



*Daer en mach gheen
ander Fundament
gheleyt worden be-
halven datter gheleyt
is, het welke is
Christus Jesus*

ADS/16.08.00293

WALKING ON WATER

PART 1: CONCERNING THE FUTURE OF THE DUTCH MENNONITES

HENK STENVERS

ALGEMENE DOOPSGEZINDE SOCIËTEIT

²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. ²³After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

²⁵During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. ²⁶When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear.

²⁷But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."

²⁸"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."

²⁹"Come," he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. ³⁰But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!"

³¹Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

³²And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. ³³Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Matthew 14: 22-33 (NIV)

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In recent years I have felt an increasing need to write down how I view the future of the Mennonite¹ faith community in the Netherlands. I love this faith community dearly, even after more than fourteen years working in the heart of the organization. In the pressure of day-to-day work, with all its dynamics, there is no time to pause and distance oneself enough to reflect on what it is really all about. I realized that I felt an increasing need for such reflection. The conference² council then decided to commission me to write this document. Therefore, both my personal desire and the conference council's commission gave birth to it.

This three-month period also became a personal faith journey. Reflection on the future also involves your own faith and motivation, of course. Reading, thinking, writing, and discussing this with good friends, who provided critical feedback, have greatly heightened my motivation to continue working for the Dutch Mennonites in the years to come. My personal faith has been strengthened as well, for which I am grateful.

The first part of this document is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, I describe the current situation of our faith community in statistics and also provide a few facts about other church denominations in the Netherlands. In the second chapter, I describe the situation of the congregations and faith community on the basis of outcomes of visits to congregations and my own experiences as general secretary. In the third chapter, I discuss some models for a future congregation, derived from a review of literature on the subject. This is followed by a reflection on the statistics and my vision for the future in the fourth chapter. In the second part, not included in this English version, I make some proposals for the short term on the way to the future.

The story is not a cheerful one in the short term. Being open to change and letting go will require a great capacity for adaptation. I am convinced that our faith community has this capacity; one thing the history of our faith community worldwide has shown us, is that Mennonites can adapt themselves to changing circumstances.

Although I present suggestions for the immediate future in Part II, these do not represent a blueprint for the more distant future. That could not be done. In my view, letting go of ostensible certainties and having faith and hope are essential for the distant future. I am convinced that the future lies precisely in being open to change.

¹ The Dutch term used is *doopsgezind*, "baptism-minded."

² The Dutch term used is *Broederschap*, "Brotherhood," by which the members of the General Mennonite Society or Conference (ADS) express a closer bond with each other than the word "society" suggests.

Our faith community will go on, but we do not know what it will be like in 20 or 30 years. That is a good thing, for we cannot imagine it; we must leave it in other hands.

A Bible story I find inspiring in this respect is the one in Matthew 14:22-33.³ It is the familiar story about Jesus who, after feeding the five thousand, sends his disciples ahead by boat while he remains behind to pray. The boat, already quite a way from shore, is struggling with waves brought on by contrary winds. Then Jesus walks on the water to the boat. The disciples are naturally considerably startled by that. But Peter calls to him, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." And he said, "Come." Then he feels the wind, becomes frightened, and begins to sink. Jesus reaches out his hand to him and catches him, saying, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" The wind dies down when they climb into the boat again.

Water is deep and dark, and threatening, certainly when it is agitated by the wind. Water is wonderful; sailing on it is fantastic, but, at the same time, it feels threatening because you cannot see what is below the surface, certainly not in the evening or at night. And of course, you can sink, drown in it. Water represents the chaos of the world; you can sink into it and be drowned.

The boat in which the disciples are sitting is violently shaken back and forth in the chaos. It has encountered contrary winds, and the waves lash against the bow, making it plunge and roll. It is not easy to steer it. I see a congregation or our faith community before me, a small group of people lurching back and forth on the waves of the chaos, yet still sailing in spite of everything, en route to the other side. But inspiration is not on board.

Then, as the contrary winds make it difficult to move forward, inspiration comes: Jesus comes walking on the water, rising above the chaos. This is scary, because you don't know what you are seeing, and you can't believe it.

Then Peter, always Peter, the rock upon which the church is built, the disciple who is ever so human, challenges Jesus. If it is you, Lord, have me walk towards you on the water. And that is what happens; courageously, he takes the first steps. But then, let us say halfway, Peter suddenly realizes what he is doing. He has left the safe boundaries of the boat and has been raised up above the chaos. Or perhaps we should say, he raised himself up above the chaos through faith. And then he becomes frightened; after all, it is a big thing to leave the uncertain security of the boat and go to meet Jesus. That fear paralyzes you, and yes, then you sink like a brick, or, in this case, like a rock.

At an anti-skid course I once took, it was emphasized that you need to look where you want to go and keep steering in that direction. For, if you look at the tree you want to avoid, you will smash into it. And formerly, when you were on the balancing

³ Quotations from the Bible are from the New International Version.

beam in gymnastics class, you were told to keep your eye on the edge of the beam, which was the goal, for if you looked down, you would certainly fall off. This is what must have happened with Peter. He no longer looked at Jesus, but looked down, where the waves and the fathomless depths of chaos are, and yes, then you sink...

He does know where to ask for help in his fear: "Lord, save me!" Then he takes the hand Jesus is reaching out to him, helping him into the boat again, and the water is stilled.

It seems to me that the image of the boat in windy waters must appeal to our faith community. It is for good reason that the Dutch Mennonite top hit is a song about wind and sailing.⁴

My sense is that we in our faith community are in the same situation as the boat with the disciples on the lake. We would really like to be safely ashore, but here we are in the midst of the wild waters of the world, and where are we heading? Yes, where – but it is dark and we do not know exactly what we will encounter on the other side. We have contrary winds, too; things are not going well with us right now. The world is becoming ever chillier, the waves seem to be rising higher and higher.

This document is an attempt to provide a direction for our thinking about the future of our faith community for the purpose of looking at our goals and what we want to propagate, thereby avoiding wreckage in the chaos. When we have the courage to take the hand of Jesus reaching out to us, allowing him to pull us out of the swirling water and to help us climb aboard again, we can relinquish our fear of the future, and the waters are stilled.

I want to emphasize that this paper is my personal vision, based on personal experience and informed by reading books and various internal papers published in recent years. I appreciate the readiness of a few people involved in the process to read the paper in its various phases and to offer feedback. They have been a big help to me in ordering my thoughts and in my writing. It is my hope that this paper may contribute to structuring further discussion on the content of our faith within the faith community, and stimulate it.

Naarden, August 2016

⁴ *Ik voel de winden Gods vandaag*, "I feel the winds of God today," no. 289 in the Mennonite *Liederenbundel*, the songbook published in 1944 and used in the congregations until 1973.

To show the trends of recent years and the present situation, I will provide an overview of the statistics on membership. I will also present a few statistics from the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN) to illustrate that the Mennonites are not in an isolated position. Through this approach, a fair and broad analysis can be made of our present situation.

In 2010, Mennonite congregations in the Netherlands had a 7,854 members. In addition, there were 3,262 associated members. In 2014, the statistics were 6,934 and 3,284 respectively, and in 2016, 6,085 and 3,036.⁵ This means that membership declined 13% from 2010 to 2014 and 11% from 2014 to 2016. The number of associated members appears to be declining less rapidly. Considering the age distribution, it is not to be expected that, for the time being, the process of rapid decline will be halted.⁶

It is striking that the decline can be attributed almost exclusively to the rate of decease of members; there are relatively few people who give up their membership. This contrasts with, for example, the Protestant Church or the Roman Catholic Church, who lose tens of thousands members annually through active termination. Although this has not been researched, it is possible that this difference is explained by the fact that membership in a Mennonite church is a conscious choice through adult baptism, or baptism on the basis of personal faith. It is evident that this practice stimulates greater fidelity to the conscious choice once made, even though it does not always lead to active participation in congregational life.

Although the number of members is declining rapidly, the number of congregations is not. In 2010, there were 116 congregations; in 2014 the number declined to 112 and in 2016 to 110. This means that the congregations are becoming smaller. In 2010, there were 6 congregations with more than 200 members (452-207); in 2016, there were only 4 (303-228). In these years, there were 12 congregations with a membership between 199 and 100; respectively 29 and 22 congregations had between 99 and 50 members; respectively 41 and 46 congregations had between 49 and 20 members; and respectively 19 and 28 congregations had fewer than 20 members, of which 2 congregations had fewer than 10 members in 2016. Obviously, these numbers have an effect on the activities that

⁵ Statistics provided by congregations for the *Doopsgezind Jaarboekje* of 2010, 2014, and 2016.

