectives, including a time schedule for the years to come.

In the ELC also concerns were voiced in spring 1995. An extraordinary general church assembly was held in March (in an assembly all Lutheran congregations are represented), which had been requested by ten concerned Lutheran congregations. They believed that the draft church order for the future united church was too backward-looking and that the few Lutheran elements in the church order are hard to find. However, a majority of some 250 persons present voted against a motion to reject the draft church order. A motion to pay more attention to an alliance of "living" Lutheran congregations received sufficient support. In the meantime, Lutherans who are afraid of losing their identity in the united church have founded the Association for the Preservation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Netherlands and Its Congregations.

When a global survey of the reactions from the congregations to the draft church order was submitted as an interim information report to the Lutheran synod, which met 9-10 June, it became clear that the majority of the Lutheran congregations had approved the draft church order. Also, the Lutheran World Federation had reacted positively. In an extra meeting early in September, Lutherans discussed the present situation of TW and it was again agreed that the continuation of existing Lutheran churches is a necessary condition for the participation of the ELC in Together on the Way. But in the draft church order the Lutherans see enough continuity with the Lutheran tradition to guarantee the continuation of existing Lutheran congregations, and with their own spirituality within the UPCN.

Later in 1995, the NRC and the RCN drew up a survey of the reactions in congregations, churches and classes to the draft church order. From this survey the boards concluded that the trio synod in January 1996 would have to discuss first whether there is sufficient support in the official assemblies of the three church communities for unification as envisaged in the draft church order. This implied a further delay in the church order process.

The RCN church assemblies largely agree with the draft church order. Only a few are entirely opposed to it, mainly from fear that the confessional character of the church will be lost if this church order is approved.

Although the NRC reactions are less positive, a majority of the NRC wishes to pursue the path of unification. A survey of the reactions to the draft church order showed that there is not enough support in the NRC classical assemblies for the unchanged continuation of the TW process. However, there is sufficient support for intensification and development of cooperation in the TW structure. According to the NRC committee for Church Order Affairs (COA), which surveyed the NRC reactions, the TW process could be continued if two important conditions were met: the draft church order must offer enough space to "pursue one's own forms of church life within the joint church" and no limit should be placed on the time within which the unification must be realized.

The NRC synod adopted this advice of the COA, thus clearly indicating that it wanted to proceed with TW, and that unification remains the final goal. This ended the idea of replacing integration by federation as an intermediate step or final model, and in fact proved to be a major ???. In many cases, as the COA observed, the request for a federation should be seen as no more than a request for more time to grow closer to each other. The advice of the COA, too, was included in the trio synod of January.

An opposite feeling was voiced by the synod of the ELC shortly before the end of 1995. It passed a motion calling on the partner churches in the TW process to state "unambiguously" that they still intend to unify in the United Protestant Church in the Netherlands (UPCN) within the foreseeable future. The entire Lutheran synod thus wished to express its dissatisfaction, broadly felt in the Lutheran church, with the slow tempo of the unification process of the three TW churches.

New decisions in early 1996 actually met these ELC concerns. In January the trio synod approved a step-by-step plan which establishes the "timetable for the church order". This decision brought forward the date by which the draft church order for the UPCN must be ready. By approving this plan the trio synod has undertaken to incorporate the reactions in an adapted text of the church order in 1997. But it also became clear that the whole church order process would take considerably more time than expected. Not only the fundamental church order and ordinances have to be decided on, but in various fields of activity additional and very specific arrangements and regulations have to be prepared. Civil law will also require additional procedures. At the moment most insiders do not expect a final unification decision to be taken before the year 2002.

Nevertheless, the conservative wing of the NRC in particular continued to argue that the process is going too fast and too far. One NRC minister even left the synod because in his view it failed to listen sufficiently to the objections in NRC classes to the TW process. Things became even more complicated due to an internal NRC development. Already in 1991 the synod had decided that as of 1 January 1996 there would be only one form of administration instead of three. The introduction of this uniform system of administration entailed that, from 1996 on, in all congregations "churchwardens" (i.e. those in charge of financial management) would be subject to the authority of the church council. Some congregations interpreted this system of administration -- with dismay -- as an instrument for promoting the TW process. They were opposed to a future situation in which their property will belong to the UPCN. To safeguard their own property, various congregations therefore even placed their possessions in a foundation, and 73 church councils took legal action against the decision of synod. They lost the case, after which 61 councils appealed to a higher court. But this appeal does not temporarily invalidate the new regulation.

