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## **The Netherlands**

TOGETHER ON THE WAY: Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC); Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN); Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (ELC)

### **"Together on the Way"**

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Two of the Dutch churches involved (the NRC and the RCN) have been participating in this process for about thirty years now. The synod of the ELC decided to join the negotiations in 1985. From the early 1990s onwards final negotiations about the structure and the church order of the future united church, as well as about the necessary labour organization, have been on the agenda of the synods involved. This unification process is commonly known as the "Together on the Way" process (TW: Dutch: "Samen op Weg", SoW).

The international news quarterly of NRC, RCN and ELC (see address at end of paper), has been reporting on developments in English, Spanish and Indonesian for a number of years now. The TW-churches will also soon make the information easily available for a wider circle on their website. For this survey, I have relied on this information. I will analyze it and interpret it from the perspective indicated above, however.

### **Introduction: What's in a name?**

In my earlier survey article (ER, April 1997) I wrote: "The future name of the united church is to be the United Protestant Church in the Netherlands (UPCN)." At the end of 1996 this indeed seemed to be beyond dispute, although final decisions still had to be taken. However, two years later this very issue is again high on the agenda of church unification in the Netherlands. What is even worse: discussions have reached a deadlock. Where we got used to speaking of the "future UPCN", we now have to refrain from that indication. The correct wording is now: "the future united church" or "the TW churches". This survey is not only meant to report on the developments in 1997 and 1998 which finally lead to this deadlock, but will also try to analyze the underlying dynamic of Dutch church unification. After some introductory remarks, an update on the church order and the organizational directions will be given and I will conclude with some reflections on the present situation.

### **Framework**

On 1 January 1998 the total number of members (confirmed, baptized and others) of the TW churches was 2,859,794. The churches distinguish between confirmed members and baptized members: "confirmed" members are those who have been baptized and have made a confession of faith; "baptized" members are those who are connected with one of the churches by baptism only. There is also a small category of "guest members", persons belonging to another church but participating in the church life of one of the TW churches (for instance, through mixed marriages). The NRC and ELC also recognize a category of "others", and they too have been included in the total number above.

In 1990 this number was 3,438,275. So from January 1990 to January 1998 membership has dropped by 17 percent. The decrease was greatest among the Evangelical Lutheran members (-29 percent) and smallest among the RCN members (-10 percent). To be more precise, the figures show that the number of baptisms and confessions of faith is on the decline in the three churches. The number of solemnizations of marriage in the churches is also dropping. The total number of ministers working in congregations is 2414 (excluding those in education, etc.), 1445 of them belonging to the NRC, 930 to the RCN, and 41 to the ELC. This number remained on the same level as in 1990.

These figures illustrate that the context of TW is characterized by secularization. Another important cause of this decline in membership is ageing, which has taken place at a much faster rate in the TW churches than in the total Dutch population.

TW is, first of all, a grassroots movement. That is where its power has been manifest over the last decades. In the meantime, the number of officially approved federation agreements on the local level has risen beyond 200. But this number in itself is not a good criterion for the extent to which congregations are in itself "Together on the Way". Many congregations work together without formalizing this cooperation in a federation agreement.

Federated congregations, however, are still facing many practical problems because they remain formally bound to the rules of both churches involved - for instance, geographical boundaries sometimes do not coincide, and there are different systems for assigning quotas.

### **The church order trajectory**

The TW process in the 1990s has been mainly characterized by the process of establishing a set of church order regulations for the future united church. In 1993 a basic church order (some churches would probably say: constitution) was approved preliminarily, evaluating the ecclesiological and juridical outlines of the church to come. On that basis more specific laws (ordinances or by-laws, and in addition to that more detailed general regulations, rules for transition, etc.) have to be passed by the synods.

The joint assembly of synods of the NRC, RCN and ELC approved of the ordinances for the future united church at the end of January 1997. All kinds of matters are regulated in these by-laws. To mention some examples: how congregations are formed, how office-bearers are elected, what the task of the church council is, how a marriage is consecrated, how the financial affairs in the congregation should be organized. The assembly was well prepared: the synod members had already studied the by-laws in mixed groups between September and December 1996. Their comments had been incorporated in a revised text by the church order working group of the joint churches. Thanks to these preparations a large number of by-laws could be approved without further discussion. One of the few exceptions to this was the text about the "consecration" of marriages and the "benediction" of other life relationships. There was a lengthy debate about this, discussing whether the same word could and should be used for the involvement of the church both in marriages and in other life relationships. The meeting decided (with over thirty dissenting votes) that the possibility of blessing (Dutch: *zegenen*) other life relationships will be incorporated in the by-laws, but a proposal to "bless" marriages too (instead of "solemnizing" - Dutch: *inzegenen*) them was not accepted. The majority of the NRC synod voted against it.

