

## Unification and reconciliation

*In 1961, a group of 18 pastors of the Netherlands Reformed Church (NCR) and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN) issued an urgent appeal to end the long-lasting separation between the two churches and strive toward reunification. Today, after more than 40 years of a “Together on the Way” process, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN) is finally a fact. A milestone in the history of the Reformation family in the Netherlands, says Prof. Dr. Leo Koffeman, a PCN expert on Church Law who was part of the union negotiations for many years. Can we speak of reconciliation as well?*

“The Netherlands have been notorious for their ecclesial divisions or – to put it more mildly – their ecclesial diversity. Especially within Protestantism ever new divisions have taken place. Already in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century a first schism within the established Reformed Church resulted in a small separate community: the Remonstrant Brotherhood (Arminians). In the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century King William I imposed a new church order on the national church, from then on known as the Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC). This was one of the causes for further schisms. In 1834 and 1886 two major groups left the NRC. They came together in 1892 and formed the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN), although some of the 1834 ‘Secessionists’ remained outside of this union. In later years new schisms led to the situation depicted in the diagram; there are more than ten Reformed denominations in the Netherlands, all with roots in the same family. Besides this, there is a growing number of migrant churches with Reformed roots in our country.

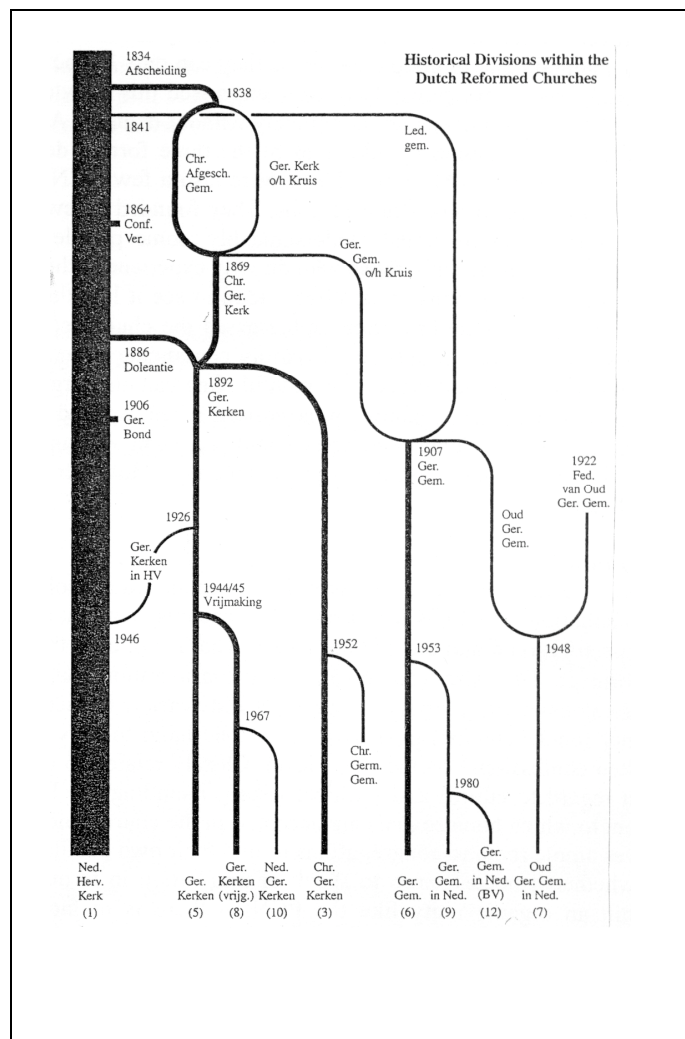


Diagram from: The Reformed Family Worldwide, A Survey of Reformed Churches, Theological Schools and International Organizations. Jean-Jacques Bauswein, Lukas Vischer, Eds, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999

Given this history, the recent Dutch church unification is nothing less than a milestone. As of May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2004, the two main Reformed churches (the NRC and the RCN) and the small Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) are united in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN). To what extent can this unification be interpreted as an act of reconciliation? Let me highlight three aspects.

