



# Learning to live out of wonder



## Introduction to the revised version

In the meeting of the general synod on September 30 the vision-note “Learning to live of wonder” was discussed. This note has been revised based on the remarks that have been made during this meeting. Intention is to discuss this note at large within the church. Therefore a manageable brochure will be published combined with suggestions for the discussion within the church council, the congregation and the classical assembly. The synodical board is hoping for fruitful meetings and discussions around this document, which intends to be determining for the church as a whole.

## “Learning to live out of wonder”

### Vision on living and working of the church as a whole

In this note the general synod expresses its vision on the identity, the calling and the future of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

With this paper the synod gives direction for the church as a whole and therewith also for the Service-Organisation of the Church. The Church Ministries will take guidance from the vision expressed in the note in formulating and executing their entire policy.

This note is also intended as assistance to all congregations within the Protestant Church of the Netherlands. They are being summoned to start the discussion themselves on the policy that has to be formulated by the local congregations in view of their identity, calling and future.

### Protestant Church in the Netherlands

Since May 1st 2004 we are a united church: the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

We are grateful for the realization of this united church while we have not forgotten the road leading there. The unification of the churches has led to new élan in many local congregations. We as a church want to make our protestant tradition fruitful for the entire society.

The Protestant Church is part of God’s worldwide church, in which Protestants have their own place. We are aware that God’s church takes root in Israel and we are obedient to the Scriptures we share with each other. We can not exist without a deep solidarity with the Jewish people.

Protestants are – in the original meaning of the word – people “that make a public testimony”. In all openness and publicity they are answerable for the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We confidently believe that God wants to speak to people and uses the Protestant Church as well for that purpose. The words of God sometimes sound like music in our ears. They tell us that God accepts us as we are. In addition He wants to renew us, encourage us and open the road to Him and to one and other. His words sometimes touch us painfully. We are being criticized if we are withdrawn or following our own devices.

As Protestants we are convinced that each believer has access to God and can hear, believe and practise God’s Word. Pessimism and apathy are being conquered by trusting in the promises of God and by following the footsteps of Jesus in persevering prayer. If we only look at what we are capable

of we get discouraged and our faith becomes more doubting than trusting. We believe however that the Spirit liberates us of dejection and shows us unprecedented things. Not decline, but faith in the power of the Word should determine the life of the Church (2 Timothy 2: 9). That is why we dedicate ourselves to come to a change of view. We want to move away from the paralysing feeling that the church might be a lost cause. Our time offers chances and opportunities and we have new means available. We believe in the lasting strength of Christian faith. The protestant tradition has always been characterized by a strong involvement in society. We experience an urgent need as a church to have a visible and meaningful presence in this time as well.

### **Community around the Word**

The church lives in the local congregation. The congregation is a community around the Word. The congregation is the receiver of the Word. The Word is the origin of the church, the ground under her feet, her greatest joy and certain hope for the future.

The church is supported by the Word. That is why she can not cease to pass on the Word that has been given her. In translating, telling and preaching; in celebrating, in setting an example and representing lies the life of the congregation. The local congregation is the beating heart of the church and the members are the ambassadors of the Word.

The congregation is therefore missionary. She is there to translate and bring the Word to life over the borders of the church and Christianity. In this she is also vulnerable. Words become meaningless if the narrator himself is not fundamentally caught by them. The Word needs to get hands and feet in the life and the service of the congregation and her members.

Many people experience this (church) community as unnecessary; they draw from all kinds of spiritual sources and sometimes squeeze the Bible in. This individualistic theology however has its limits. Faith should be carried by a broad religious community, nourished by Word and sacraments. A place where Christians encourage one another in the mutual association, inquire of each other and strengthen their personal faith and Christianity. Protestantism thinks highly of the individual faith, but also knows how essential the community is. Such a community, in old or new form, is offered by the church.

### **Being church in unity and variety**

Article I of the church order describes the identity of the Protestant Church. 'The church lives by God's grace in Jesus Christ and professes the Holy Scripture as one source and norm of the preaching.' She draws from the sources of the Calvinistic and Lutheran tradition. We whole-heartedly stand in this professing tradition.

The church is multi-coloured. This variety originates from the difference in context of the local congregations and the various forms of religious experience in the church. In addition the members, with their specific history with God and their own gifts and talents, form the congregation (1 Corinthians 12).