However, these developments did not further slow down the process. Discussions on the ordinances could begin. Between September and November 1996, almost two hundred NRC, RCN and Lutheran synod members studied a large package of ordinances that go with the draft church order of the UPCN. These by-laws, drawn up by the church order study group of the three TW churches, form the practical rules for daily routine in the congregations. Comments will be shared with the trio synod assembly in January 1997. If everything happens according to plan that trio synod will approve a set of ordinances "in first reading". For May 1997 a second round of discussion about the (fundamental) church order is scheduled.

The organizational procedure

The synods of the three Together on the Way churches are not only responsible for the confession and the church order of the future united church, they are also ordinary "employers" of hundreds of staff members. Besides a new church order, the unification also involves a new labour organization. This integration of the supra-local organizations had to be prepared by a special task force.

At the end of October 1994 the trio synod had approved the report "People and Structures", which outlined the structure of the national and regional organization of the future United Protestant Church in the Netherlands. The new organization should be more "market-oriented", and the principle of supply and demand should play an important role. The report was given to the boards of synod "as a work assignment". On this basis a project plan was drawn up for the penultimate phase of the integration process of the three churches, in which the shape of the future organization were to be marked as specifically as possible. Commissions started working together with administrators, and project teams with officials, to detail the structure of the supra-local organization of the future church.

At first it seemed that the two areas (church order and labour organization) could run parallel. But as mentioned before, the discussion of the ordinances had been deferred until January 1997. On the principle that the structure follows the church order, this meant that work on the labour organization could not continue either and that reflection was necessary.

The trio synod failed to resolve this problem at the October 1995 assembly. A decision on the churches' administrative offices was deferred until January 1996. The problem was that some synod members had serious objections to the proposal of synodal boards to dismantle the project organization which was preparing the integration of the respective labour organizations. The boards held that the project organization no longer served its purpose because the unification of the churches had been postponed as a result of delays in the timetable for achieving the church order. But supporters of the TW process did not want the most successful and least controversial part of the integration process to be struck off.

However, in January 1996 the trio synod decided that the Together on the Way churches should continue on the path towards unification. The trio synod approved a report "Further on the Way Together", of the three boards. In this new report the boards indicated how the supra-local organizations could best cooperate within the existing church order frameworks. The structure report "People and Structures", which had been previously approved, remained the touchstone here.

Central accommodation was seen as being of decisive importance for the cooperation between the national organizations. Since decisions of the trio synod always need to be approved in the individual synods, the NRC synod devoted another lengthy discussion to the subject. Nevertheless, the decision was ratified with 19 dissenting votes out of 75.

The trio synod of May 1996 tabled a first concrete proposal for a central location, and in October 1996 it was decided in principle to move all national offices to Utrecht, which decision will probably be implemented in 1998 if all negotiations succeed in time. In the following interim period -- from the move to Utrecht until the official unification of the three churches -- a cooperative structure will work under the responsibility of the three synods.

Final decision-making on the organizational process will take place only after the church order for the UPCN has been approved in the second reading, and the corresponding ordinances in the first reading. The trio synod held that integration of the supra-local organizations of the three churches involved is desirable in any case, regardless of possible changes or decisions regarding the new church order. The proposed structure is flexible enough to be adapted to such changes, according to the trio synod.

The local level TW originally was, and still is, first of all a grassroots movement.

Over the years, the number of officially approved federation agreements on the local level has risen to about 150. Measured by the number of congregations, this means that about 9 percent of the NRC congregations and about 17.5 percent of the RCN congregations are officially federated. ELC congregations hardly participate, among other reasons because of their size. The form which the federations take varies considerably. There are about 75 federations in which congregations with only one minister are involved. But the number of approved federation agreements is not a good criterion for the extent to which congregations are "Together on the Way". There are many congregations which work together without formalizing this cooperation in a federation agreement. Several of them have called on congregations to send a letter to the synod members. At the end of June 1995 the synodal offices had already received more than 500 letters, largely from congregations which in one way or another are Together on the Way.