### **1. Reformed – Lutheran**

What began as a process of re-unification, viz of the NRC and the RCN which had abandoned each other in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, gained a new dimension when the Evangelical Lutheran Church joined the process in 1986. The ELC had been an independent Church from the very beginning of the Reformation. So reconciliation in the sense of ‘healing a painful breach’ was not at stake. However, in political and societal life the Lutheran church had been discriminated against for centuries. Like other dissenters (Mennonites, Arminians) they did not enjoy equal rights with the established Reformed church until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They had only been tolerated. They could meet in freedom, but only if they were not too visible. This had caused bitterness, but over the past two centuries these memories have disappeared. Nevertheless it is appropriate to speak of reconciliation. The unification of Lutherans and Reformed became an option as a consequence of the *Leuenberg Agreement* (1973). In this document over one hundred churches from the major Protestant traditions in Europe declare the mutual doctrinal condemnations of the past to be no longer valid in light of a new and common understanding of the Gospel. The PCN church order consistently maintains this position. Lutheran and Reformed confessional documents have an equal position in the new PCN *Constitution* – immediately following the three classical ecumenical symbols. Also noteworthy is that besides the large number of united congregations, there are also separate Reformed and Lutheran congregations in the united church. There is diversity, but within the framework of a full mutual recognition. Adherence to one’s own specific tradition is legitimate, as long as it does not lead to the rejection of the theological legitimacy of the other tradition. In other words, the diversity is reconciled diversity.

### **2. New schisms**

However, for a minority in the NRC this equality of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions was unacceptable. They maintain that in good conscience they can only be members of a church which is exclusively based on the Reformed confessions. They have expressed this view at every occasion since 1990. As a consequence the 2004 unification was not completely without damage. A number of congregations split. Altogether more than 97 % of the total membership of the three former denominations is now part of the new Protestant Church. Less than 3 % is not. There were also a few RCN congregations which decided not to participate, although for less fundamental reasons. They founded a new community as well. As a result there are today again three denominations! Understandably, some people see this as clear evidence that the unification process failed. Especially those who directly experienced the painful consequences of these new schisms – in their own congregations or families – tend to see it like this. It goes without saying that press coverage of these recent conflicts has often embarrassed the churches. Responding to this situation by pointing to the 97% score as “quite satisfying” is hardly convincing in terms of theological and ecclesial discourse. There are new divisions, and division is painful. One can also argue that on the global scene most cases of church union have been accompanied by minorities which refused to join the new church, but that does not make a strong case either. Finally one can try and give some explanations in terms of social-psychological dynamics or other so-called ‘non-theological factors’. However, explanations do not automatically provide justifications.

### **3. Plurality**

There is a third factor to be taken into account when looking at the relationship between unification and reconciliation. The PCN has become a “spacious” church; a church where there is room for many different perspectives on a number of vital issues. That is not only true in terms of confessional diversity (Lutheran – Reformed). One also has to take into consideration major differences in the way people refer to our confessional heritage as such. There is a wide variety of theological views in this respect, from very orthodox (if not fundamentalist) positions on the one hand to very liberal positions (in fact hardly referring to the written confessions) on the other hand. Closely related to this is the fact that one finds very different ideas with regard to ethical and political issues, including the hottest issue in present day ecumenism, viz: the extent to which homosexuals are accepted in the church and in the ordained ministry. The PCN church order leaves ample room to congregations to find their own profile in such issues. This very fact raises the question of whether it makes sense to speak of unification in terms of reconciliation. Doesn’t it prove that – even within an organic unity like the PCN! – there is in fact irreconciled dissent rather than reconciled diversity?

### *Nevertheless...*

We are thankful for our unification. It certainly is a milestone in Dutch church history. But given the points made above, some modesty is appropriate. Both the recent schisms as part of the unity process and the continuing fundamental differences within the new church make us aware that unity is fragile and incomplete. Neither explanations nor apologies can alter that fact.

Nevertheless, speaking of reconciliation is appropriate as well. The Dutch union implies a reconciliation between Lutherans and Reformed, and between two Reformed denominations which were granted the opportunity to bridge a painful historical separation. It is however important to understand that every gift of the Holy Spirit includes a task as well. This also goes for ecclesial reconciliation. It is never complete. Its implementation is a continuing challenge. Reconciliation as something we accomplished – or rather found – invites us to take the next steps in an irreconciled church and world. In the Netherlands – a country where according to a recent survey almost two thirds of the population do not see themselves as part of the Christian churches! – several of the smaller protestant churches, including some migrant churches, now wish to reconsider their relationship with the PCN. The road of division leads to ever more divisions, but likewise, once you are heading for unification you will see new opportunities for unity again and again.

Reconciliation is interpreted too narrowly if it is only understood as the healing of interpersonal relationships. Of course, it is important to overcome feelings of bitterness and frustration. But reconciliation has an ecclesial and structural dimension as well, and that has to do with faithful obedience. Therefore, reconciliation continues to be a challenge both for the PCN as such and for those within the PCN. That's why the PCN church order highlights the importance of several platforms where the theological and ecclesial discussion on the mission of the church will be kept going. Besides the general synod, the most important instrument in this respect is probably the classical assembly or presbytery. Furthermore, the working groups of the ordained ministry will be pivotal as well.

