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The Netherlands

UNITING PROTESTANT CHURCHES IN THE NETHERLANDS (Together on the way or "Samen op Weg"): Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC); Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN); Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (ELC)

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Three Dutch churches are preparing for unification in the near future. Two of them (the NRC and RCN) have been participating in this process - commonly known as the "Together on the Way" process (TW process; in Dutch "Samen op Weg") - for about 40 years now. Fundamental decisions were taken in the 1980s; and in 1985 the ELC synod decided to join the process. One year later, after a careful process of consideration on all ecclesial levels, the joint meeting of synods accepted a Declaration of Agreement. Agreement was expressed on all the main ecclesiological issues dividing the churches; the remaining differences are supposed to be acceptable within the one church.

In the 1990s important decisions have been taken regarding church order, and the organization of the churches' work-forces (personnel), in order to arrive at a full unification of the churches. This is now expected to take place at the beginning of the year 2004.

1. Some statistics

Some statistical data may give an impression of the significance of this process. It concerns the two major reformed denominations in the Calvinistic (Reformed) tradition in the Netherlands. About 16 million inhabitants live in the country. The NRC has about 1300 local congregations, numbering some 1.9 million members (including about 400,000 "other members", that is, non-baptized persons mentioned in the registration because their parents belong - or belonged - to the NRC. The RCN, which includes only baptized members in its statistics, counts about 660,000 members in 850 local congregations. Finally, the Lutheran partner church, with about 15,000 members in some 60 congregations, is one of the very small denominations in the Netherlands. The number of ministers active in the churches' congregations is about 1450, 890 and 30 respectively. Overall about 1 percent of the membership of the future united church will represent the Lutheran tradition.

On the local level many congregations, mainly from NRC and RCN backgrounds, have entered the stage of "federation" over the last decades. They cooperate as intensively as possible under present church law and, in practice, are living already as one congregation. The number of formally approved federations lies around 400, with another 400 situations showing warm cooperation but in a less intensive and formal way.

Out of 75 "classes" (presbyteries, that is, regional assemblies) in the NRC and RCN, 28 have opted for a federation, and another 22 cooperate closely. Out of 9 provincial assemblies, 6 have become federated also.

2. Organization

In December 1999 an important development was implemented. The labour (work-force) organizations of the three churches were housed together in one national service centre, in Utrecht, and integrated as far as possible under present church law. In fact there is now one supportive apparatus for the three churches. This was the result of a huge organizational effort, since before that the three churches had very different structures, including varying offices located in six different cities - and, of course, the organizational "cultures" differed accordingly. Nine smaller common provincial service centers are part of the planning, with most of them already implemented.

3. Church order

After decades of ongoing but slow growth in cooperation, in the early 1990s a decision was taken to go for a common church order. This decision implied the choice for an eventual full, "organic" unity. The church order, or structure, will be based on that of the NRC. This means a relatively short basic *constitution* and, linked to that, a number of by-laws or "ordinances". The acceptance of these fundamental juridical texts requires two "readings" in synod. This gives the process a cautious and complicated character.

A common TW church order working group has been drafting the necessary documents. Every text must be discussed first in a joint meeting of the three synods involved, the so-called "trio-synod". Once adopted there, every text has to be discussed, and again adopted, in each synod separately. The next step after that is sending the drafts to the ecclesial assemblies on a regional and local level, the "minor assemblies"; these are given ample time for comments. Then the TW church order working group produces a new draft, evaluating these comments. This draft - discussed, possibly amended, and accepted by the trio-synod and the three synods separately - is final.

The first reading of the constitution was completed in 1993, the first reading of the by-laws (14 in number) in January 1997. However, the discussion on the constitution during its second reading (November 1997), raised new problems. Although the trio-synod had agreed on the text, it became clear in the debate in the NRC synod afterwards that there was insufficient support for the name which had been chosen for the future united church. Until then it was supposed to be called the United Protestant Church in the Netherlands,⁽¹⁾ but this name was rejected. As long as this problem is not solved, the constitution cannot be formally accepted.

In the meantime the TW church order working group evaluated nearly all the reactions to the draft by-laws for the new church. In November 2001 and May 2002, 11 out of 14 by-laws have been adopted by the trio-synod, and subsequently by the three synods separately. The remaining three by-laws will follow in November 2002.

However, tensions regarding the unification process have been growing over recent years, rather than diminishing. A number of causes for this can be identified; and in fact they are different in each of the three participating churches. Let me now give a short survey of these causes.

