

Local autonomy in a secularised society

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Introduction

In this address I would draw attention to the central position of the local congregation in reformed church polity. My thesis is that this central position hinders the church in her central mission task, due to profound social changes and patterns of church membership. Firstly, I will give a short introduction to the present situation of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN). Secondly, a brief historical sketch of the background to the centrality of the local congregation in both the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN)* and the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (NHK)* which united together (with the *Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk in her Koninkrijk der Nederlanden*) in 2004 to form the PCN. Thirdly to make some remarks about modern society and its influence on people which will lead to reflections about the changing nature of local congregations and the consequent inability of the church to react to these social changes. I suggest another pattern of church polity to address this challenge I draw on the example of a national supermarket chain. Finally, I give some suggestions for further investigation.

The Protestant Church of the Netherlands in modern society

The church policy of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN) is based on the autonomy of the local congregations. Church law is very clear about this fact, following the first article about confession, tradition and the mission of the church, it is clearly stated that the church is made up of local congregations of the church. Only after this are the tasks and duties of congregations, the class and structures detailed.

This concentration on local autonomy is not surprising being the historical heritage of the PCN. In the process of uniting the Dutch Reformed Church (NHK) and especially the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN) insisted on the importance of the autonomy of local congregations. As the last general secretary of the GKN I was deeply involved in discussions about the process of uniting and read about the hesitations and complaints rising from a fear of the loss of local autonomy. It is remarkable that many of these fears were considered with financial independence and the ownership of premises.

It is not history alone which played a part in the decision making of the new church policy it was also an answer to strong anti-institutional sentiments in wider society. There is in society – and among church members – a deep mistrust of big organisations and institutions, whether that is government, union or churches. People prefer to live with informal relations that are appropriate for that particular phase of life or because of specific tasks to be accomplished. We live in what has been termed a “network society.”

In the meantime the process of secularisation continues. The number of church members in the PCN continues to decline, over the last decade on average over 60,000 people per year. All congregations have to deal with having less members, income and the challenge of continuing parish life with fewer elders and volunteers. Consequently, local congregations have to consider a future with less professional pastoral support, closing and selling church premises, concentrating on fewer activities, uniting parishes etc. All this takes place at the same time as a deep felt need to consider new ways to reach people who have no contact with the gospel or who are alienated from the church.

These three elements – a smaller church, local autonomy and a new missionary necessity – form the basis of my central question, namely whether the focus on local autonomy of congregations is an appropriate approach for the church in an increasingly secularised society.

Short history of local autonomy in the GKN

The plea to maintain local autonomy within the GKN, though rooted in the reformed church tradition, (Church Polity of Dordrecht) can also be understood as a strategic answer of Abraham Kuyper to the problems he had when he organised the GKN at the end of the 19th century. Kuyper broke with the NHK in 1886 and formed the GKN in 1892, following an earlier separation from the NHK in 1834.

On the one hand, Kuyper insisted on the importance of a strong theologically based socio-political movement to counter the dominant liberalism of his day. For him the GKN was an important instrument in achieving political goals e.g formal Christian schools, Christian social organisations (unions, welfare, health etc). On the other hand, he had to build up the GKN throughout the Netherlands from small beginnings. In many local contexts small groups of people with little formal education and from lower classes had left the NHK. Few had little organisational experience and it proved impossible to establish a central organisation. So Kuyper relied on the available resources and capabilities of these few men (sometimes women) in local congregations to finance the new church. It was also important to develop a strong theological unity among the members and the dispersed congregations, with the aim of establishing a strong socio-political movement. Due to these limitations, Kuyper used other means to build up the new church. He started a national newspaper and a Christian weekly in which he explained his theological convictions and political ideas. He founded a university to educate theologians and intellectuals and he founded a new political party.

Within the church he created a stable network of leading intellectuals in the “*deputaatschappen*,” the church commissions who advised classes, provincial synods and the general synod of the church on all manner of theological and social questions. These *deputaatschappen* formed the theological backbone of the GKN, taking custody and control of the theological unity of the GKN. After 1945 several *deputaatschappen* were given a budget and developed an important role in building class, regional and national movements in different spheres e.g. youth work, mission and social welfare. It was understood that this work was necessary to grow the church on supra-local levels as a consequence of social changes after WWII.

This small sketch highlights the reality that the GKN’s focus on local autonomy was restricted to financial, organisational and pastoral concerns. The church’s theological and social ideology was centralised with local congregations having little opportunity to develop their own policies. It is important to remember this, when thinking about whether local autonomy is appropriate for being a missional church in today’s context.

