De verbeelding van de kerk. Op zoek naar nieuw-missionaire ecclesiologie.

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Summary

The Imagination of the Church, towards a new-missionary ecclesiology

This study was started out of a double concern: the bending in the Netherlands of missionary initiatives into the direction of inner-church community-development on the one hand, and a hesitation within newer missionary initiatives to formulate explicitly the founding of community as a goal and to interpret this ecclesiologically on the other hand. On the basis of analyses of questions from the practice of newer missionary initiatives, from the concept of ‘presence’ directed at the person of the worker, from the development of the relation between church and mission in missiology and from leading visions in social theory a missionary-ecclesiological pattern of thought is developed, which can do justice to the experience with and grown views of these newer missionary initiatives. Thus the study aims at contributing to the profile and identity of missionary workers in newer contexts of exclusion, deprivation and the intercultural society. Thus, in this study existing experiments in the field of missionary presence provoke the question of the possibility of founding new churches in this context. The envisaged missionary-ecclesiological model forms a fundamental answer to this question.

This is a study of literature which has been developed along the following lines: it begins with the experience and grown insights of the research-worker at the point of ‘church and mission’ as a starting point of the study. These insights are then brought into discussion with the self-understanding at the point of church and mission within newer Dutch missionary initiatives like urban and industrial mission, missionary congregations and drop-in centres. The initiatives are discussed in the framework of the world-wide network of Urban Rural Mission. Then two chapters follow, that further elaborate the definition of the problem of the second chapter; in the third chapter the benefits and the deficits are evaluated of the thinking about church and mission in missiology; in the fourth chapter these developments are placed into the light of a sociological analysis of dynamics and phenomena of modernisation, especially directed towards a sociologically tenable vision on the conception of community. Finally in the fifth chapter a missionary-ecclesiological model of thought is developed.

The first chapter forms the signal to this study, by naming moments of choice out of my own learning-process in the context. After a period of mainly ‘mission in reverse’, of learning and just ‘to be there’, the insight grows that it is necessary to qualify the presence or availability; the fear to make the old missionary’s fault (impose one’s own cultural presuppositions), makes room for the insight that the showing of your own ‘face’ is a necessary condition for encounter. The emphasis on encountering people in the context leads to centralising the forming of community with them, and giving up group-formation of missionary workers among
themselves. After the failure of attempts to join in with existing other forms of community development, a new process of community development with people in the context starts. Through this process of community-formation the question arises, in what measure and under which circumstances a process like this is to be seen as church.

In the second chapter the central practical starting point of this study is dealt with: grown experiences and insights of newer missionary initiatives with respect to church and mission. I start with the world wide URM-network. The emphasis of URM-initiatives is on the local struggle for justice, participation, emancipation, from the position of the poor, not to help them, but from their being subject in the political struggle. This struggle for justice and dignity of ‘people’ acquires theological meaning as the people of God, as church. The movement sees itself more and more as a religious community, even as a new church. The community as a cell of struggle for justice coincides with the Christian community. The church becomes a local countervailing power of the suppressed people. At the same time the church (the existing church) is summoned to side with the poor in the struggle to become subject of their own history. URM comes to the fore in written sources, not as a movement of the poor themselves, but as a movement of those who support them.

The description of the self-understanding of newer missionary initiatives in the Netherlands is preceded by a treatise of terminological indistinctness and difficulties. Especially the originally theologically loaded concept of ‘presence’ has become church-related in the course of the years (Schippers), diaconalised and neutralised into a professional method (Baart).

I state that exactly in the reluctance with traditional categories a common trait of these initiatives appears, namely the quest for definitions and posing the questions which result from the encounter with the concrete context. It is exactly in the experience of the appeal-structure of the encounter that the new initiatives are heirs of the missionary movement. On these grounds I use the term ‘new-missionary initiatives’ to describe urban and industrial mission, missionary congregations and drop-in centres.