At the request of a number of synod members, the church order working group promised that civil law specialists would examine the text of the by-laws. The entire package of by-laws was eventually passed by dissenting votes to 18.

According to the current rules, the decisions still needed to be ratified by the separate synodical assemblies. This happened without further delay. Next, the texts were sent to the classical assemblies and church councils, so that they could give their opinions before the end of 1998. Not surprisingly, a large pile of letters with reactions from the regional and local level was received. The church order working group has to evaluate all these materials, in order to prepare a final discussion about them in the joint synod. The by-laws can then be given final approval. It is not yet clear when this will happen, since it will also depend on the outcome of the ongoing discussion about some aspects of the church order itself.

In June 1997, the NRC laid down in its own church order that at least two-thirds of the votes cast are required for the final decision to unite with the RCN and ELC. In 1995, this had already been decided in a first reading by a small majority of the synod. Until then the NRC church order included no specific "unification clause". A discussion about this question was triggered off by the TW crisis in early 1995 (see my report in the previous church union survey). The classical assemblies were then given the opportunity to react to the proposal. A large majority approved of it. The decision about the unification, and the decision about the joint church order, are two separate matters. The joint church order for the united church will be stipulated by a double synod, i.e. all the members and their substitutes together. At that point the question will be whether the church order is acceptable if the unification of the churches is realized. In the subsequent decision about unification the question will be whether the churches really wish to unite.

In November 1997 at the joint assembly of NRC/RCN/ELC synods the second debate on the basic church order took place. The church order was passed by nearly 175 to 24 votes, at that moment including the name: United Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Five Lutherans and 19 NRC members voted against it. It is a stipulation that is "provisionally final". That is to say that the text can still be changed here and there if the discussion of the ordinances should give reason to do so.

The trio synod needed two full days to discuss the 19 sections of the church order. Some small sections could be stipulated without any discussion, such as those dealing with procedures for objections and disputes, the introduction of changes into the church order, and the church in times of distress. Most sections required more discussion.

There were some very difficult debates, such as the one regarding the way the Leuenberg Agreement (LA) should have a place in this church order. The conservative wing of the NRC synod understands the LA as being in direct contradiction with one of the confessions of NRC and RCN, the Canons of Dordt. On the other hand, the LA has paramount significance for the ELC as a foundation for the merger with the larger Calvinistic sister churches. A

formulation was found which differed slightly from the original wording in the draft accepted in 1993. It stresses the common understanding of the gospel rather than the common acceptance of the LA. Another much debated issue had to do with the question whether the church order should or should not include an article regarding marriage. This discussion did not result in any change: the church order still only contains a reference to marriage in the framework of liturgy, and no separate article on marriage "as instituted by God".

As indicated above, the most difficult issue proved to be the name of the future united church. In 1993 agreement was reached on the name UPCN, but there remained uneasiness about this name, especially in the NRC. The church order working group maintained its earlier view that the new name should not contain parts of existing names. Therefore, as an alternative to the "United Protestant Church in the Netherlands", the working group once again suggested the name "United Reformational (Dutch: Reformatorische) Church in the Netherlands", which had been rejected in 1993. This proposal did not find any support in the trio synod in the 1997 meeting and was therefore withdrawn by the church order working group. A compromise was proposed from the floor to accept the name "United Church of the Reformation in the Netherlands" (UCRN). This would mean, however, that in Dutch the sound of the name of the NRC could be heard in the new name (Dutch: Nederlandse *Hervormde* Kerk, and Verenigde Kerk van de *Hervorming* in Nederland). Strong resistance came from the Lutheran delegates. In their view, words like "reformed" and "Reformation" refer in ecumenical circles exclusively to the Calvinistic tradition. Although a majority of the NRC synod members (45 out of about 70 members) voted in favour of UCRN, the majority of the joint synods as a whole rejected this proposal. For only 19 of these 45 synod members this was a reason to reject the church order as such in the final vote.

However, the decision of the trio synod to stipulate the church order needed to be ratified by the separate synod assemblies. The NRC synod was the first to meet, in March 1998. According to its own rules the NRC synod could not refrain from discussing the whole draft in detail. There were again several proposals for other names. During this discussion the amendment containing the name the "United Church of the Reformation in the Netherlands" was reintroduced. It was carried by a small minority: 35 to 33 votes! All other articles of the draft accepted by the trio synod were confirmed. But of course, the synod was not able to approve the church order of the future united church as a whole anymore. A final vote on the church order could not be taken, since the inclusion of a new name required additional negotiations with RCN and ELC.