In fact, everybody agrees that the federated congregations should not be the victims of this delay. At present these congregations are facing many practical problems because they are still formally bound to the rules of both churches involved. For instance, they work with different sources of funding and different accounting departments, although in practice these matters have become integrated. The synod therefore urged the joint boards to make haste in putting forward proposals outlining how the obstacles for federated congregations, especially with regard to member registration, can be removed. The trio synod therefore discussed a memorandum which listed the main problems. These concern, among other things, geographical boundaries which do not coincide, the sending of double delegations to the federated classical assemblies, and the various systems of assigning quotas. The problems were identified and solutions initiated. A number of difficulties can be solved by giving proper information to the TW congregations. Other problems can only be solved by new (provisional) church order provisions. Concrete proposals are expected to be presented to the trio synod soon.

Some final observations

Where 1995 was a year of unexpected and regrettable delay, 1996 seems to have brought a new impetus to the unification process, both in the formulation of a new church order as well as in the design of a joint structure of the three churches involved. It took time to understand the dynamics of a process like this. Those in favour of the process had to realize that, for procedural and legal reasons, a longer road has to be taken than they had expected. Those who oppose TW had to understand that, in fact, the point of no return has already been reached. Although final decisions are still to be taken, withdrawal from the process as such may be regarded as impossible.

Differences in attitude and "culture" play an important role. For instance, the time-honoured RCN approach to taking decisions and carrying them out might to a certain extent be harmful to the church in the TW process. On the other hand, the NRC decided to investigate whether the NRC classical assemblies, like the synod, feel that the church's way of working and life need to be renewed. This was decided by the NRC synod in its November 1995 assembly after publication of a policy plan "Renewal and Continuation". The result conjures up the image of "a diligent and well-meaning organization which cannot say no and consequently runs the risk of working in a fragmentary way and with outdated means because it does not have enough room to invest in radical renewal". So there is a clear need for an outlook which can serve as a guideline for the operational work. The policy plan gives impetus to this by mentioning a number of important threats to the church, which at the same time can be seen as opportunities or challenges: secularization, individualization and the new spirituality. The plan also indicates the following priorities: development of network facilities using the new media, stimulation of congregations to exchange knowledge and experiences, development of a view of renewed spirituality and of theological scientific research and education, and renewal of the supervision and organizational style of the supra-local organization.

Will other churches join the TW process in due course? Evangelical groups and the established Protestant churches are indeed coming closer together. Since early 1995, the TW process includes some "guests". The Alliance of Free Evangelical Congregations (AFEC) was the first. Representatives of the AFEC are present in the synod of the three denominations; they have the right to speak but not to vote. The AFEC is a loose confederation of congregations, which seceded from the NRC in the last century. The approximately fifty congregations already have close relations with the NRC and the RCN, as is shown by the tradition of pulpit exchange and joint church services.

An invitation to become involved as guests in the TW process was also sent to two churches in which Dutch people with a Moluccan background assemble, the Moluccan Evangelical Church (MEC) and the Emergency Congregation of the Moluccan Protestant Church in the Netherlands (ECMPCN). Both churches -- which are cooperating more closely with each other, too -- reacted positively. This decision also marks an important change in relationships between NRC, RCN, MEC, ECMPCN and the PGI (the Indonesian Council of Churches). On 7 March 1995 in Jakarta a joint agreement was signed in which the denominations involved declare their willingness to enter into an official ecumenical relationship with each other. The agreement is supposed to stimulate the dialogue between Indonesian churches and Moluccan churches in the Netherlands.

Let me repeat my conclusion in Built Together: this might be an important development, also in terms of the mission of the church today in our society. In a way it could be regarded as an implementation of art. X/4 of the draft church order, which reads: "With a view to the fulfillment of its vocation, the congregation makes grateful use, in a relationship of reciprocity, of insights and experiences offered to it by congregations of which the members come from different cultures."