We experience this multi-coloured Protestant Church as riches and challenge: as riches, since the revelation of God in Christ is too great to have merely one shape; as challenge, since pluriformity can easily turn into an optional non-commitment. We also suffer from diversity. It is therefore of great importance, that we make the existing differences (in tradition, in experience and wording) fruitful by entering into debate with one another. Listening to the religious justification and exegesis of one another is not without commitment. We may not ignore each other indifferently and isolate us from the other, nor may we cover up the differences of opinion. Because, in spite of all diversity, we are this one Protestant Church. On a national level we want to enhance this unity by the forming of opinion in diversity which strengthens and deepens the unity. The ministers will also be supported in this. The Church order awards a key role in this point to the classical assembly. Inspiring leadership is indispensable in the strengthening and preservation of the unity. Because, however diverse the Protestantism and the Protestant Church are, yet the essence in the multi coloured church is about the profession of the Name above all names: Jesus Christ.

### **Being church in a changing culture**

In our culture each human being has to give shape and meaning to his or her life. There is no self-evidence anymore in the area of religion, politics and course of life. Many people experience this as liberation, but it also causes uncertainty.

Faith in the manufacturable society has been replaced by the illusion of manufacturability of the own existence. Because of that life has become very full and busy. Education, career, relation, job, care for children and/or parents, social connections, everything asks for attention. The pressure is strengthened by the constant call for success and happiness. On top of that is the necessity to adapt

over and over to the rapid social developments or reorganisations at work. This is also cause for pressure on volunteer-work.

Distrust has developed towards authorities and institutions, in which the satisfaction about the own independence goes hand in hand with the feeling of being lost, of discomfort. This feeling is strengthened because people feel uncertain by the development towards a multicultural society. A feeling interfering with the public debate and which can easily lead to a hardening of the public opinion. There is talk of appreciative culture in which the aspect of experience carries much weight for people.

On account of the pressure of the existence there is a need for intense and superficial relaxation. But at the same time there is a need for orientation on meaningfulness and vital questions. In this as well the experience plays an important role, more than institutions or dogmatisms. There is demand for rituals in key moments during the personal course of life, for deepening of personal spirituality. For that purpose contact is made with congenial spirits, often without need for lasting connections. There is a search for personally acquired answers to the questions of life, not for collective supported certainties. In their search or in their answer many people may be willing to share their experiences with others, however not to commit to them.

### **Being church as shape of anticipation**

In all of these symptoms we should realize again, that the Gospel is not the self-evident answer to all questions. The Gospel is not a generally perceptive story, but the proclamation of the Crucified. The church is a stranger in this world.

Her preaching goes against the grain and is sometimes offensive. Her place is constantly challenged. As soon as the church loses sight of this, she loses her critical standard, or she overstrains herself. The crisis of the western church is closely connected with the confusion our society is in. This crisis can be beneficial if the church learns to see that in our society she is a minority depending on the words of God. The church only has a future if she follows the risen Lord and trusts in God's Spirit, based on the prayer: "Come, Holy Spirit, renew your church".

On that road we learn to look further than the borders of our own church. In the church, in our own congregation, we long for that renewal by the Holy Spirit, but often we do not see the impetuous growth of other religious communities around us. We see too little, that in a worldwide perspective, the church is a fast growing movement. It makes clear that God inspires people today as well.

In addition we are aware that we can only speak from silence; and that we can only profess after having confessed our guilt. For the church crisis, confusion and temptation can never have the last word. It is our profound conviction, that God's promises and kingship offer a new beneficial perspective to the people of today as well. That is why the church has the ongoing task to proclaim the triune God in our time:

- God the Father, Who gives security to people in this searching world,
- Jesus Christ, Who brings reconciliation into a world full of wounded and injured people,
- The Holy Spirit, Who renews us, people – and this world.

On this road we learn again to spell the basic words of Protestantism: *sola gratia* (by grace alone), *sola fide* (by faith alone), *sola scriptura* (by the Scripture alone).

### **What does the Protestant Church in the Netherlands want to be to people?**

1. The church wants to be a powerful community of faith where people, together with others and in the light of God's words, discover the purpose of their life. From her age-long association with God the church has found answers (words) which are directive for man and society even today.
2. The church wants, based on her protestant religious tradition, to represent and bear witness of the life-changing message of the Gospel. The church wants to do this in a contemporary manner which is appealing to all generations.
3. The church wants to be a community where God's presence is being celebrated in preaching, in singing, in prayer and in the signs of baptism and communion.
4. The church wants to be a community of prayer where people learn to realize that they may put their suffering, their guilt and their questions in God's hands.
5. The church wants to be a centre of values and spirituality, a place of reflection where people can discover who they are and what God asks of them.
6. The church wants to be a caring community with concern for people in problem situations, assisting and vindicating them.
7. The church wants to be a community where people may feel secure. The community, which the church is, reflects something of the space and security which God grants people.