⁶ Returned questionnaires (> 80% of the congregations) filled in for the visits to congregations in 2014 show that 47% of the members are between 60 and 80 years old and 29% older than 80. (ADS/14.08.04892, *Stand van zaken gemeentebezoeken. Notitie ten behoeve van de BV november 2014*)

can be developed in smaller congregations. Approximately 36% of the members are considered actively involved; among the associated members,⁷ 30% are.

Nationally, more than 75% of the members are older than 60, 29% older than 80 (1977: 16.2% older than 77). Only 4% are younger than 40 (1977: 21.6% younger than 46). Certainly in the smaller congregations, the average age is advanced to very advanced. Youth work and Sunday School or similar work with youth and children is still being provided in 31 congregations. This varies from a small Sunday School held every few weeks to multiple groups divided by age and showing a broad range of activities.

This age structure means that the membership will continue to decline steadily. It is anticipated that at least 30% of the members will pass away in the coming ten years, whereas the number of baptisms will not compensate that loss. It is worthwhile to note that more baptisms have been taking place in recent years than has been the case for a long time.

Year	Number of members/associated members	Number of congregations
1950	39,000	148
1970	31,612	142
1977	25,052	141
1980	22,500	143
1990	16,858	136
1997	12,559	
2000	11,776	125
2010	7854/3262	116
2014	6934/3284	112
2016	6085/3036	110

Of the 110 congregations, 79 have their own church building. Six congregations share a building with a congregation with which there is cooperation, but do not own it. Finally, there are 6 congregations who have two or even more buildings. A large number of these churches are listed buildings⁸ of national or local governments, which brings with it additional requirements for maintenance. Here, too, the case is, of course, that as a congregation gets smaller, looking after a building becomes increasingly challenging.

There are 83 congregations who have one or more pastors; 7 congregations have more than one. Fourteen work in combinations of 2 to 3 congregations. Of the total

⁷ *Belangstellenden*, “interested persons.”

⁸ Or, “monuments.”

63 pastors, 48 are licensed ministers⁹ or licensed pastoral leaders¹⁰ and 15 are not. Of the 48 licensed ministers and pastoral leaders, 25 will be pensioners by 2026, and of the unlicensed, 9 will be. The size of the position varies from 1 FTE (fulltime) to 0.08 FTE; this pastor also has a position in another congregation. In general, the licensed ministers and pastoral leaders have the larger positions (0.5-1 FTE). There are only 7 congregations who have a minister with a fulltime position.

In recent years, a trend has developed towards lowering the size of a position when the congregation becomes vacant. Naturally, this gives rise to the question as to what the congregation's idea of the church is; when a congregation diminishes in size, the work of the minister in a smaller position does not decrease. The question also arises how much thought the congregation has given to its choices, or whether only financial considerations play a role. The same question applies to the choice of some congregations to appoint a pastoral worker instead of a licensed worker of the conference, primarily for financial reasons. Here, too, the issue is how these congregations think about disseminating Mennonite ideas and where the priorities are. Are the priorities focused on members only or also on disseminating identity, and what is that identity?

The above facts are not new, nor entirely unforeseen. Concerns about the future were already being raised in the conference in the 1970s, and the report called *B.O.L.T. (Broederschap op Lange Termijn, conference in the long term)* was published. This report established that the faith community was already shrinking by 3% a year. This trend has obviously continued and has even increased in recent years.

The rapidity of the secularization of Europe, especially in the Netherlands, can be considered surprising. The report *God in Nederland 1966-2015*¹¹ notes that, in 2015, for the first time, a majority of the Dutch, namely 58%, viewed themselves as non-believers (agnostics 34% and atheists 24%). In 2006, this was 40% (26% resp. 14%) and in 1996, 37% (27% resp. 10%). That is, whereas the increase in non-believers was only 3% between 1996 and 2006, in the last decade the increase was 10%.

The Mennonite faith community in the Netherlands is certainly not the only "traditional" denomination dealing with a substantial decline in membership. In the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN), the annual decline in membership is 2.6% to 2.8% (2007: 2,267,220 members; 2015: 1,969,755). Fewer baptisms are taking place in this church as well. In these years, the number of congregations

⁹ The Dutch word used is *proponent*, "ordinand," a ministerial candidate who has followed a study and training program approved by the Mennonite conference.

¹⁰ The Dutch word used is *voorganger*, "one who leads." The *voorganger* does not have the academic level of a minister but has followed a shorter academic program approved by the conference, and the higher education preceding it can be a college for higher professional education rather than a university. See the section on "Professional Workers."

¹¹ Ton Bernts and Joantine Berghuijs, *God in Nederland 1966-2015* (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2016).

decreased from 1,816 in 2006 to 1,597 in 2014.¹² At the same time, the number of ministers in service declined from 2,067 to 1,864, and the average age of ministers is rising.

Similar statistics with respect to decline in membership apply to the Dutch church province of the Roman Catholic Church as well.

With respect to the less traditional faith communities, such as migrant churches or charismatic churches, it is difficult to determine precise numbers because few of these churches have an umbrella organization. An exception is SKiN, Samen Kerk in Nederland, that is, church together in the Netherlands, which some of the migrant churches have formed. We can hazard the guess that these churches are experiencing some growth.

The decline in membership is therefore certainly not a purely Mennonite “problem.” It is occurring in all of Dutch church culture and outside the church. We should therefore cease to view it as a uniquely Mennonite “problem.” The way to the future will not consist in acquiring more members for an unchanged faith community, but in transforming that community.

Summary

The rapid decline in membership, already predicted in the late 1970s, has continued steadily and, in recent years, increased, primarily through attrition. A continued decline is inevitable. It is anticipated that, in the near future, many congregations will be dissolved because there are not enough members. The decline in church involvement is not limited to the Mennonites but is a general fact of church life in the Netherlands.

II THE STATE OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY

CONGREGATIONS

The number of congregations to the total number of members is high. Approximately half of the congregations have fewer than 40 members. It is precisely in the smaller congregations that the average age is advanced to very advanced.

It can be concluded from the facts collected on visits to congregations and from what I have experienced in the faith community, that small congregations with many older members face increasing problems in organizing things that are traditionally

¹² Protestantse Kerk Nederland, *Statistische jaarbrief 2015*, expertisecentrum Protestantse Kerk, April 23, 2015.

connected with “being the church.” Things like forming a church council, participating in ecumenical activities, holding special worship services, but certainly also sending representatives to national or regional meetings and organs are more and more under pressure. It is also becoming more and more difficult to organize the Sunday services and Bible study or discussion groups. This quickly results in a feeling of carrying the burden alone and in a sense that there is no future. And yet, such congregations often have a number of attractive characteristics as well. The members are often deeply involved with one another; the congregation is often a safe place for members who are lonely; people care for each other; and sometimes the congregation plays a role in the similarly small local community. That mutual involvement, often based on years of bonds in the congregation, is very valuable, even though no new members have joined for many years. It is very important that these congregations can do the things they are good at for as long as possible, and no longer do what takes too much effort or what they are not good at. It is not a must to do everything that can be done.

CHURCH COUNCILS

As congregations being visited mention again and again, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find candidates for functions in the church council. This is an effect of the trend that people do not want to bind themselves to tasks that are not clearly defined, or general tasks, for a long period. The trend fits in with the individualization and the de-institutionalization of our time. Various congregations have resolved this problem creatively by working with task groups and a small council that functions as coordinator. With this approach, the desire of members to get involved in concrete, controllable tasks suited to their area of interest is met. For smaller congregations, finding people for the functions is a problem, although this can also provide an additional motivation for reducing the number of tasks the congregation takes on.

Another experience is that many councils do not really know exactly what their task actually is. In many cases, the council organizes everything and also carries everything out without involving other members.

ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATION

The organizational structure of our faith community, with its many committees, independent foundations and institutions, conference assembly and conference council, is complicated and bulky. The form of organization has not adapted itself much to the reality of the number of members and congregations. The organization is practically the same as it was when there were more than 20,000 members.

The result of failing to adapt along the way is that we are now facing our limits in both the administrative and financial aspects and that we are forced to adapt. For this reason, the Landelijke Federatie van Doopsgezinde Zusterkringen (LFDZ, national federation of Mennonite women's groups) has decided to dissolve itself, among other things because of the decline of the number of groups and reduced involvement due to the advanced age of its members. The Stuurgroep Duurzame Ontwikkeling (SDO, steering group for sustainable development) is joining the Stichting Doopsgezind WereldWerk (DGWW, foundation for Mennonite work focusing on the world) in order to have a broader impact. The association Gemeenschap voor Doopsgezind Broederschapswerk (GDB, fellowship for Mennonite conference work) is becoming a foundation which will be involved only in managing its financial capital.