A. Tensions in the NRC

The situation in the NRC is by far the most complicated. The more conservative and orthodox wing of this church is gaining more influence over time, and is not unconditionally in favor of unification. In fact, a part of this group is unconditionally *against* unification, and threatens eventually to leave the NRC. The motives for this resistance are varying, with the most important being:

In terms of doctrine, there are problems with the inclusion of the Leuenberg agreement (LA) in the constitution. The LA - which has become of major ecumenical importance in Europe - reflects the view that the classical doctrinal conflicts between Reformed and Lutherans have been transcended in a new common understanding of the gospel: these conflicts, therefore, are no longer church-dividing. This provides a theological basis for the TW process; but conservative NRC members see it as denying the importance of the doctrine of predestination.

From a more material point of view, huge tensions exist within the NRC on the question of property, particularly on what say the church as a whole has regarding the properties of local congregations. A process to establish uniform internal rules for church practice in this respect was embarked upon also because of the TW process, and this has led to a number of civil court cases. In all these cases the church as a whole was judged to be in the right; but that, of course, could not prevent bitter feelings.

For part of the NRC constituency, another issue is the idea that the NRC is - in an unbroken continuity - the "church of the Netherlands", that is, the church as founded here by the first Christian missionaries, such as St Willibrord and St Boniface, in the 7th century CE. This very church is regarded as having "gone through the Reformation" and continuing to exist in the NRC, and this continuity, it is believed, should be expressed in the name of the future united church. That is one of the reasons why the name Uniting Protestant Churches in the Netherlands has been rejected by some.

A major difficulty is related to the issue of marriage and "alternative life bonds", such as homosexual relationships. The draft by-law on worship includes the option for a local church council to facilitate (under strict conditions) the act of blessing such relationships within a church service. The conservative part of the church sees this as "condoning what God condemns". The draft text of the by-law was adopted by the NRC synod, but only with a majority of 40 to 33.

For these and others reasons there have been efforts time and again over recent years to compel the NRC synod to express itself in favour of a less far-reaching mode of unification: that the three churches should continue their separated existence, although cooperating most intensively. In June 2002 the NRC synod again rejected a proposal like this, with a 23 to 50 vote.

B. In the ELC

The last-mentioned controversial issue is vital for the Lutherans, too, but for the opposite reasons. For them the *acceptance* of homosexual members, including the possibility for them to receive a liturgical blessing, is a decisive requirement. Over the last decades this church has taken decisions in this respect which cannot be given up (so have other small denominations, incidentally).

Although there is fear in some congregations that in the future united church the Lutheran tradition will be "washed away" by an enormous reformed majority, the general picture is that the Lutheran synod will continue to support the TW process - and with a large majority. It is, however, also clear that the long-lasting process, and the large number of discussions which are needed, are creating ever-greater difficulties for the Lutherans. They fear that they will run out of human resources, and that the Lutheran voice might sometime fall away. That is why a fast pace in the union process is favoured from now on.

C. In the RCN

For a long time it seemed that there were no significant tensions within the RCN. Only in the year 2000 did serious problems become manifest. The RCN has always been a "confederative" denomination with the local congregation as the basic entity, also in juridical terms. If, for instance, a local church council, supported by a majority of the constituency of the congregation, were to identify serious theological or confessional objections towards synodical policy, it might even decide to leave the denomination. In that case, they could take local church properties with them. In 2000 it became obvious that such decisions will no longer be possible under the future united church law. (Then the relationship between congregation and church will be the same as in the present NRC. Of course, people can leave the church; but the congregation, as a legal entity with juridical corporate personality, will continue to be part of the church. Since properties belong to this legal entity, they cannot be taken outside.)

The RCN synod sent a report to the local congregations, assessing this interpretation of future church law and asking for comments. It raised an amount of objections such as never seen before! Many church councils expressed their feelings that - although they see no reason whatsoever to leave the church now - this option for withdrawal should, as a matter of principle, remain under future church law.

Now new regulations are being prepared to tackle (as far as possible) these objections. Transitional provisions are being considered to reduce these tensions, at least in the early years of the new union. Also a procedure might be included in future church law, enabling cases involving church properties to come for decision to an independent church court. This approach could help in the case of larger parts of congregations leaving the church. Despite these difficulties, confidence has returned that the RCN synod will eventually wholeheartedly agree with a decision to unite.

4. Concentration: a new focus on moving forward

The most important documents being ready, unification is coming close. In April 2002 the board of the trio-synod therefore decided to plan the last phase of the TW process according to a timetable. A decision to "concentrate" the TW process was taken: all available resources will be used to finalize it as soon as possible. This is deemed necessary because the long-lasting process produces ever-more negative effects: growing alienation, introversion, diminishing endurance on the local level, reduced confidence and reduced commitment amongst those in favour of unification, growing confusion, and so on.