The border lines between these different forms of work are flowing. But there are significant differences in starting positions and basic attitudes: characteristic of urban and industrial mission is, that they start where the people are. They renounce offers as yet. They start with ‘learning’, with mission in reverse. They learn to look at the church from an outsider’s point of view, and inevitably alienation develops between workers and the existing church. There is a strong tension between the existing church and the work: there is a danger that they drift apart more and more. They are hesitant, more so with industrial mission than with urban mission, to define the formation of groups in the work as a process of forming a new church. Characteristic of drop-in centres is that they start where the problem is. The basic attitude is to ‘help’ by ‘being there’, by listening. They do not want to proselitize the people. There is neither a question of a new church or mission, nor of a problematic role of the existing church. Many do this work as a consequence of their membership of the church. They think of the church as a care-model. But here, too, the distance to the established church grows. In missionary congregations they start where the church is and try to come form there to where the people are outside the church. The tension with the context must be solved within the existing church. It is a missionary model of church, thought from the starting point of the existing church and directed at renewal of the existing church. The attention is primarily
directed at making the church missionary, and less at the context as a place from where the congregation rises.

In the theological reflection on new missionary initiatives the missionary-ecclesiological digestion is underdeveloped and unsatisfactory. In the vision of D. Werner, who reflects on the experiences of URM, the church is torn between rich and poor: the in the societal analysis highly raised tension between rich and poor leads to an ecclesiological stalemate between the (rich) established churches in Europe as representative of the culture of the rich on the one hand, and the true church of the poor on the other. With J. Veldman industrial ministry becomes a ‘project’ which is evaluated by the mandating authority. No ecclesiological reflection gets going out of the missionary experience. K. Schippers deliberately renounces ecclesiological reflection because that would be too early. With Polhuis the church becomes superfluous. With F.J.S. Wijsen taking the missionary of the folk-religion seriously results in an inner-church strategy of innovation.

In chapter three I start the thinking about a missionary ecclesiology by searching connection with the thinking about church and mission in missionary theology. To that end I make a tour of those missiologies that have occupied themselves explicitly with this point. With the ‘three self-formula’ the declaration of independence of a new church meant a ‘euthanasia’ of mission. Here church and mission are practically absolutely opposed: mission ends where church begins. The sending western church is subject, the non-Christian is object (Warneck). Warneck makes no clear distinction between church-planting and christianisation of the people, between church and Kingdom of God. With Hartenstein a fundamental new thinking is outlined: church and mission melt together, because they are rooted in the Missio Dei. And at the same time church and mission come, because of a strong eschatological emphasis, in a critical relation to the ‘world’. The world becomes ‘between the times’, and the church becomes a missionary congregation. The emphasis comes on the independence of new local churches, which in their own surroundings start the dialogue with religions, but with ideologies, too. The independent church itself becomes a sending church in its own surroundings. Because of this closer connection of mission to the local church both the ecclesiology and the dialogue with the political reality get more attention.

By concentrating on Missio Dei the missiological importance of church and church-planting is toned down: mission is no longer the movement of church to church, but the mission of God with a view to the coming of the Kingdom of God. Especially the radical secularisation and eschatologisation of the Missio Dei-concept by J.C. Hoekendijk has defined the discussion about the position of the church more precisely. Not the church is the ultimate goal of mission, but the ‘shalom’ of the world is. The position of the church becomes eccentric and instrumental in the salvific work of God. The discussion around the church is now brought to a stalemate: Church growth (McGavran) becomes a conservative, evangelical signature tune, and political action becomes an ecumenical one. Still the ecumenical studies of the missionary structure of the congregation, too, remain thought out of the existing church which has to open up to the world. In the sequel of this the emphasis in the sixties is put on the missionary congregation.