For some years, it has been difficult to find capable administrators for the conference council (BR), the regional councils, and the organizations. This is not only because of the declining size of the faith community, but also the phenomenon of a general mistrust of organizations. In this, too, we are inhibited by the fact that people do not want to commit themselves for a longer period to a task that is not clearly defined.

The conference assembly (BV) has had to make do with a turnout of 60% of the members or congregations for years. A number of small congregations in particular have a vacancy for a BV representative, and some representatives seldom appear at the meetings. It is doubtful that the principle of one vote per congregation, introduced in 1975, can be maintained, certainly at this time, when there are so many very small congregations. The model of the BV and the BR and everything connected with it needs to be adapted if the faith community is to be administered properly.

PROFESSIONAL WORKERS

As part of this memorandum, I would like to discuss the pastors in the faith community in particular. We differentiate between licensed ministers and unlicensed ones.¹³ With respect to the licensed ministers, appointed by the conference assembly, we distinguish between the Mennonite minister (three-year Master of Theology and Religious Studies at the VU University/Mennonite Seminary in Amsterdam), the Mennonite pastoral leader (one-year Master of Theology of various forms at the VU University/Mennonite Seminary), and those who have ministerial training with another denomination and have followed a program in Mennonite teaching. The ordinands from before the cooperation with the VU University,

¹³ See note 10.

including those of the so-called “second way,”¹⁴ are all referred to as Mennonite ministers. Among the unlicensed pastors are the sisters and brothers who have been trained elsewhere, for instance as a pastoral worker at a college for higher professional education (HBO), ministers trained in another denomination but not having followed the program in Mennonite teaching, and others.

Many workers have only part-time, sometimes very small, positions. It is important to note that, in many cases, licensed ministers hold somewhat larger positions than unlicensed ones.

Considering the anticipated developments in the number of congregations, the financial situation, and the finances of the remaining congregations, it is realistic to assume that there will be fewer job opportunities for pastors. For years, the trend has been to replace a departing minister with someone whose position is reduced. Congregations also frequently decide, as a matter of finances, to appoint a pastoral worker when an ordinand leaves. The result is, among other things, that some workers have to take on several small positions to be able to earn enough to live on; others have to take on an additional job to acquire an adequate income. In addition, congregations frequently appoint people who have not been trained at the Mennonite Seminary.

This combining of small positions means an additional burden for both the worker and the congregation involved. Working with several church councils, with all the additional meetings and diverse wishes, additional travel, time management, and, of course, having to lead services in various places results in the person working many more hours than the size of the positions justifies.

Appointing people who have not been trained at the Seminary leads to loss of Mennonite proclamation and therefore the loss of Mennonite identity.

POLICY

When considering the future, it is also important to look at the way people think about policy in the faith community. Thinking in terms of long-range policy plans is something that belongs more to the “olden” days, when structures were much more clearly defined than at present. In the organizational structure of an upside-down pyramid, a policy plan can be carried out because each level is accountable to the next level. In the developing structure, which is more of a network with many short, immediate, and project-oriented relations, it is more difficult to carry out policy plans. It is therefore ill-advised to give a lot of attention to developing policy plans

¹⁴ A Seminary program for people without an academic theological education who often had work experience for many years in other professions, such as teaching or nursing.

which are laid aside and never looked at again. Thinking and working in networks and projects is more compatible with our time.

Another point to consider is the question who is making policy for whom. Is it the congregations or the conference who make policy? It appears again and again that the congregational structure of our faith community, where the central organs have very little authority to make decisions and carry out the decisions of the national assembly (BV), cannot be enforced, is not conducive to developing a central policy. Only in a few practical matters, where the congregations have delegated authority to the conference, can it organize matters centrally. Examples of this are the salary administration, the arrangements for pensions, the collective insurances, and a few other collective arrangements.

THE GENERAL MENNONITE SOCIETY (ADS)

When the Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit (ADS) was established in 1811, it was given two tasks:

1. Maintaining a seminary for training teachers/ministers;
2. Financial support for “needy” congregations.

In the course of the two centuries of the ADS’s existence, other tasks have been added, especially in the last 50 years. Its tasks have come to include support for the congregations in every possible way and representation of the Mennonites in other organizations. The ADS supports the congregations through awarding grants, information/guidance in building up congregations, national youth work, etc.

Today, these things are the primary task of the ADS. The ADS represents the faith community in 21 various inter-church organizations, such as the Council of Churches in the Netherlands, Europe and the world; the SILA, a general membership administration for churches;¹⁵ Mennonite World Conference; the CIO, an inter-church contact point for matters relating to government, etc. The ADS also includes a number of committees: a supervisory board, an advisory board for spiritual matters, a support group for sexual abuse in pastoral relations, a committee concerning the relations between Jews and Christians, a steering committee for sustainable development, a committee for Indonesia, a committee for the cultural property of Mennonite churches, a distribution committee, an archives committee, a committee

¹⁵ Local governments used to register the religion of citizens in their records and to send such information to the church involved, but when the government decided to discontinue this practice, the SILA was set up to compensate the cutting back of this service. If a religion is still registered in a person’s records, the local government sends information such as changes of address to the SILA, and this organization sends it to the relevant denominational office.

for counseling ministers and congregations in their mutual relations (BPGOR, “the committee with the long name”), and a communications board.

The ADS is also responsible for the IDGP, the agency which administrates the salaries of congregational workers, pays them, collects the money from the congregations, and performs other employer-related tasks. The GO, a group responsible for consultation about the terms of employment for congregational workers, falls under the ADS.

The Seminary, too, falls under the ADS. The Board of Governors (CvC), which is accountable to the membership assembly (BV) via the executive council (BR), directs the faith content. The CvC consists of seven persons appointed by the BV. Getting new members for this board is also a problem.

THE CONFERENCE OFFICE

There are at present 11 permanent employees at the ADS (in total 7.7 FTE) and one freelance worker (± 12 hours per week). The appointments at the Seminary are not included.

The division of labor among the permanent employees is:

Director/general secretary: 1.0 FTE

Adviser congregation building: 0.8 FTE

Adviser youth work: 0.5 FTE

Editorial board *Doopsgezind nl* (national magazine) and *Doopsgezind Nu* (digital Mennonite magazine): 0.27 FTE

Human relations worker: 0.2 FTE

Secretariat, catering, cleaning, and administrative support for communications: 2.4 FTE

Financial administration and ICT: 2.6 FTE.

The requests made to the office have increased greatly the past few years. The problems of congregations with a smaller membership and higher average age, and of finding people to do the work, mentioned earlier, means that the ADS is asked for help more frequently. The financial administration is being done for an increasing number of congregations. The adviser for congregation building is involved with individual congregations thinking about their future, the general secretary is more frequently approached on a wide range of matters which cannot always be referred to the adviser for congregation building or to others. The rise of the Internet has led to more activity in websites for the ADS itself but also for congregations. As described above, in our time, when images play an increasingly stronger role, it is important for the faith community to have a recognizable character.

The work for the IDGP, the salary administration, collections of money, payments, reports of the sick and recovered, providing information, etc. create more pressure for the office, in particular in the financial department. This is compensated by the fact that the foundation for the pension fund has been dissolved, for which the department did the administration; the pension administration is now incorporated into the salary administration.

In the past few years, constant extra pressure has been created through changing to a new bookkeeping system, planning and setting up the IDGP, applying a different salary administration system, changing to a new membership administration system, and, finally, the new website.

Increasingly, congregations are turning to the adviser for congregation building. The activities for individual congregations take up a lot of time. Since spring 2016, training sessions for church councils have been held; considering the attendance and the reactions, they meet a need. More attention should be given to this kind of service. The question is whether the term “congregation building” should not be replaced by “advice to congregations” or “support for congregations.” Since a congregation has to do the building up itself, it is doubtful that “congregation building” is the right term to use. It is more a matter of transforming or reforming than building.

The adviser for youth work is primarily involved in supporting inter-congregational activities. Considering that the majority of the involved youth participate in these activities, this seems to be the right choice. In the small number of congregations where there is substantial youth work, the capable youth workers there do not need practical support. The ADS could try to invite youth workers to meet occasionally to exchange expertise. In various places, much good work is being done that deserves a broader public.

The secretariat, occupied from Monday to Thursday, is very important for the progress of the work. The staff does an excellent job of looking after people at the meetings of committees and organizations, handling telephone calls and mail, sending out documents, and the like. The ADS secretariat also serves as secretariat for the Seminary. In general, the secretariat is perfectly adequate as the first point of contact for people having to do with the ADS.

In pre-digital times, substantially more tasks were done by hand. Setting up documents, and printing, assembling, stapling, and sending them to BV members, for instance, was a huge operation requiring several weeks of work by a number of people. Now more material is sent digitally, and the equipment is faster and does the sorting, with the result that the whole process, starting with the preparation of documents, is much quicker and requires fewer people. Since the onset of the e-mail, distinctly fewer letters are being written by hand.