Local autonomy in the NHK

The Dutch Reformed Church (NHK) was the established national protestant church of the Netherlands since the Reformation. So it comes as little surprise that this medieval situation of isolated parish communities continued and is now part of the *Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk*. Though institutionally the national church, there were significant theological and spiritual differences between local congregations.

After WWII there was a growing awareness of the importance of local communities within the church, these were too important to be left in isolation as only an institutional part of the national church. This was true for two main reasons, firstly that the national church had become more important to everyday national life. Secondly, that the local congregation was taken on a more important role as an instrument of Christian education. Stimulated by Hendrik Kraemar amongst others it was evident that membership of a national church was insufficient for growing discipleship and faithful participation in church and civic life. In 1994 Kraemar introduced the idea of “congregation building” (*gemeenteopbouw*), to highlight the importance of the local congregation as the presentation of church in society, alongside the national church in relation to state and nation; and as the most important context for educating church members in the Christian faith and its value in everyday life and civic participation.

These two sketches of the GKN and NHK make clear that the local autonomy of congregations was not a quality in and of itself. But was related to the situation and challenges in which the church was working. Furthermore, local autonomy is not an isolated quality, but an element in relation to other aspects of church policy and governance.

Fluid Society

Whole libraries have been written in recent years about changes in modern society and the impact on religion. Whilst I cannot give an overview here, it is helpful to explore some aspects in order to understand the tension between modern society and protestant church polity.

Firstly, the fragmentation of society into different elements e.g. economics, juridical, education and private, means the isolation of church and religion. A consequence of this fragmentation is the impact on individuals who live fragmented lives throughout the day, for example, at work, at home, politically, in relation etc. So religion no longer provides an overall orientation to life but is one orientation alongside many others by which people may choose to live. More importantly, people develop different identifies to cope with these different spheres.

The famous quote by French philosopher Lyotard that the time of big stories is over is often used to characterise post-modernism. Perhaps this has to do with the modernisation of modernity and the ongoing fragmentation of life, either way a consequence for the church has been the rejection of meta-narratives – big stories, so that all religions, philosophies and life-orientations have equal status. No longer can a dominant theology claim to be absolutely true and no clerical authority is above criticism. This means that being a Christian is no longer a matter of tradition or habit, but is a matter of choice and conscious decision.

The dismantling of the welfare state in many European countries throughout the 1970's, created a liberal cultural climate which insisted on self reliance and personal responsibility – ‘be yourself’ and each person to show responsibility for ‘writing your own biography.’ Martin Beck introduced the term “*risk society*” (*Risikogellschaft*), to demonstrate that modern governments can no longer guarantee a safe and prosperous life for its citizens each person must instead take care of themselves. At the same time, flexibility in the labour market develops, so that people change jobs more frequently and can no longer assume a job is for life. Increasing divorce rates and the exponential growth of information technology, with permanent information flows and connections with people around the globe based on shared interests. These and other developments show that lives no longer pass away in

lifelong patterns, but are subject to dramatic and unexpected changes. These realities prompted Zygmunt Bauman to speak of fluid society in which social structures and patterns of relations do not endure but are characterised by being temporary. Consequently, people no longer rely on social institutions, because institutions are fixed structures that do not move with rapid social change and personal life. Another consequence is the fluid identity of people. Everyone needs to have an open mind to manage new situations and to identify that environment that meets personal need; mental needs constantly change with age, changes at work and home, family situations and religious conviction or spiritual outlook. In such a fluid society with fluid individuals we have to consider the future shape of the church.

The objective and subjective community

As we have already established the PKN consists of local congregations. But in reality, the local congregations are not the most basic entity of the Protestant Church, but the individual members of local congregations. All congregations consist of members, made up of individuals who have been baptised, confessed their faith and live in a defined local area. So, congregational membership (and therefore membership of the PKN) is an objective and the congregation is defined as the sum of these objective members i.e. those living in the neighbourhood, the baptised and/or converted. Whilst this definition of a local congregation is arguable from an ecclesiological sense, it does not easily fit with modern society.

De Jong¹ states that a local congregation can be understood in three ways: as an organisation, as a social movement and as a social community. These three are intertwined and difficult to separate, nonetheless each has different ways of operating, cultures and behaviours, different goals and ideas, and different formal and informal leaders. Every member of the local congregation has the tendency to be more involved in one than the others. In addition, many congregational conflicts and tensions can be understood by these three different social phenomena with members displaying different expectations and values.