The importance of the ecumenical discussion and of theologians like H. Gensichen and H.J. Margull building on that basis lies in the focus on the modernising world and the questions which arise therefrom, and in the awareness of the sociological captivity of the churches in these modern contexts. The same can be
said about the economical captivity through the liberation-theological contribution of L. Boff, and about the communicative captivity through the contribution of G. Collet. At this point an embarrassment, also characteristic of new missionary initiatives is laid bare, which needs further investigation: on the one hand church and mission as sociological (too) human realities, and on the other hand church and mission as theological categories. The question is whether a more fruitful thinking is possible on this subject than in terms of the opposition between ideal and empirical church, between visible and invisible church.

In the newer discussion stress is laid upon contextualisation and inculturation. Radical religious plurality and contextual liberation are the determining elements. Especially through the contextual approach the lines of thinking in missiology are sharply challenged. In the contextual approach the supposedly universal western theological and churchly construction is reduced to a local reconstruction of Christian tradition, and the thinking in terms of ‘transferring a message’ between a sender and a receiver is broken. The local church becomes church in interaction with its surroundings and in this it becomes missionary. Western churches, too, are religious communities, cultured in specific contexts. In the liberation theology the church comes to the fore as ecclesiogenesis of the church of the poor (Boff). Here the thinking is from the poor to the church. They re-invent the church, as the church has to be invented anew in every context and time.

In an expatiation I explain that the to the ecumenics important theologians L Newbigin and D. Bosch have not gone through this contextual thinking, and therefore they do not present new insights for a contextual missionary ecclesiology.

The fundamental benefit of missiological thinking in relation to new-missional thinking about church and mission must be sought exactly in this insight gained in the course of history, that the sending church is itself a church in process of formation in its own context, and that the church starts anew in every situation in interaction with the context.

Concluding it can be said that new-missionary initiatives can learn from missiology to overcome ecclesiological reluctance. New-missionary initiatives have not digested this ongoing toning down of the sending church, and have hardly begun local development of tradition. To a large extent they have remained captured in a way of thinking about the church as a sender of the workers. But, on the other hand, missionary ecclesiology has not digested the experiences and insights of new-missionary initiatives. A step must be made which digests the context in which new-missionary initiatives are placed.

In chapter four I elaborate this context as a new multiform underclass, which results from influences of the dynamics of modernisation. Therefore I take my bearings in social theory. Especially the question concerning the sociological meaning of ‘community’ is central.

The philosophical-anthropological starting point in this chapter is the interactive structure of human existence. Sociality, the need to belong and the need for recognition is in-built in humanity. The individual person is searching for security in the contingencies of existence. Identity is, less than before, defined by a fixed role in a stable social order. Social groups are less defined by layers in society. Also the securities and dogmas which belong to it are subjected to constant change. The individual wants to belong, but there is no self evident identification: identity is continuously threatened.
The meaning of the term 'community' and the renewed interest in it in social philosophy must be explained from the lack of it and the difficulty to realise community in societal reality. It expresses the longing for exactly what is missing in modern societies. The non-communal has become communal. This becomes visible through the dynamics and phenomena of modernisation, through which belonging and recognition stand under pressure and are not self-evident. As characteristic dynamics of modernisation differentiation, rationalisation, domestication and individualisation are elaborated, and as important phenomena: exclusion, social isolation, ethnic tensions and the coming into existence of a new multiform underclass.

The only social possibility of community is temporary, unstable, partial communities, in which people participate on voluntary basis. Community cannot get out of the structure of a network. Churches and churchly communities cannot escape this social reality either: congregations are networks. But we can imagine these networks as community and give it a meaning by that signification. The sociological tenable possibility of community formation is network formation imagined as community. One imagines the network as a community, one acts out of that metaphor and appeals to others to treat the network as such (Imagined community, B. Anderson). There is no encompassing community as a sociological reality, but there is a network in which the imagination of community as a counter-part of (negative aspects) of modernity is kept alive.