There is also less work by hand with regard to publications. Articles seldom need to be typed up, and the layout of *Doopsgezind nl* has been contracted out. Recently the CMS (Content Management System) has been doing the layout for the digital newsletter *Doopsgezind NU*. Since the *Doopsgezind nl* magazine is now being sent to all members, hardly any administration of subscriptions is necessary.

The reduction and change in the work has resulted in a reduction in the staff complement at the secretariat. Further thought needs to be given to other changes in the staff complement and/or their activities.

Appointing a Human Resources Officer for the IDGP has improved the quality of service to congregations with respect to the relations with those in salaried positions. The involvement required is varied. Sometimes a counseling process in cases of illness and/or conflict requires a great deal of time, and in other cases advice given by telephone is sufficient. This officer is financed by the money congregations pay for the service provided by the IDGP.

As the title suggests, the general secretary/director has a dual function. On one hand, as general secretary, the officer maintains contact with the congregations, supports boards and committees, and participates extensively in developing policy. As director, the officer is responsible for managing the ADS office. In this function, of course, frequent and intensive consultation with the responsible governing bodies is necessary. Since these functions overlap, it is almost impossible to indicate precisely how much time is necessary for each.

There is frequent consultation with the so-called management team, which consists of, besides the director, the adviser for congregation building and the rector of the Seminary. At these meetings, matters having to do with the faith community and those related to the office are discussed.

GOVERNING STRUCTURE

The question concerning who governs what is parallel to the one concerning who makes policy and to what purpose. It is clear that the congregation is governed by the church council, while the membership meeting makes the final decisions. In the faith community, the conference council (BR) is the governing body and the conference assembly of members (BV) makes the final decisions.

The fundamental issue is, what the BR is governing in the faith community and on what policy, precisely, the BV makes decisions. Naturally, it is about matters going beyond the local congregation, such as representation of the faith community, points of view on ecumenical issues, and the policy of the organization with respect to the congregations – in short, what the congregations need from the ADS. However, it is not concerned with congregational policy, how one believes, or matters such as the

content, frequency, or form of the church service. The ADS's role is emphatically to support the congregations. It is the responsibility of the congregations to nurture a life of faith, while the ADS's task is to facilitate congregations in this as much as possible. Besides this, many legal regulations, such as those concerning staff appointments and the maintenance of listed buildings, have become so complicated that the volunteers in the governing bodies can hardly grasp them on their own.

In 1975, a structure was chosen for the conference assembly (BV) whereby each congregation is represented (or should be) and has one vote. Originally, there was a large BR (around 30 people), in which the ADS organizations were also represented, with a small executive committee. In the 1990s, this structure was changed: there was a smaller BR without the organizations and an advisory BR+ with representatives from the organizations and regions. Finally, in the first years of this century, a decision was made to dissolve the BR+ and to reduce the BR to a maximum of nine members. The executive committee disappeared in both these changes in structure. Since this did not really work either, a consultation group consisting of the chairperson, secretary, and treasurer was formed which took care of current business and prepared the meetings. This "CST consultation" has not been set down in the rules and regulations and therefore has no real authority.

In the period when there was little trust between the BV and the BR, a decision was made to change the rules and regulations to include a supervisory board (RvT) which, on behalf of the BV, assesses the way the BR carries out the resolutions of the BV and reports to it.

The structure of the BV-BR-RvT is subject to "wear and tear." This results in some problems threatening good governance:

- It is seldom that more than 55% of the total number of representatives appear at the BV. When fewer than 50% show up, no decisions can be made.
- A number of congregations have a vacancy for BV representative.
- Some BV representatives have had this function for a very long time. It is doubtful, in some cases, as to the extent to which there is consultation with the church council/membership meeting, and, therefore, whether the positions taken are supported by the congregations. A few representatives give the impression that there has been no consultation at all, which visits to congregations sometimes affirm.
- The role of the RvT is not clear. This is caused partly by its name, which has a different connotation in industry. There, the supervisory board has a very different, more hierarchical role than it does in our faith community.
- It is particularly difficult to find suitable or capable members for the BR and RvT. This has to do with the general developments in society named earlier. In spite of the smaller BR, it is also difficult to find suitable meeting times,

certainly because of the desire to include non-pensioners in the BR and to maintain regional representation and a balance between men and women. These problems are caused by the way regions are distributed, difficulties in making time during the day, and similar.

- There is a discrepancy between the expectations expressed in the BV and the possibilities the BR has in policy development.
- The representatives seldom feel inspired by the agenda of the BV because of the great number of business matters included in it.
- A few items of the agenda, namely, those in the financial field, are beyond the competence of many representatives and yet – or because of that - get a lot of attention and time at meetings.
- One of the many complaints about the present BV is that the financial accountability requires too much time and is too specialized for many representatives. A few years ago, an intermediate form was introduced, whereby the treasurers of the congregations are invited to discuss the financial reports and budgets of the ADS, already audited, and its related organizations (primarily the former pension fund foundation SPF and the ministerial salary administration IDGP). These gatherings, incidentally attended to a varying degree, have no regulatory status and therefore also no authority of approbation.
- The assembly is too large to allow for a good exchange of ideas. The discussion and, as a result, the atmosphere, is often dominated by a few representatives. Other representatives are never, or rarely, heard.

Many other points could doubtlessly be mentioned. One aspect with respect to the BV that is often mentioned as a positive thing, and that certainly should not be neglected, is the informal meeting that takes place with other representatives.

COMMUNICATION

In our time, communication requires a lot of attention. It is very important to be identifiable and univocal in our communication. Much attention has been given to the subject in our faith community in recent years.

- The *Algemeen Doopsgezind Weekblad* (ADW) has become *Doopsgezind NL*, and a few years ago it became a magazine appearing 10 times a year.
- A digital newsletter, *Doopsgezind NU*, is published every two weeks.
- The websites have been upgraded to *Doopsgezind Web* and given an attractive lay-out and a new Content Management System (CMS). Congregations can also make use of this lay-out and the CMS, which is beneficial for identifiability.

- Various expressions, such as the yearbook, the annual report, and the material for the annual theme now follow the house style (*Doopsgezind INFO* and *Doopsgezind THEMA*).
- The newest offshoot is *Doopsgezind plus*, an extra publication with more pastoral content, which targets senior Mennonites who can no longer get to church readily. Originally, the intention was to distribute this publication only to subscribers, but, considering the positive reactions, and, taking costs and editing issues into account, including it in *Doopsgezind NL* as a supplement is being considered; in this way, the whole faith community is reached.

These developments are partly due to the work of the coordinator of communications, who was, and is, the driving force behind the activities mentioned.

ORGANIZATIONS

The organizations referred to in this section work on behalf of, or proceeding from, the Mennonite faith community, in the world or for the benefit of the Mennonite faith community itself. These are: the Doopsgezinde Zending (DZ, Mennonite mission), the Stichting Vrouwenzendingshulp (VZH, foundation for assistance to women missionaries), Doopsgezind WereldWerk (DGWW, Mennonite work in the world), Gemeenschap voor Doopsgezind Broederschapswerk (GDB, fellowship for building up the faith community), the Landelijke Federatie van Doopsgezinde Zusterkringen (LFDZ, the national federation of women's groups), and finally, the Stuurgroep Duurzame Ontwikkeling (SDO, steering committee for sustainable development).

The GDB has decided to turn itself into a foundation that only manages the capital and publishes materials on the annual theme. Other activities have been variously delegated. The LFDZ has decided to end its activities within a year. The SDO will integrate its activities for sustainability into the DGWW. In all three of these decisions, the increasing difficulty to keep the organization going because of a shortage of new board members and a decline in members, along with their advanced age, plays a role.

This applies to a somewhat lesser degree in the other organizations, but they are certainly expected to follow the trend in the near future. Some congregations have the feeling that there is a gap between the congregation and the organizations. To give people a real sense that the organizations work on behalf of, and proceed from, the faith community, it would be meaningful for the future to strengthen the bond between the faith community and its organizations. This can also have a positive effect on a vision on mission and aid that is broadly supported.

For this reason, it is also meaningful, even necessary, for the organizations to re-orient themselves. For many years, an effort has been made to combine resources, a goal partially fulfilled in the establishment of the DGWW, in which the Stichting Bijzondere Noden (foundation for special needs) and the Doopsgezinde Vredesgroep (Mennonite peace group) have been consolidated. Ultimately, the mission organization did not join it.

INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

The ADS is a member of the Mennonite World Conference (MWC). As such, it is represented in the General Council. Since 2012, the present General Secretary/Director of the ADS is secretary of the Deacons Commission (one of four commissions of the MWC; the other three are: Peace, Faith and Life, and Mission), and since 2014, he is the regional representative for Europe/European coordinator. Both functions are MWC staff functions, and the ADS receives a small fee from the MWC for his work as secretary and from the other European Mennonite faith communities for his work as European coordinator; the ADS also contributes to this. Neither of these international tasks are connected to the function at the ADS.

Since 2015, Rev. Wieteke van der Molen is representing the ADS in the General Council and is a member of the Faith and Life Commission. During the Assembly in Harrisburg in 2015, she held a sermon that was greatly appreciated by many.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the majority of the member churches of the MWC are located in the southern hemisphere instead of in North America and Europe. This results in a great diversity of color, literally and figuratively. Certainly, the African and Asian faith communities contribute a more evangelical identity. It is evident that the Dutch Mennonites belong to the most liberal faith communities in relation to the majority of the members.

It is perturbing to see the division occurring at present in the Mennonite Church USA, where regional conferences are separating from the main one because of disunity about the stance on homosexuality. With respect to faith statements, MWC takes the position that it is not a worldwide church which promulgates dogmas or faith positions, but that it is a platform for meeting, discussion, and mutual solidarity. The question is, what impact the discussions and schisms in North America will have on the MWC.

Although Dutch involvement and interest was actually limited to a small, permanent group for centuries, interest has definitely grown in recent years. There were more than 100 Dutch Mennonites, including a group of 40 youth, at the recent Assembly in 2015. This is in line with the general trend towards globalization; it is easier and cheaper to travel nowadays, and the world seems to have become smaller

due to developments on the digital front. There appears to be more interest in the international community among Dutch Mennonites. It is striking that there is also more interest in the Dutch Mennonites. This interest has arisen in North America because American Mennonites realize that they, too, have to do with increasing secularization and assimilation into the society around them, and they see that this process has been in progress in the Netherlands for decades, even centuries. Then too, for Americans, Europe is the continent of their ancestors and of interest on that account alone. Interest is growing in Africa and Asia because Anabaptists there are becoming interested in the origin of the Anabaptists in Switzerland and the role of Menno Simons later on. When journeys to Europe are undertaken, Witmarsum is a favorite goal for many.

III CONGREGATIONAL MODELS

The Dutch Mennonite congregation functions in a local context; it is bound to a certain place. The congregation is centered around a building and the Sunday service and relies on its membership. This is sometimes called a static congregational model. To a great extent, this model will not be sustainable in future. Thought is being given to other congregational structures and models for some time already. In this chapter, I will discuss some of these developments of thought about congregational models.

Early in the 1970s, Rev. Jan Matthijssen (1924-1978), then minister in Amsterdam, presented a proposal to the church council to divide the congregation into small groups, “mini congregations,” on the premise that it is impossible to get to know each other in a larger congregation; in his view, it is an important characteristic of a congregation that people “know” each other. In an interview in the church paper *In dit Amsterdam* in 1976, on the occasion of his 25th anniversary as a minister, he says concerning this, “To be a community, you need to have contact with each other. To facilitate this, without necessarily being intimate friends with everyone, it is necessary that we ‘know’ each other. ‘Know’ is placed between quotation marks because it means more than being acquaintances.... I still think that, if the plan had been adopted then, we would have been better off now. I believe that it is now too late for this approach, for we have grown so small that we need to cluster our resources.” A little later he says about the small groups, “Every group can form such a community. These communities can be discussion groups, groups for young families, house meetings. That is, they can be little congregational units.... Such groups should initially be open, and after a time they would perhaps have to split up. I do not see these as the ‘ideal congregation,’ but these small cells can play a good role in the whole. Now, this should not be dismissed as an attempt to imitate a village congregation; that has nothing to do with it.” In response to the question whether it

is important for the future of a congregation to present a clear identity, he says, “Yes, but then it is not as important on which front that is the case. Presenting a clear identity can occur on dozens of fronts, about which each group will have to make a choice.” When the interviewer mentions a number of Anabaptist “traditions” such as a frugal lifestyle, non-violence, and adult baptism, Mr. Matthijssen says, “I believe that the fact that someone wants to belong to Christ is the only important one; the rest is frills, but in terms of ‘frills,’ I still regard those points of Anabaptist faith as important ‘frills,’ important matters.”¹⁶

Mr. Matthijssen posits that this approach is not feasible in 1976 because the congregation has become too small, and it is necessary to cluster all its resources. He argues this from the situation of the Amsterdam congregation, which at that time had about 1200 members. In the meantime, many congregations have become so small that, in terms of numbers, they are just such a little group, such a “mini-congregation.” The difference is that, although Mr. Matthijssen calls them “mini-congregations,” he assumes that their activities are limited to discussion groups, young families, etc., whereas the congregations that have become so small often try to keep as many activities as possible going and get bogged down as a result.

The model proposed by Mr. Matthijssen is in many ways similar to the present model of the “small groups” that is applied in North America in particular. The congregation is split up into a number of small groups, mostly consisting of six to 10 people. These small groups meet regularly, often once a week, pray and eat together, and share their concerns in the area of faith and everyday life. Their involvement with each other is very important and enriching for participants. They do not necessarily form groups of friends, but small fellowship units of people who are bound together by faith, sharing ups and downs and being there for each other when necessary.

Jan Hendriks, a Dutch congregation builder, has presented a number of models over the years which are also familiar in our faith community. These include things like “the vital and attractive congregation,” “the congregation as hostel,” etc. Over the years, a very small number of congregations have worked on a different way of being in the world using these models, but most of them have ultimately carried on in the way familiar to them.

Another model has been developed by the American missiologist and anthropologist Paul Hiebert (1932-2007). He speaks of bounded sets and centered sets. By “bounded set,” he means the situation in which we set boundaries on who belongs and who doesn’t. The boundary can be theological, doctrinal, or behavioral. Within the boundary, it is safe and warm, and there is a clear separation from the bad world outside full of dangers. But, in contrast to this, there is the centered set, a

¹⁶ Bert Hampe, “Jan Matthijssen: 25 jaar predikant,” interview *In dit Amsterdam*, July 1976.

situation in which there are no boundaries. There is no dividing line between us and them, and there are no rules about who belongs and who doesn't; everyone is welcome and accepted. Nevertheless, there is a center which attracts and fascinates people. There is no gatekeeper, but everyone who moves towards the center belongs. The degree of involvement with each other does not depend on whether or not you are within the boundaries, rather on how close you are to the center and in what direction you are moving. Those closest to the center will be more involved with each other, but also those far away from it can be involved with others, for instance, with those who are moving towards the center.¹⁷

The congregation can be compared to the images of the congregation as a magnet (centered) or as a stone (bounded). The congregation that is like a stone is hardened; it has built up high walls to protect itself and is inward-looking. The congregation that is like a magnet attracts people and has no clear boundary.

The absence of a clear boundary is also seen in the model of a fluid congregation. In this model, people have a network of relationships where they meet each other in varying combinations at various times.¹⁸ The Dutch theologian Willem van der Meijden refers to the fluid church as the "future church." Dutch Pastor Andries Bakker, like Mr. Van der Meijden, uses the terms static congregation and fluid congregation in his report on his study leave in 2008. He presents the fluid congregation more as an alternative alongside the static congregation and makes a case for openness of the static congregation towards a fluid congregation.

It is my conviction that a congregational model suited to our faith community of the future will be characterized by the absence of a clear boundary (fluid) and by small cores of believers (centered sets) connected around a clear identity and a group of involved people.

IV REFLECTION

In the above paragraphs I have indicated the situation of the Mennonite faith community in terms of statistics. I also indicated that the decline is not a uniquely Mennonite phenomenon. All "established" denominations show the same trend. Then I discussed the situation in our faith community at present and provided examples of congregational models. In this section, I would like to look at how these facts can be placed in the broader framework of developments in society, followed by

¹⁷ Jeremy Myers, "Bounded sets ad centered sets." <https://redeeminggod.com/bounded-sets-centered-sets/>.

¹⁸ W. van der Meijden, Lecture at the Contact Day of the Vrijzinnigen Noord-Nederland, April 5, 2008, appearing on www.zinweb.nl May 24, 2008.

a look at how our faith community views the decline in membership and an attempt at providing a vision of the future as I think it could be.