8. The church wants to be a movement of hope and anticipation in which people from near and far inspire each other across limits of poverty, injustice and hopelessness.

**For her policy the synod of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands chooses the following starting points:**

1. *Perseverance and progress*

The Protestant Church wants to be a church of the Word. In the midst of temptation and crisis we trust in the promise of Christ about His presence, about the gift of the Holy Spirit and the strength of faith (John 10: 10 and 14: 12). We persevere in the confidence that there is every reason to put the progress of the Gospel opposite the apathy over and over again. We live out of wonder and believe that God has the final word (Hymn 225: 3 of the Songbook of the Churches). Therefore we put effort into mutual encouragement, loving and effective guidance of congregations and purpose directed community-building.

2. *Faith deepening*

In everything we do – on a national and local level – we will put the Word and with that love, hope and growth in the centre (Ephesians 4: 15, 16). We acknowledge our shortcomings, but put our trust in Him who forgives and renews. Therefore we aim first of all for faith deepening. We believe that the religious discussion and the equipment of congregation members to share their faith with others can lead to growth of the church (Hymn 252: 2 Songbook of the churches). Not decline, but faith in the power of the Word may decide the life of the church (1 John 5: 5).

3. *Missionary calling*

We emphasize the support of the congregation by following up on her missionary calling in such a way that the various gifts of the congregation members and congregations are stimulated. Together with the congregations we will search for words that translate the Gospel in such a manner that people are inspired. We are eager for a continually growing group hearing and believing the Gospel to develop in the Netherlands. For them we want to be open and for them we want to be church. In addition we want to start focussing ourselves explicitly on those groups of people we can not reach with our present way of being church.

4. *Transference of faith*

Faith knowledge is essential for the survival of the church. Transference of faith – individually and within communities – is therefore made central.

By study, stimulation and making information available from congregations giving shape to their calling in a renewing way, is ensured that assistance is available to every congregation in order to get them further. The emphasis herein is on the development of the congregation itself. Herein they can – if they want to - be assisted by the Church Ministries. The development will be focussed on the character of the congregation.

5. *Space for youth and the new generation*

Youth and the new generation receive room and opportunity to look for new forms of church-being, to get to know Christ and to grow in faith. Young people have great need for religious discussion, the discussion between the generations is essential in this. We ask of the congregations to pay close attention to this. We ask the youth-movements to cooperate more and closer.

6. *Spirituality*

In a culture of “experience” we look for new forms of spirituality. We draw grateful from the sources of Protestantism, but will also make use of what is being offered from other Christian traditions. The church will give assistance in the field of meditation and spirituality, vital questions, ethics and interpretation of the Bible.

7. *Image*

We will look at ourselves as a church and at our activities and ask what the appeal, attraction and activation is for the people around us. We oblige ourselves to improve the quality of our being a congregation, the image of the church and the quality of our speaking and acting.

8. *Church- and religious discussion*

We ask of one and other to engage into discussion within our own congregation and with other congregations on our calling of being Christ's congregation. This church discussion will have to grow more and more into the character of a religious discussion and faith sharing. The classical assemblies will have an inspiring part in this.

*9. Individual contacts*

Because people are less inclined to be addressed as part of a group, individual contacts are of great importance. We want to take people's personal questions seriously. The latest means of communication (among other things internet) will be used more intensively.

*10. Service to the multicultural society*

The purpose of congregation life and (world) diaconate is to make the love of Christ visible. Therefore the congregation will put effort in her service to people she comes across in this multicultural society. The national church commits itself to be of service to the local congregations for this work. Because the living Lord takes all things into his service, we want to overcome the contradiction between the service of the Word and action.

*11. Cooperation with other churches and organisations*

As a united church we seek closer cooperation with other churches and related organisations. The youth and mission organisations of the Reformed Alliance – in cooperation or on their own - will have every opportunity to be available to the entire church. Our purpose in that will be missionary presence. Ecumenism must be focussed. The tools for this are joint study and cooperation with other churches and denominations. Especially the links with migrant churches will be forged tighter and the cooperation will be deeper and broader. Missionary presence will be the focus for our relation with foreign partners. Mutual learning from each other will be the centre of attention in these contacts.

*12. Being church in society*

We want to make clear that the church can have an important contribution to society. We will participate on a national and international level with vision and dedication in the discussion on the questions on life, cohabitation, durability, peace and righteousness in which we will not back away from the ethical questions on life and death.