This threefold sociological approach to the congregation is interesting when considered alongside the anti-institutional atmosphere in society. Increasingly people are not interested in the congregation as an organisation (even less so the large central organisation of the national church structures), and are less interested in formal objective membership. People belong to a congregation because they enjoy what is on offer in that context; they feel at home with a particular style of worship, preaching or a congregation's social programme. New people joining are not asked whether they are baptised or not, or converted etc, merely if they would like to join the congregation, participate in its activities and pay a contribution towards making parish life possible.

In short we can see a shift from an objective approach to church membership which dominated our understanding to a more subjective approach. In the first instance, congregations have become social communities.

From the Middle Ages until the eighties of the last century, the local congregation was a fixed geographical community. Where an individual lived was the determining factor in where that individual worshipped. This was a very objective criteria and everyone accepted other members because of this criteria. Theologically speaking we did not choose each other, but were gathered by and around Scripture; sociologically speaking an individual geographical location determined the congregation they belonged to.

This situation is now finished. In every sphere of life people have enormous mobility.ⁱⁱ Christians choose the congregation that they want to belong too, not on the objective criteria of where you live but the subjective criteria of where you feel at home. So the congregation has become a community by choice, based on the decision of each member to belong to that specific congregation.

This shifting pattern has deep consequences for the internal cohesion of local congregations, as has been pointed out by Nautaⁱⁱⁱ. In the “objective congregation,” membership is not a matter of personal decision and the whole congregation is not the result of a number of those personal decisions. The congregation finds its *raison d’être* within itself and this is the condition for an individual to become a member. As a member we accept the rules of the congregation, the decisions made by the minister and elders etc so long as I do not succeed in changing them. This is significantly different to current patterns of “subjective congregations” where membership is based on choice.

The identity of members in the “objective congregation” is based on the congregation they belong to, in the “subjective congregation” the character is based on the members identity, the choices they have made, the people they want to become. It is not difficult to see how the character of the congregation formed by choice is founded on feelings of well-being and feeling good. When an individual no longer feels at home in that congregation they leave and find one better suited to their individual spirituality and needs. But more importantly, the subjective congregation has a strong tendency to maintain the church for the homogeneous group that already attend, keeping the environment comfortable and familiar. New people will be accepted into the group on the condition that they accept the existing social atmosphere. Radical change is unwelcome because this disturbs the congregations cohesion and those who disturb this find themselves excluded.

This might sound rather negative about the modern congregation, but it is intended to be descriptive. For those belonging to the congregation they have chosen, it is a place and community of inspiration, faith, comfort, social interaction and activities. These congregations play an important role for many people so there is good reason to support these in their mission in a secular society. But is this pattern of church life the most appropriate way to communicate the gospel in a secular society? Are these congregations capable to reach out to people totally alienated from church and gospel? And from a different perspective: are we not overloading these congregations with unrealistic expectations to be changed agents of the church in meeting the challenges of modern society?

In summary, the local congregation is thought of as being defined by geographical boundaries but in fact a congregation increasingly defines its own spirituality and the people who choose that specific kind of congregation. The objective basis of the local congregation has changed to a subjective desire for people to belong to this community. This subjective basis is an obstacle for change and for the people who do not want to change their spiritual home. Conversely, as soon as there is tension and conflict about change, people decide to move for another community. Both responses confirm the tendency to comfort those who belong to the congregation and form a closer circle together.

The challenges of the church in modern society

It is generally agreed that the church in Western Europe is increasingly weak whilst at the same time people are increasingly interested in personal spirituality. Although the churches have a lot to offer an individual spiritual quest the church struggles to connect with this

search. The desire for spirituality has different aspects; for knowledge, experience, life guidance, social interaction and personal support. But all these aspects need to be translated into different kinds of service for these diverse groups of people. A growing group of older people who deserted the church in their youth; young people who have never shown interest in the church; young parents struggling to raise their children; stressed managers; disorientated people etc are all seeking meaning, support, transcendence and spirituality. Yet the church fails to make significant contact with them. Every local congregation has its weekly sermon on Sunday morning, a mix of education, experience, direction for Christian living, but largely only comprehensible to those who belong and are familiar with the rituals, language and music. This sermon does not fit modern people's search and I think it is unrealistic to expect local congregations to explore all the experiences of church relating to religious, spiritual experiences, social cohesion and support in everyday life. Therefore, we must seek other ways to bridge the gap between society and church.

An example of change, the supermarket company

Is there anything that the church can learn from developments in society? Are there other organisations looking to make contact with new clients? I would share one example that has inspired me – and I apologise in advance for any technical organisation language. The church does not need to be afraid of taking principles from secular organisations, as the church has often borrowed schemes and methods from wider society.