In comments on national statistics, it is often pointed out that a distinction must be made between religion and piety. Joep de Hart, professor of Church and World at the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands, writes in his book *Geloven binnen en buiten verband* (faith within and without affiliation), “In our country, secularization has clearly been increasing for some time. Fewer Dutch people are members of a church, church services are attended less and less frequently – at present this applies to 31%, respectively 18% of the population.... We have seen that this does not mean that people see themselves as unbelievers or non-religious. Traditional truths of Christian faith and involvement in a church are evidently regarded by many as only one of many forms of religious experience, which belong primarily to former times.”¹⁹ He uses the term “believing without belonging” for the group having religious feelings without belonging to a church. On the other hand, the term “belonging without believing” is also used. This term seldom – or not at all - refers to believing church members.²⁰

Another aspect of the changing relations with respect to churches in the Netherlands is the similarly changing view on the position and role of churches and religion in society. Studies show that the church is regarded as less important to society in every respect. For instance, the Dutch increasingly consider religion to be a “private matter which deserves respect, and which, according to them, it gets,”²¹ but like organizations, churches are not trusted much. The role of the churches as a socially uniting force is now considered of less importance than was the case in 2006. This change in the view of the importance of the church to society is also to be seen among people who are, in fact, church members. They, too, increasingly regard the church as a private matter.

In his reflection on the statistics, Mr. De Hart points to the trend towards religious individualization. He means that inner experience is regarded as the source of knowledge and that the view of religiosity is not so much connected to a group happening or a church but as something personal that has to be put together from what the various traditions offer.²² Mr. De Hart then points out that this individualization is going hand in hand with de-institutionalization. Indeed, de-institutionalization is very evident in the context of the church, but it certainly does not apply only to the church! It is a general trend in society. We can observe clubs

¹⁹ Joep de Hart, *Geloven binnen en buiten verband, Godsdienstige ontwikkelingen in Nederland* (The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, May 2014), 73.

²⁰ De Hart, 75.

²¹ De Hart, 54.

²² De Hart, 124.

everywhere having problems with decreasing involvement, which is expressed in loss of members and less volunteer commitment on the part of members.

Such a trend is also to be seen in the Mennonite faith community. A commonly heard comment is that it is very difficult to find new council members or members who are willing to serve on a committee. This complaint is certainly not restricted to small congregations, as congregations who seem to have enough members to recruit also face this dilemma. This problem exists in the organizations, national committees, and bodies of representatives as well. Even among Mennonites, members evidently do not want to commit themselves to a more general task, which is often not clearly defined, for a long period. This trend is not only due to the average advanced age of members, but it is also a phenomenon in the wider society.

The present era, in which Christians are no longer dominant and in a leading position, is called post-Christianity in the Western world. In this section, the term Christianity refers to the era in which Christians were dominant in the Western world. With few exceptions, people were considered to be Christians. This does not, of course, mean that everyone was, therefore, a believer or participated in the church.

The structures familiar to us from the time of Christianity do not provide answers for society and culture as they manifest themselves in the era of post-Christianity. People distrust institutions. In post-Christianity, there is a very limited knowledge of Christianity. Generations have grown up without the stories of the Bible, without knowing what the Christian feasts are, without ever having seen a church from the inside, and without any idea what liturgy is. Christianity as a leading cultural, social, and political concept is a thing of the past, at least in Western culture. We will have to get used to a minority position. Mennonites can, in truth, argue at this point that they always were in a minority position. This is true, but this was still in a culture that can be described as Christian. Since the Constantinian era, there has never been a time when the majority of the population regarded itself as non-Christian. We, therefore, have a whole new situation to deal with, and for the Christian churches, it is a wholly unfamiliar one.

Another characteristic of post-Christianity is that, in general, people consider it more important that their faith be practical, than that faith be theoretically true. First belonging to a community and experiencing whether or not the Christians in it are living according to the values they propagate is therefore preferable to first believing them.²³ In the Mennonite faith community, this phenomenon reveals itself in the fact that the number of interested/friends in the congregations are decreasing less (in fact, rising in some cases) than the number of members. The average age among the

²³ "Belonging before believing," in contrast to "believing before belonging." Stuart Murray Williams, *Church after Christendom* (London: Send the Light, 2004), 19.

interested is also lower. A person registered as interested often chooses for baptism after a long period of time, or sometimes not at all. I suspect that this also has to do with the view - or lack of one - the congregation has of the value and meaning of baptism. A comment often heard is that baptism is given so much significance and is experienced so much as a kind of final exam, that the threshold becomes so high that no one dares to cross it. Here and there people make a case for dispensing with baptism as the criterion for membership, perhaps with the thought at the back of the mind that the congregation will get more members that way. Indeed, we do need to reflect on whether baptism and confession should continue to be a requirement for membership in the community or whether it would not be better to be less stringent about whether or not someone belongs to the community. When you ask an African Mennonite how many members the congregation has, you should not be astonished if he says, "We have 400 members, of which 50 are baptized." In this case, belonging to the community is based on a different concept than baptism. Whoever feels a bond with a community, belongs to it. Confession and baptism are connected far more with personal conversion than with an "entrance ritual" for joining the congregation.

As described in the section on congregational models, there are many models that can be developed. All of them can ultimately be reduced to the image of the congregation as an attractive center that draws people to it and does not have a clearly defined boundary, as opposed to the static congregation with its clearly drawn boundary and looking inward. Whichever image writers use, all of them lead to the conclusion that the demarcated congregation is not suited to the era of post-Christianity. The open models with fluid boundaries, to which people may feel attracted, perhaps temporarily, seem to be better suited. This is more than opening yourself up as a congregation in order to welcome people. It is not about enticing people to join in, or about converting others. A wholly different way of being in the world is involved. The issue is that the congregation becomes part of the world around it, listening to the other and letting itself be formed by it. People who want to belong to a congregation contribute themselves and their faith to changing it. We are challenged really to be what we pretend to be.

It is evident that this alternative way of viewing the congregation also brings risks. In his book, *Waar blijft de kerk* (where is the church), the Dutch theologian Erik Borgman quotes, among others, Pope Francis: "What...has to happen is that the church goes into the streets to seek people and to get to know their names. This is to be done not only because it is the church's mission, but because it causes damage if it neglects this.... What happens to a church which limits itself to the controllable work in the parish, which lives locked into its own community, is what happens to people

who are cut off from the world outside: they fade away physically and spiritually. Or it is damaged, like a closed-off room where mold and moisture spread.”

People who go out into the street can have an accident. But it is better to take that risk than to remain self-satisfied and thereby risk becoming paranoid and autistic. The church needs to look beyond itself to where the Spirit speaks to it in what the Second Vatican Council identifies as “the signs of the time.”²⁴

Summary

The fact that people turn away from the “institutional church” does not automatically mean that they regard themselves as non-religious or without faith. Church and faith are increasingly being regarded as a private matter. The importance of the churches is rapidly declining as a result. There is not much faith in churches as organizations.

De-institutionalization is a phenomenon of society at large and is not related to the size of an organization or congregation.

In post-Christian society, the congregational model familiar to us is obviously inadequate. The goal is to form open core groups that are attractive because they are communities where the people belonging to them live according to their confession.

This period of decline, or rather of change, offers us an excellent opportunity and challenge to return to the essence of what it means to be a community. It is an opportunity to deepen our life of faith. There are examples of congregations which have sold their church buildings or have given it a different purpose. They no longer have to gather frenetically with five people in the church to listen to a minister every week but now gather once in five weeks in house groups where participants probably experience more depth than in attending a church service as a passive listener.

Our faith community has, of course, been reflecting on the future and discussing it for some time. And, besides being about preservation, the discussion was also about the content of our faith. I already discussed the proposals of Rev. Mathijssen, but there are more. I will mention a few other moments in chronological order.

THE B.O.L.T. REPORT

In 1975, the conference council (BR) of the time established a committee that was to collect facts about developments in the membership of the congregations – there were 25,052 members at the time – and to draw conclusions for, among other things, the number of ministerial positions that could be maintained. It was proposed that

²⁴ Erik Borgman, *Waar blijft de kerk, Gedachten over opbouw in tijden van afbraak* (Baarn: Adveniat Geloofseducatie, 2015), 137-139.

they consider a period of 10 years. In addition, the council requested advice concerning some financial matters such as the contributions of congregations to the ADS, taking these developments into account. I will not be including the financial aspect in my considerations. The committee is called Commissie Broederschap op Lange Termijn: B.O.L.T (the committee on the conference in the long-term).

The committee presented its report, with recommendations, in 1978.²⁵ Using facts about membership numbers among the Mennonites derived from the censuses of 1947, 1960, and 1971,²⁶ a questionnaire sent to congregations, and the reports for the conference yearbook, a prognosis was made for the following 10 years. The report assumed that the decline would continue at the same rate as in the preceding years, on the average a little more than 3% a year. Several conclusions were drawn from the prognosis, of which the main one was, in summary: The congregations should go public more. They should be missionaries in their own environment. Other recommendations were:

1. The members should be prepared better through training, not only in going public but also for mutual pastoral care.
2. Congregations should consult with each other about creating work areas encompassing 300 to 400 members for ministers, with the aim of retaining 60 ministerial positions in the late 1980s.
3. The Seminary should be equipped to provide training for ministers who are inadequately grounded in theology.
4. The Seminary should continue to be equipped to train ordinands educated in theology at the university level.