During the same session, in March 1998, the NRC synod had to deal with other questions and objections regarding the TW process as such. NRC members who had problems with the formation of a united church were given till the end of 1998 to table additional proposals for a way in which the identity and church order status of NRC congregations could be safeguarded within the future united church. A motion to this effect in the NRC synod was carried by 39 to 28 votes. The synod is supposed to discuss these proposals in the middle of 1999 and to pass on the conclusions drawn from them to the church order working group. The synod emphatically stated that these steps must not delay the progress of the local and supra-local TW process.

The assembly of the RCN synod (April 1998) decided to approve the church order in full, including the name "United Protestant Church in the Netherlands". The synod knew, of course, about the NRC decision, but it felt that only after completing the required procedures the consequences of different conclusions could and should be assessed.

The ELC synod (May 1998) took the same position. However, it voiced its displeasure at the decision of the NRC synod, agreeing with a memorandum presented by its synodal committee on the procedure they had followed. According to the committee the NRC synod should have consulted with their partners about another name, instead of taking an abrupt decision. The Lutherans regard the choice for a name containing "reformation" as evidence that they are not accepted and that the NRC synod attaches more value to "historical continuity" (expressed in the name) of their own church. "It cannot be our aim to stop the development of the united church. A great deal of good work has already been done and there are many aspects that join us together. But the union should not be dominated by the toleration of intolerance and the determination to arise the primacy of one's own values and point of view, one's own absolute truth," said the synod.

Both the RCN and the ELC synod included a clause in their decision saying that these decisions would only be valid, if the other synods involved accepted the same church order text.

As a consequence of this situation it was up to the Together on the Way commission, together with the executive boards of the three churches, to find a way out of the deadlock. On the one hand, there seemed to be good reasons to take some time for consideration of the situation. Meanwhile, the work on the by-laws of the church order, general regulations, and transitional provisions could continue as normal. There should therefore be no delay resulting from disagreement about the name. On the other hand, the legal situation was such that the NRC synod could only take a final vote on the church order, refraining from new discussions about the whole draft, if this could be done before the end of 1998. As of January 1999, 20 percent of the members of the synod were going to step down, and their successors might legally demand to reopen the debate. This might eventually lead

to even more points of disagreement between the three synods. That is why the executive boards decided to arrange an extra assembly of the joint synods, on 21 November 1998.

However, in this meeting they did not manage to overcome the deadlock in the negotiations about the name that the future united church was to receive.

The church order working group advised the three synods to accept the decision of the NRC synod ("United Church of the Reformation in the Netherlands"), arguing that, although "reformed" usually indeed refers to the Calvinistic tradition, "Reformation" does in fact point to the common roots of both the Calvinistic and the Lutheran tradition. Furthermore, unification would not be worthwhile if it would result in a major breach in the NRC. However, the three executive boards did not explicitly support this proposal! At the beginning of the session, each of the three chairmen gave a short introduction. The RCN and ELC leadership gave a strong appeal to enter into a real encounter, but they did so without giving any specific advice about the name to be chosen. The NRC chairman tried to convince the meeting of the strong tensions within the NRC, in order to make the decision of the NRC synod seem acceptable. These contributions could, in fact, easily be heard as pleading in favour of the decisions taken in their respective synods.

An amendment was immediately brought to the floor, including a proposal to stick to the name UPCN. During the assembly many journalists and camera crews were witness to what was in fact not a discussion, but a long series of monologues. Finally, a majority of 105 delegates voted for UPCN, but a majority of the NRC (48 members) voted against it, so that the proposal was not carried. The official proposal (UCRN) was then voted on, but also failed to secure a majority, because a (large) majority of RCN and Lutheran members voted against it.

There was of course no other opportunity left to solve the problems risen before the end of 1998. This means in fact that the ratifying decisions of the RCN and ELC synods have also lost their weight, due to the fact that no agreement was reached on the name as yet.

### **The organizational procedure**

In principle it was already decided in October 1996 to move all national offices of the three churches to Utrecht. The trio synod held that integration of the supra-local organizations of the three churches involved was desirable in any case, regardless of decisions about the new church order. The proposed structure is flexible enough to be adapted to such changes.

In May 1997 the joint assembly of NRC/RCN/ELC synods decided, by dissenting votes to 24, to buy part of the former military hospital in Utrecht in order to turn it into the future national service centre of the TW churches. From December 1999 onwards this building will be the national office of the TW churches. The new organization consists of three "services": (1) congregational upbuilding, theology and education; (2) missionary and diaconal work and ecumenical relations; (3) technical services and general affairs.

The NRC/RCN/ELC trio synod also accepted the proposal that a single general director should be appointed as from 1 January 1998. This means that staff members of the standing organizations of the three churches will be led by one general director, namely Mrs A.W. Wamstecker-Meijer.