Church structures are instruments, not a goal in themselves. This is true for structures of organic unity as well. They can play a role in the work of the Holy Spirit who realises unity and enables reconciliation. It is that ministry that we, as individuals and churches, are called to serve.”

*Dr Leo Koffeman*

*Protestant Church in the Netherlands*

For more information about the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, consult the PCN website at [www.pkn.nl](http://www.pkn.nl) (Dutch) and [www.protestantchurch.nl](http://www.protestantchurch.nl) (English).

For further details about the entire Reformation family in the Netherlands, see the website of “*Reformed Online*” at [www.reformed-online.net/](http://www.reformed-online.net/) under Europe/ Netherlands.

### **The new PCN logo explained**

The circle symbolizes unity. It also refers to God's perfection. He is the beginning and the end (Apoc. 22:13). Some would recognize in the circle also a sign of God's wonderful creation, our world. The lighter cross won't need an explanation. As in the former UPCN logo we chose the simplest form: the Greek cross. In the nimbus we also see an eight arm cross, a composition of the Greek cross and the Greek letter Chi, referring to Christ Jesus. Another explanation reminds us of the eighth day of creation, the new beginning of Eastern. In the middle we see a dove, sign of peace, and sign of the Holy Spirit. Biblical connotations are abundant. The dove in the story of Noah. The name of Jonah. John the Baptist baptizing Jesus. Altogether the logo reminds us of the Triune God.



## The world church on one km\_



In ages past, missionaries sailed from Rotterdam “to the ends of the earth” to share the Gospel. Today those “from the ends of the earth” have come to Rotterdam and now live around the harbours where the missionaries used to board the ships. The Cool district, thirty years ago one of those city areas with few Christians left, is today counting many flourishing non-western Christian communities. With thousands of others they are searching for a place in Dutch society and living out the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Netherlands Missionary Council (NZR) understands this multi-coloured presence of churches from the south as the dawning of a new era, and used the occasion of its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary for a festive celebration in Cool, Rotterdam. The event was entitled *The world church on one km\_* and was hosted by the Scots International

Church (est.1643). Besides the Scots Kirk there are six other “immigrant” churches on this square kilometer, both old and more recent. The oldest one is the francophone Eglise Wallonne, which has worshipped in Rotterdam since 1590. Then there are the Russian Orthodox Church (est. 1947), the Chinese Evangelical Mission in Europe (est.1974), the Igreja Mana (est. 1990, Lusophone), the Hope International Baptist Church (est. 1994, Anglophone) and the Universal Church of Christ Mission (est.2004, Anglophone). As part of the festivities on 13 November 2004, all seven churches opened their doors and told participants about their experiences as missional churches in Rotterdam: hopes and dreams, activities and obstacles, and as became clear, an amazing commitment to serve their community and society at large. Something of their stories is recorded in the NZR jubilee book *“The world church on one km\_. Immigrant churches in Rotterdam”*. As the Preface of the book says, the portraits of the churches are in effect:

*“Seven letters of recommendation in the sense of the words of Paul: a letter of Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God (2 Cor. 3:1-3)”*.

“It is noticeable”, said Dr Wout van Laar, General Secretary of the Netherlands Missionary Council, “that unlike many white Christians, many members of immigrant churches tend not to emphasize distance and difference but are rather longing to celebrate with others the unity in Christ the Lord which transcends culture. This requires a shift in the way white churches and believers think. As long as we continue to see the immigrant churches as an exotic and temporary phenomenon, we easily ignore them and continue to regard our own way and tradition as normative. But their continuing presence challenges us to perceive more and more their gifts and talents. Is the Spirit of Christ, through the presence of these new churches, not urging us to search for new ways in mission and ecumene?” (<http://www.zendingsraad.nl-jubileumviering>)

The same challenge echoed through in the words of Rev Cesar T. Taguba, Philippinian pastor in the Netherlands, at a consultation earlier this year:

*“Uniting in diversity is not an end goal. Rather, it is a means for Christians / church(es) to be credible and effective instruments of God’s reign on earth. United in our vision and mission, let us give full play to our creative and diverse ways to fulfill it. Only then will our historically conditioned diversities, including different ways of celebrating the joy of life and the abundant life, be a source of strength and a blessing.”*

(From: Open letter to Christians in Europe, Rome, March 2004)

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Mission in Unity Project 1999-2005

27 chemin des Crêts-de-Pregny, CH-1218 Grand Saconnex, Genève, Switzerland

Tel: +41-22-920-3385; Fax: +41-22-747-0099; Email: [miuproject@iprolink.ch](mailto:miuproject@iprolink.ch); web: <http://www.warc.ch>