Unfortunately, it is not clear from the B.O.L.T. report whether the members of the committee also looked at developments in other churches of the time. No doubt a similar trend was to be observed in other churches. Neither were developments in society as a whole taken into account in the study and considerations.

In the report, the decline in membership is regarded as a “problem” that must be solved. The problem is approached primarily statistically. There is no reference to causes for the decline other than identifying administrative errors, such as losing contact with members when they move elsewhere. It is striking that the recommendations do not tamper with the conference structure or congregational model in any way. In spite of the fact that there are four theologians in the committee, nothing is said about theology, except that the conjecture is expressed that there is interest in undogmatic Christianity. Congregations are advised to do more on missions, but the message they are to spread is not defined. A system of

²⁵ *Verslag en aanbevelingen van de commissie Broederschap op Lange termijn (B.O.L.T.). Rapport aan de Broederschapsvergadering van de Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit, June 1978.*

²⁶ At that time, a person’s religion was included in the municipal records.

appointing ministers centrally through the conference in connection with social benefits is mentioned briefly, as well as a comment on the autonomy of the congregation, but it is evident that the committee does not want to burn its fingers on this matter. "Solutions" are therefore sought in general measures which maintain the existing structure. This fits the context of the period in which the report appeared.

Ed van Straten, a minister who was the general secretary of the ADS at the time, does include faith matters in his policy advice as a result of the report. He writes about the faith community: "The basis of our existence as a conference is: entrusting ourselves personally to the Lord, and our confession of it also means that our faith community produces a colorful whole. We are birds of different feathers but are all birds. We are together, and remain so, not because we agree with each other on every point of teaching and lifestyle, but on the basis of our common understanding of:

- inner piety, colored differently from one to another, but with the same intensity;
- the space we create for each other to experience personal faith and to reveal it in our own way;
- radicalism which leads members to draw consequences from their faith, and must do so, and we may, and must, remind each other of the seriousness of those consequences;
- a bond with each other, the warmth of which we experience with joy each time; a bond because we make closeness, space, and radicalism possible for each other and share it, even when we do not speak and act in the same way."²⁷

There is no evidence of anything being done with these statements. In any case, no trace of them can be found in the decision making, and neither are they mentioned anywhere in the discussion - at least, not according to the minutes of the BV assemblies. Immediately after the report has appeared, various representatives state in the BV that the report does not concern itself with faith but purely with statistics. A request is made several times for a document about faith matters that deals with identity.

A year after the policy advice, and nearly a year-and-a-half after the B.O.L.T. report appears, the BV of October 1980 resolves as follows:

1. The ADS will give high priority to developing ideas about policy in the congregations.

²⁷ E. van Straten, *Beleidsadvies ten behoeve van de Broederschapsvergadering van 13 oktober 1979*, 3.

2. The ADS will establish a study group to stimulate congregations to think about policy and to guide and support them in this.
3. The ADS will stimulate organizations separately but especially also in combination to respond to requests for concrete assistance and to try to meet them.
4. The ADS will have to appoint other workers for these tasks besides those already in place.
5. The job description for the publications committee will be broadened for the purpose of furthering and supporting publicity.
6. The ADS will be responsible for creating clarity in the congregations regarding the task and the procedures of the office for those who have moved (Verhuisdenbureau).

In the minutes there is no reference to the requests about matters of faith.

It is evident from the formulation of these resolutions, that those involved are convinced that the “problem” can be solved by a few technical measures, whereas they ultimately avoid the discussion on faith. In any case, there has been very little reflection about fundamental changes in the faith community. At the time, the churches rested on the idea that Christendom had been dominant in the Western world and still was, even though its role was rapidly crumbling. The churches had not yet adjusted to the frame of thought that this would soon no longer be the case. Since then, society has undergone fundamental changes.

VOOLSTRA’S ADDRESS

In his speech at the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Mennonite Historical Society in 1988, Sjouke Voolstra, professor at the Mennonite Seminary, said about policy in the faith community, “People attempted to develop policy as a business, forgetting that, in a church, only a confession [of faith] may be called policy.”²⁸ There is certainly much truth in that. A congregation cannot develop policy as if it is a business, because the structure, organization, and goal are totally different. Mennonite confession should always be our point of departure. That is the basis for a congregation’s thinking about principles and projects; these support the confession.

Mr. Voolstra poses that the “constituents of Mennonite faith heritage which cannot be given up” are: “A personal confession of Christ that is not like drifting sand but rather the fundament of confession.... An understanding of the congregation as a community of people who have committed themselves to God in baptism, the Lord’s

²⁸ Sjouke Voolstra, “Doopsgezinde Historische Kring, 25 jaar van dienstbaarheid, Bewerking van een voordracht ter gelegenheid van het 25 jarig jubileum van de DHK te Elspeet op 6 november 1998,” in *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen nieuwe reeks* 26 (2000), 16.

Supper, and a certain lifestyle reflecting the obligation to love God and neighbor. A congregation that knows what it means to limit itself in many areas: not everything that is possible, may, needs, or has to be done. A congregation that also knows how to be patient, avoiding hasty judgements and the use of violence. Finally, a congregation that is trustworthy in its witness concerning God and in its relationship to others.”²⁹

CONTOURENNOTA

In 2000, the new BR taking office after a period of administrative turmoil published a memorandum outlining its policy, called *Het Verhaal, de Plek en de Mensen* (the story, the place, and the people).³⁰

The preface includes the following remarks: “The starting-point of our work is our awareness that the living congregations of believers are the basis for the Mennonite faith community in the Netherlands. We feel a bond with the people who live according to Mennonite tradition, personally confessing God, being convinced that human beings are not almighty, and having Jesus Christ within us as our living example. Lovingly, inspired by the Holy Spirit, we work for a world of peace, justice, and wholeness on the basis of a contemporary understanding of the Bible, in a way that invites genuine contact and constructive dialogue. In doing this, we create space that allows all people to be truly and wholly themselves (see Ps. 31). It is our understanding that people are created according to God’s image. We regard life as something given by God; no one’s life may be placed at the disposal of others. Following the way of Jesus the Messiah, we adhere to the practice of approaching opponents in peace and love with unremitting effort, without letting others determine our behavior. We believe that we can overcome evil through an inner passion for doing good (see Rom. 12:21).”³¹

The declining membership is also an important theme in the memorandum. The goal is to turn the decline of 1,000 members per year into an increase of 1,000 per year, for “growth and an ability to adapt are key words defining the concept of vitality more closely.” Just like the *B.O.L.T.*, the *Contourennota* is based on the existing congregations but does also point to “the congregation of the future,” which can take on forms and characteristics as yet unfamiliar to us.

²⁹ Voolstra, 18.

³⁰ *Het Verhaal, de Plek en de Mensen. Contourennota van de Broederschapsraad van de Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit*, ADS/001145 (Amsterdam: ADS, 2000).

³¹ *Het Verhaal, de Plek en de Mensen*, 3.

Apart from the text in the preface about the content of our faith, the memorandum does not go into *Het Verhaal*; rather, practical suggestions are made concerning the many issues in the faith community. As a result, reactions to the memorandum primarily concern the practical suggestions and do not say anything about faith. Many will retain from the report only the expressed goal of doubling the membership. Although at the time of publication many, if not all, suggestions were rejected, many things have nevertheless been achieved in the course of the first decades of the twenty-first century.

BEING CREDIBLE

In March 2014, at the request of the conference council, the Adviesraad voor Geestelijke zaken (advisory council for spiritual matters) presented a document called *Geloofwaardig zijn* (being credible), in which the Mennonite identity is described in clear language, in six key concepts limited to one page. The advisory council writes, among other things: “Mennonites form a Christian community founded on Jesus Christ. As free people, they choose for God and the way of the gospel as their guideline for faith and life. Following Biblical insights, they get together in independent congregations, where people are led by the Holy Spirit and experience a bond with each other. Personal faith is undogmatic and free, but not without obligations. Mennonites believe that the way of the imitation [of Christ] becomes visible in concrete deeds. With a view to the kingdom of God, Mennonites work for peace on a large scale and in smaller ways.”³² This advisory document was intended as part of/a defense of policy suggestions and was presented to the BV but had not yet been published or discussed at the time of writing.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Present reality is that, ultimately, none of the many memoranda and recommendations have had a noticeable effect. The faith community has not been able to reflect and discuss deeply on the matter of the content of its faith and the Mennonite identity connected with it. Rather, it has got tangled up in discussions about practical issues. A few things (IDGP, collective insurance, Internet, etc.) are regulated more centrally, with the result that the pressure on the councils of congregations has been reduced somewhat, and the workers have better social benefits. And of course, much has been achieved with respect to nation-wide communication. But all this has brought no results on the membership front or in the

³² ADS Adviesraad voor Geestelijke Zaken, *Geloofwaardig zijn*, ADS 14.03.01791, internal publication, 2014.

deepening of a life of faith, and that is not unforeseen, considering the developments in society at large sketched above.