In January 1998, the joint assembly of the NRC, RCN and ELC synods accepted the document "The Church's Agenda and the Work of Its Labour Organization in 1999-2002" as the starting-point for the policy of the common labour organization. The trio synod was extremely positive about the document.

The draft church order for the future united church is close to the present NRC church order in many respects. This is not the case for the RCN church order. This fact made the RCN synod decide to prepare some changes in its own church order, in order to make the transition to the unification smoother.

The RCN synod wants to organize the representation to synod via the classes rather than via the particular (provincial) synods. The church order committee is to study also whether a so-called "permanent" synod can be introduced without throwing out the church order structure of the RCN. At present, every second year a completely new synod is elected, which normally includes about 50 percent of the members of the former synod. If a permanent synod is possible, the committee should also prepare the necessary changes in the church order.

It must also be made clear in what way the local RCN churches are ultimately supposed to agree with the unification of the RCN with the NRC and the ELC. A "unification clause" might be advisable. The committee has been commissioned to put forward proposals in the near future.

These decisions were taken by the RCN synod in November 1997 after a lengthy debate. In the wake of this discussion another point was raised: the administration of justice in the RCN does not meet the standards which are laid down for efficient legal protection nowadays. The RCN do not have independent jurisdiction: church assemblies themselves adjudicate upon conflicts. The church order committee therefore proposed that the rules for "objections and disputes" developed for the UPCN be introduced into the RCN church order. The synod asked the committee to put forward a proposal for adaptation of the church order in this matter too.

Preliminary decisions were already taken in two respects in 1998 (and early 1999). Firstly, the synod accepted a proposal to organize the representation to synod via the classes. Secondly, the synod took a first step towards a revision of church jurisdiction. If the church councils and classes agree with the synod's proposals, procedures in both respects will change as from the year 2000.

### **Once again: What's in a name?**

It is clear that the deadlock with regard to the name of the future united church we are faced with now, points to much more than just a technical problem. Once again, major differences in the way these three churches see themselves have become manifest in discussions about this issue.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that a strong minority within the NRC has opposed the TW process as such from the very beginning. As long as no real progress was realized or even aimed at — and that was the case until about 1985 — this opposition was not very loud. But several crises in the 1990s in fact have shown the determination of the majority to come down to business, as well as the intentions of the minority to prevent final steps as long as possible. The NRC leadership, together with a larger part of the NRC synod, finds itself in the unpleasant position of being responsible for both the continuation of the TW process and the maintenance of the unity of the NRC. Somehow, they are held hostage by the opposing minority. There is no doubt that in the very end some NRC congregations at least will feel compelled to leave the NRC, but of course the leadership of all of the three churches will do as much as possible to limit that number.

Fear plays a major role in determining the position of the congregations opposing the union. The present NRC gives these conservative circles all the necessary room to live within the NRC by their own standards, but they are afraid that the future united church will in some way endanger this freedom. The solution may lie partly in coping with these fears in a convincing and effective way. Additional decisions in this field providing a type of guarantee for the congregations might be sufficient to keep most of the people involved "on board". Much will depend, then, on specific regulations regarding the authority of supra-local bodies in the future united church.

Finally, I think that much of the present situation can only be understood in relation to history. The NRC sees itself historically as the direct continuation of the "church of St Willibrord", the missionary who evangelized the Netherlands more than 1300 years ago. In this view, this "church of the Netherlands" as such was reformed in the 16th century, and continued to play its role in Dutch society up to now. In this perspective, the NRC is essentially not so much a free church as a *national* church, even if its relation to the Dutch state is the same as that of other churches in the Netherlands. Issues such as the name of the future church are dealt with in this perspective of a historical continuity. Historical or rational arguments are not easily accepted here. The real issue plays a role on another, psychological level.

In ecclesiological terms, the NRC experiences its being a church primarily as a gift of God, and only secondly as a mandate and a matter of human responsibility. The ELC, and certainly the RCN, have a different ecclesiological framework. They are fully-fledged free churches. The common priesthood of the faithful is decisive. For the RCN, this includes the primary awareness that the church has to take responsibility for its own future. Well organized processes and structures of decision-making can serve that mandate. Now that unification with the NRC and the ELC has been defined as a matter of obedience to what the Lord expects, RCN synods will feel free to take any decision required to reach that goal. If it implies the necessity to drop traditional names completely, they will accept that. However, there is one major problem. A strong emphasis on the freedom of local congregations can be accepted without any doubt, but this should be counterbalanced by structures in which the mutual accountability of these congregations can be given shape. Sufficient possibilities for encounter on the supralocal level should in some way be provided.

The years to come will show whether these differences in ecclesiology, and in the way the churches involved react to challenges like these, can really be bridged.