My example is of the large supermarket Albert Heijn in Holland. This large supermarket chain is present throughout the Holland, known familiarly as AH and has a substantial part of the total grocery market. All local supermarkets are largely independent enterprises, responsible for making a profit in their locality. But at AH Head office it was found that a whole section of people (mostly young people) never entered their local AH supermarket. Their individual lifestyle, shopping needs and the time available all meant that they never used their local AH. So the Head office decided to develop ways of reaching this specific group of people without losing their regular client base. They could have decided to re-organise the local supermarket chain, develop new products etc. They did not choose this route, instead they developed a new AH market solution to be developed by new local operators in new locations – railway stations. The layout, design, products available etc all make it clear that this is an AH store. Furthermore, customers of the railway “AH-to-go-shops” as they are known, will more easily use their local AH supermarket as they become accustomed to AH products.

AH has succeeded in winning a new set of customers not by improving or changing the existing formula or markets, but by starting a new wing of the same core organisation. In management language this is called multidimensional control. Using this language, you could say that the protestant church is characterised by mono-dimensional governance: everything is expected from the same formula i.e. the local congregation. In response to the dominant anti-institutional atmosphere in modern culture there is a tendency in the church to strengthen this mono-dimensional governance. There is little interest in local congregations for church policy; neither is there any great interest in national or regional levels of the church; all energy is concentrated on the local congregation. It is easy to justify this concentration with ecclesiological and theological arguments. But as we saw previously, we must remember that in the protestant tradition local autonomy was never an exclusive or isolated approach of church policy. In the history of the GKN the *deputaatshappen* can be understood as a realisation of multidimensional governance in the church long before the management concept developed.

The next question: the relationship between baptism and church membership

To be clear, I do not have a solution to the problem I have identified. My thesis is that the challenge of the church in modern Europe cannot be addressed with only the belief that the heart of the church beats in the local congregation. Local congregations are of great value to those who are involved, but is overwhelmed when we place on it the expectation that it will reach out to all those who are alienated from church and gospel. We have to develop new governance structures that will allow the national church to shape new programmes and activities to reach people who are currently beyond the reach of local congregations. Activities based on different levels of experience, understanding, ethics and social welfare. A range of activities for different social categories at local, regional and national levels. This is what I term “re-inventing the church” realising that this has significant implications for church policy. Because when we stop focusing on local congregations we have to address many questions about responsibilities, finance and membership. The last point – membership – is last but not the least. Membership in the PCN is not exclusively related to membership in a local congregation. But this same local congregation is a barrier for many people, representing an in-crowd, and unattractive to join, even though they might be interested in the experience, knowledge and professional skills of the church. Another aspect of church membership is the one-to-one connection between the sacrament of baptism and the socio-juridical membership of the faith community. That is to say, many people have been baptised without becoming a church member, this does not undo the act of baptism. And though the church law says that baptism can only be performed once, many people want to be baptised again when they become a member of a new community or as adults when they are fully aware and make a conscious choice. So in reality, baptism and church membership do not share a one-to-one connection since membership has to do with choice and participation on a temporary basis because of personal biography, social regularities and other factors. Increasingly people like to belong and participate in a community without being baptised, neither knowing whether they will be connected with that community for a life time or not. Or because they only want to participant in a specific local congregation, without being part of a national institutional church.

All these questions cannot be solved in an afternoon session. For this reason, I ask for a long term research project, to develop models and proposals which will shape a church appropriate for the next decades. The geographically defined congregation which determines church life according to patterns from the Middle Ages, is no longer appropriate for the mission challenges of our modern society. Respect for the tradition and all the theological arguments used to sustain this pattern of church cannot be an obstacle to finding new ways of making contact with people currently beyond the reach of the church as we know it, though never beyond the reach of the gospel. Finally in conclusion, we share a rich history to which we can look for solutions.

ⁱ De Jong, Gert: *Doen alsof er niets is, sociologische gevalsstudie over een kerkelijke gemmnte asl dynamische configuratie*. Diss, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, 2008.

ⁱⁱ There is a lot of literature analysing this shift in western society, often characterised as “*individualisation*.” Regardless of whether this is the correct term, I prefer the concept of *liquid society*, introduced by Zigmunt Bauman. See f.i. his *Liquid Modernity* (2000)

ⁱⁱⁱ Nauta, R., *Paradoxaal Leiderschap. Schetsen voor een psychologie van de pastor*, Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2006.