You can react to this in different ways. We can rest our weary heads on our hands and think, “This will never come out right,” and give up. We can try to retain what we have and hold campaigns to increase membership. But we can also try to be open to a changed world and accept that things pass away and new things turn up. In this way, we build on what was and is now, en route to what is new and as yet unfamiliar.

I am convinced that the last-named offers prospects for the future. Let us stop viewing the decline in membership as a problem that needs to be solved. Although our membership will no doubt decline even more substantially, those who are left - and it seems apparent, in other European countries, that 2,000 members is a kind of minimum - will be motivated, alert believers who will show great commitment to the community to which they belong.

I realize that this is asking a lot of us. As a faith community, we need to relinquish many things, many of which we greatly value. We need to have the faith to let go, even though we do not know what the future may bring. We need to trust that the faith community will find its purpose, to trust that we, building on tradition, will find ways to make the Mennonite voice heard, to witness of the imitation of Jesus in word and deed. We need to have faith in a future we do not yet know, resting in the Eternal One, who, as we proclaim again and again at Sunday services, does not abandon the works of his hands [Psalm 138:8 NIV]; we are nurtured by the stories about Jesus as they come to us in the Bible, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, who lifts us up beyond ourselves.

If we want to continue to exist, faith has to have priority. We are a community of God, our existence is legitimized by what drives us. In many cases, we need to stop “playing church” and, instead, return to the countermovement of the Mennonites. Perhaps we have gone too far in wanting to go along with the established churches in the past century and have forgotten what it was all about: following Jesus.

But to be able to do this, we need to reflect on why we actually want the story to continue. What is really our story for the world? What is our witness? Do we want to work for change, and let go, or do we prefer to keep everything as it always was? Do we have the courage to live with the uncertainty that goes with relinquishing security and walking unfamiliar paths, knowing that these, too, could be the wrong ones, to live in hope and anticipation, without, perhaps, seeing the final goal, living in the imitation of Christ? The American theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas puts it like this: “Discipleship means...an intensive training in renouncing possessions. Becoming a disciple of Jesus means letting go of everything that we think gives us a hold on our own lives and those of others, as Jesus did. As long as we do not learn to give up the arrogance of thinking that we have to secure the meaning of our lives, we

are not fit for the peace of God's kingdom."³³ Further in the same chapter, he says, "We can rest in God because we are no longer propelled by the idea that we have to form history, that a happy ending is dependent on our efforts."³⁴

The Anabaptists were once a countermovement. In the Netherlands, the movement assimilated into society, but the Mennonites still continued to be something of a countermovement, also with respect to traditional churches, through the simple lifestyle, social involvement (which they did not broadcast), adult baptism, later the peace witness, and the support for conscientious objectors. Aspects of these activities are still present, although there are now many more faith communities who practice adult baptism, and Mennonites are no longer unique in their peace witness. And simple living, oh yes, but there are so many who live that way now and even go farther in it. We are scarcely, if at all, a countermovement any more, no matter how much we still like to think of ourselves that way. We are a faith community that partly rests on, or longs for, the past, and is partly looking for a way forward. I believe that the freedom of thought and faith that we cherish so much is a very great good. It is one of the characteristics that are attractive for others; we do not force people to believe certain things but rather ask each other what motivates us. That is a most precious characteristic!

However, in about 30 years, the world will look different, just as it did 30 years ago. Our society is heading more and more towards a society of networking, where many traditional structures will have been replaced by networks of more temporary and project-related contacts and cooperation. A Mennonite faith community certainly still fits into that model, although it, too, will have a different form. It is more likely to be a network of small groups of believers, connected by a local context, or otherwise connected by a common goal or an inspiring place. These are groups many people fit into, where the boundary between belonging or not does not need to be sharply defined. If you feel you belong, even at a distance, then you belong. It is quite possible that this congregational form will grow out of the current structure, if only we are not afraid to be open to it. Other forms need not be a "threat" for the existing congregation. Other forms also do not represent an implicit rejection of the congregation as it is at present. Other forms can be regarded as steps along the way, a supplement to the model as we know it. A national faith association, or baptisms in the Mennonite vacation center Dopersduin, are not competition, but provide new spaces for faith and putting that faith into practice. Not every initiative will succeed, but that is no reason for not moving forward on it.

³³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Een robuuste kerk, de christelijke gemeente in een postchristelijke samenleving*, ed. Esther Jonker, Herman Paul, Bart Walet (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2010); originally published in *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 1983), 142. The English translation is by the translator of the article.

³⁴ Hauerwas, 143.

The reality is that a new congregational model is not, of course, immediately applicable from one day to the next. Learning to think differently about our congregation and faith community takes time. The question is also to what extent existing congregations can transform themselves. Nevertheless, I think that, using the model of small groups and satellite congregations, described below, the faith community can be moved in the desired direction, whereby both the small groups and the satellite congregations can function as an attractive center referred to as centered set or magnet. If congregations, regardless of size, send out positive vibes, people may want to belong to it, feel attracted by it.

I believe in the space God gives us in our thinking and acting. He gives us space to be in the world, which is God's world, and interact with it. He gives us space to teach each other how to live and to give a place and space to everyone who wants it. This space is the task inherent in following Jesus – the task to avoid hurting people in what you do, to love another, everyone, as you love yourself. We all know, certainly, that this is not easy. But it is the principle on which we can exist as a faith community. It is precisely in a world that sometimes seems to have lost that principle entirely, but appears to exist on the basis of power, oppression, violence, and self-interest locally and globally, that there should always be a group of people who raise their fingers and say, "Uh, may we say something? We believe that there is a better way. We have learned this way, after all." That small groups can have significance in this way, can be seen, for example, in the peace process in Colombia, where precisely that small bunch of Anabaptists, Brethren in Christ, has a great positive influence. This is not a role for the established churches, for they are far too closely connected with the authorities.

The world is in chaos, and it is logical that we are afraid to be swallowed up in it. How, then, do you rise above the chaos? We are always talking about following Jesus. Do we believe in that story of Jesus, do we believe in Jesus, do we believe Jesus? Above all: do we believe what Jesus believed? Do we live up to it, or do we fear to do so? To return to the story of Peter (see preface), do we look down and get startled by the water and start sinking? In that case, there is always the hand of Jesus reaching out to us; let us grasp it and face the unknown in faith, like people of the way. If you are en route, you can't cling to the old, or live in the security of the familiar view. En route, either walking or in the boat, there are always new views; every curve you take, every country you approach, gives a new vision of what can be.

Let us relinquish what is keeping us from heading out. It is better to be a community of people who choose for God and people en route, than a community of people who try to cling to what they have but consequently lose Jesus, God, the other, and ultimately themselves.

But this does not mean that we should relinquish everything with the idea that anything goes. Failing to put the imitation of Jesus in center place for fear of putting people off is no option. On the contrary, I am convinced that we are more attractive when we have a strong fundament – believing Jesus and believing what Jesus believed – than when we propagate a meaningless “everything goes.” That is not a lack of freedom, but the basis for discussion.

Along the way, you meet people who walk a short distance with you. Others walk with you the whole way, becoming your traveling companions. It won't be masses, but a few are enough: others with whom you can share what's in your heart, with whom you can read and learn, and with whom you grow. This is a group of people with whom it is pleasant to walk. And when the group gets too big, it splits up into independent smaller groups, though retaining their bond with the others. Others join these groups, changing the character of a group. In this way, a network of small groups of people en route is formed. Each group has its own character, but is en route in a bond with the others.

Back to that little boat with the disciples from the Gospel of Mathew (see preface): Jesus and Peter climb into the boat again, and the wind dies down. What a beautiful image! The raging sea, the wild world, the turbulent chaos becomes calm when Jesus is on board. When Jesus is in our boat, when Jesus is present in the people in our group, we experience the world as less threatening, and the storm in us dies down, too. We can then go on courageously.

Summary

Going new ways is only possible if we relinquish the fear of an unknown future and focus on what we are good at in the congregation. In this way, congregations can be attractive groups to which people belong.

To be a genuine faith community, and remain one, we need to return to the content of our faith and place priority on the imitation of Jesus.

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