Identity is and will continuously remain problematic and threatened. But a network as community, at on the other hand, is exactly the necessary precondition for development of identity. Modern men cannot do without the belonging to and recognition of such community. And the other way around: individualisation (which is the result of interaction with others or texts) is not necessarily threatening to community: the free individual is a condition for community. The fact that community formation can take place ‘only’ on the basis of free, individual choice and can only exist in the form of temporary, unstable, partial communities, makes it all the more necessary to promote community. We cannot do without. An essential question by that is whether this community formation develops in seclusion of the surrounding world or in inclusion; if this process is dominated by thinking in terms of separation or by ‘inclusive thinking’; whether one starts form an absolutely pre-given principle (blood, soil, race or God), or whether one lets oneself be questioned by the radical multiformity and asymmetry. Whether one locks oneself in a pre-modern answer in a modern situation or whether one renews oneself reflexively in interaction with significant others in social reality.

In chapter five I work out the theological core-question further. Developments in modernity, which are taken up by new missionary movements as their starting point, lead to an understanding of the church which can no longer build on whatever given communality. Modernity has direct meaning for ecclesiology and not via the history of the modern project of mission as an extension of Christianity over the whole world. We can learn form the thinking of church and mission in modern project mission, but we cannot build on it directly. And no more can we build directly on the existing churchly tradition and the practice of mission and apostolate built on it. The own context is the starting point. Therefore another step must be made: the learning form the world outside the church, the characteristic point of new-missionary initiatives, must be digested in missionary-ecclesiology.
The central question is how the church learns to be church in the interaction with the world outside of it. Therefore the conceptions of sender and receiver, missionary and convert, apostle and disciple, must be put into perspective and made more equal. Conversion does not take place through transferring from a speaker to a hearer of a message which has already a fixed meaning, but conversion takes place since in the communication a new interpretation of one's own situation develops. But this approach of communication then asks for a theological approach in which the interaction with the other in the context gains a proper place in ecclesiology.

By looking from eschatology as the central point of reference to church and mission, the other in the context receives a theological significance in the process of church-formation. Eschatology means the breaking in of the final judgement of justice in the acting here and now. This judgement means at the same time wrath for the tyranny and suppression and comfort for those who are guiltlessly suppressed. Eschatology is a critical category, which evokes the characteristic missionary restlessness between the Christ that has come, the Christ we 'know', and the coming Christ, whom we do not yet know. The church is thus defined as a learning process: as a living, lively, communicating community, standing in the middle of society, in which community tradition (that means: with the eye to the Kingdom drawing upon tradition) is kept by people who do not communicate with each other as a closed group, but with people outside their own community of interpretation, with people who are co-determiners of the context. The church is less a vanguard, and more a seat of restlessness, which in interaction with the context teaches what leads to Christ and what keeps from Christ. The church-in-formation can only learn from Christ in the interaction with the context, which interaction is often conflictive and asymmetric. Mission as the entering into an eschatological process of reinterpretation and interaction, is church-in-formation from the very beginning. The Christian community is a place of transition and of reconstruction of tradition. Church and mission do not melt together. Especially in the distinction mission remains being a part of the definition of the church. Mission as the work of the Spirit who lights up the meaning of Christ in the context has to relate to tradition, but does not directly originate from it.

The developments and starting points described here at the same time challenge Roman-catholic and protestant ecclesiologies. The Roman-catholic visions (R. Schreiter and W.R. Burrows) depart from a world-church which absorbs the context; the boundaries between church and context are not sharp: the world has, in principle, already been redeemed. Protestant visions (D.L. Guder, A. Noordegraaf) depart, on the contrary, form a sharp marking of church and context opposite each other: the world is in principle sinful.

On the ground of these theological starting points and the conversation with these recent designs, I typify the congregation theologically as a contextual-eschatological learning process. It is essential that formation of Christian tradition takes place as part of the ongoing interaction and formation of identity between people: the process of formation of a congregation is as a communicative learning process part of this wider process; the formation of Christian identity is a continuing, open, fragmentary, interactive and conflictive learning process, especially in the interaction with the being different of others.

Finally the theological identity of the missionary worker is, on the ground of this typification, described as a part of the process of contextual church-formation, also
in situations where this church does not yet exist, and only exists in the imagination of the worker.