The TW church order working group is scheduled to complete its activities by September 2002. Then all drafts should be ready, including a number of more detailed technical regulations and so-called "transitional regulations", needed to facilitate a flexible transition from the three old church orders to one new church order. The trio-synod will have to decide on them in November and December 2002. The issue of the name of the church will again be on the agenda at the same time.

In the first months of 2003 the minor assemblies will have another opportunity to give their comments to all of this. In June 2003 the formal decision to unite has to be taken in first reading, and again the minor assemblies will be given the final opportunity to react. The final decision on church unification is supposed to be taken in a trio-synod meeting on 12 December 2003. A two-thirds majority in each of the separate synods will be required shortly afterwards. The united church could then be a fact as from 2004.

5. The other side

So far this article might strengthen the impression that the TW process is mainly organizational and juridical in character. This would be one-sided, to say the least. Over the years the spiritual and theological aspects have been introduced into the discussion again and again. Also the coming, concluding period will see the preparation

of new publications in this area, to promote discussion in congregations and ecclesial assemblies about the background and purposes of the TW process. The question *why* we are seeking this form of unity by all means has to be put on the agenda again. Prayer and the exchange of views on a local level have to be stimulated.

During the last decades the trio-synod has had to spend much time discussing organizational, juridical and financial issues. Fortunately there was some room for fundamental theological debate - for example, in November 2001 a surprisingly large majority adopted a thorough report on Christology.(2)

6. Unity - Mission - Identity

Allow me only some concluding observations regarding the three central issues for the upcoming 7th international consultation of uniting and united churches (Driebergen, Netherlands, September 2002), sponsored by Faith and Order with the assistance of the Council for World Mission and hosted by the Dutch churches.

1. Unity.

It is clear by now that unity is a complicated concept. What kind of unity do we seek? This question must be reconsidered again and again. Behind it lie other questions: Why are we focusing so much on "organic unity"? What exactly is decisive for our unity - church order only, or also a real communion in confessing our faith together? In many respects the future united church will be a roof covering a large variety of congregations, representing a number of different spiritual approaches.

The need to secure a "safe haven" for these congregations, where they can continue their existence without being disturbed or challenged, seems for many to be more important than the urge to intensify communication between various theological and confessional streams. The challenge of giving shape to mutual accountability within one larger body lies still ahead of us, after unification.

A promising development has recently become visible. The by-law on ecumenical relations introduces the possibility for churches and congregations outside the future united church to relate to this church as an "associated church or congregation". Different migrant churches have already expressed their interest in considering this option seriously.(3) It might change the so far very white, and very Western face, of the church. It would certainly also enrich the church spiritually - and maybe lead to new tensions?

2. Mission.

The TW process started from a missionary perspective. In 1962 it was launched by the initiative of 18 ministers from both NRC and RCN, working in a missionary setting (that is, as student pastors). They expressed their conviction that the churches, in continuing their separate existence, seriously hampered the witnessing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Forty years later the world is quite different. The Netherlands is strongly secularized. The majority of its inhabitants say that they do not belong to any church (but the church attendance statistics are significantly higher than in most Western European countries!). A post-modern attitude and mood determines culture, which shows hardly any interest in ecclesial institutions and which, at the same time, reacts in a much less negative way to the existence of a variety of denominations. Ironically, ever-reappearing news reports on internal divisions within the three churches over the issue of unification might have a more negative missionary impact than divisions as such.

3. Identity.

The core of all our questions and problems might be our uncertainty about the question: what exactly is decisive for the identity of the future united church? Is identity primarily related to its confessional basis? I already above mentioned the issue of the inclusion of the Leuenberg agreement in the constitution, as well as the resistance to this in NRC circles. (In the future united church, Reformed congregations will have the right to identify mainly - if not exclusively - with the reformed confessions.)

Or is identity mainly a matter of provisions of church order, and structures? Is it organic unity as such? Is it given, first of all, with a common presbyterial-synodical church order? Or is a common book of worship - including, to be sure, a rich variety of options - as we adopted a few years ago decisive?

Or, finally, can the identity of the church only be found outside of itself, in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour? That has to be said, and has to be received. But it does not answer all questions.

NOTES

1. Cf. my contribution to the previous Survey, *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 52, no. 1, Jan. 2000, pp.19-26.

2. English translation: *Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour*. Available online at the website of the church union process: www.unitingprotestantchurches.nl, see section "Statements". A printed version can be ordered through: REC Focus, see: rec@recweb.org.

3. An English translation of a synodical report which is interesting in this respect, *Born in Sion*, can be found also at www.unitingprotestantchurches.nl, see section "Statements".

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