

Leading from the liturgy

Ordained ministers as facilitators of a communal process of interpretation

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to contribute to the reflection on ecclesial ministry from the perspective of the *missio Dei*. The gateway chosen is the unconventional image of ecclesial ministry as depicted in the Polish film *Corpus Christi*. Jan Komasa, the director, paints the protagonist as a facilitator of a communal process of interpretation and reconciliation through which the core of the gospel becomes concretely visible in social reality. This cinematographic portrayal of ecclesial ministry is then used to look at the situation regarding ministry in a small Reformed denomination in the Netherlands. The issues highlighted in *Corpus Christi* also play a role in these churches. To see if the imagination of *Corpus Christi* can also be made fruitful for thinking through a Reformed theology

of ministry, two steps are then taken. First, it will be shown that within the Reformed tradition there are starting points for the view of the ordained minister as a facilitator the process of interpretation. Then, using the thoughts of Michael Moynagh, the article explores how this vision of ministry can be made fruitful for the current missionary situation in the West. The article concludes with three elements needed to implement the image of the ordained minister as an interpretive guide.

Keywords: Homelessness; *Corpus Christi*; Film; Interpretive guide; Michael Moynagh; Ordained ministry

INTRODUCTION

In the Polish film *Corpus Christi* director Jan Komasa tells the story of Daniel, a young convict who is paroled and sent to a rural village to work in the local lumber mill. Once Daniel arrives in the village, however, he poses as a clergyman and is asked to replace the old pastor who is ill and must temporarily leave the village for treatment. Although he initially accepts his new “calling” hesitantly, Daniel gradually grows into his role and becomes a beloved pastor.

The strength of Daniel’s ministry manifests itself particularly in his unorthodox handling of the drama that has recently taken place in the village. About a year before his arrival, a terrible car accident occurred in which seven villagers were killed. Six young people, under the influence of alcohol and drugs, and an adult villager with a history of drinking had collided head-on. The tragedy created a deep rift between the parents of the adolescents and the widow of the solo driver. This rift is reflected in the fact that the driver’s body is not buried in the village cemetery and his picture does not hang at a memorial in the middle of the village.

Initially, Daniel encounters great resistance when he brings up the accident and the underlying accusations, but by the end of the film it appears that his unconventional approach has resulted in a (beginning of) reconciliation between the widow of the solo driver and the parents of the other victims. Unfortunately for Daniel, he has already been exposed at that point and must return to the detention centre to face his own demons.¹

1 The violent ending of the film is puzzling. Once back in the prison, a bloody struggle unfolds between Daniel and another prisoner who is targeting him. Daniel gets the upper

Corpus Christi lends itself to various interpretations and can be understood in different ways. For example, the film can be seen in light of the contemporary post-modern search for identity, with Daniel struggling to define who he is. For the purposes of this article, however, I would like to take a different approach and read the film as an entry point for reflection on the Reformed theology of ministry from the perspective of the *missio Dei*. It may not seem very sensible to begin an article on the Reformed theology of ministry by discussing a motion picture about a Roman Catholic pseudo-priest, but I am convinced that *Corpus Christi* can be helpful in imagining what (Reformed) ordained ministry can mean in today's post-Christian culture.

ROUTE

The route of this article is as follows: After briefly reflecting on the main issues emerging from *Corpus Christi*, I want to turn my attention to the Reformed denomination to which I belong, the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (CGKN).² With the imagination of *Corpus Christi* in mind, I briefly reflect on the main challenges of ordained ministry in these churches. Then, with the fruits of this in view, I pause for a moment to consider the historical roots of the Reformed theology of ministry, to see if there are historical starting points for further reflection. I will then return to the present and give my attention to what Michael Moynagh writes about missional leadership. I conclude by describing some steps that I believe are needed to improve the practice of Reformed ordained ministry in a post-Christian context.

hand in this struggle but is pulled away from the fight by one of his fellow inmates before fatally injuring his opponent. Daniel later manages to escape from the prison. Opinions differ on the interpretation of this final scene. Does Komasa want to show that reality is more unruly than the ideal as it took shape in the Polish village? Or is the emphasis on the fact that Daniel finally escapes his prison? However, since it is not directly relevant to the subject of this article, I will not go into it further.

2 The CGKN is a relatively small Reformed denomination with approximately 70,000 members and 181 congregations spread over the Netherlands. Its origins lay in the secession movement of 1834 (Dutch: *Afscheiding*), but it was not until 1892 that the CGKN was formed in response to the emergence of the Dutch Reformed Churches (GKN) under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper. Confessionally, the CGKN are based upon the so-called Three forms of unity: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt). Spiritually the CGKN are characterized by a pietistic slant based on historical affiliation with the spirituality of the "Further Reformation" that emphasized the personal appropriation of faith.

ISSUES FROM *CORPUS CHRISTI*

I suggest there are three main areas of concern that emerge from *Corpus Christi*.

Mechanical vs authentic ministry

First, director Jan Komasa paints a sorry picture of the state of church ministry. The pastor who is to be temporarily replaced by Daniel is an unhealthy old man who has fallen into the clutches of alcohol and has a cynical view of his own parish, which he sees as mostly made up of villagers who do not believe and only go to church out of habit. In addition, it is precisely at the instigation of the old priest that the village turns a blind eye to the unprocessed trauma and the underlying reproaches. It was his idea not to bury the solo driver in the local cemetery and not to hang the picture of him with those of the other victims. The subtext is clear: the church and the pastor are unwilling and incompetent to deal with the real issues of the village and are there merely as irrelevant “givens”. Even the rituals in the church are accompanied by computerized electronics that leave little room for spontaneity and authenticity. The film presents the image of a church and ministers struggling with their relevance.

In the face of this sad state of church ministry, Daniel embodies a very different form of priesthood. For one thing, Daniel cannot be caught performing formal rituals in a mechanical manner, but rather his actions are characterized by a high degree of spontaneity and impulsiveness. Thus, Komasa creates the image of a priest, albeit a pseudo one, who is not caught up in mechanical rituals and procedures but, on the contrary, consciously embodies the message of the Bible and church rituals.

(Ir)relevance?

The second, and most pressing, issue runs from this. The old pastor was unable or even unwilling to tackle the great unprocessed trauma and the underlying mutual accusations of his fellow villagers. The church is located in the middle of the village but its minister dodges the problem in the heart of the community. In fact, the old pastor’s sigh about the unbelief of the villagers is a self-fulfilling prophecy: how can they possibly believe in the power of the gospel of reconciliation when the church itself is giving it a wide berth by neglecting the deep rift within the community?

In the person of Daniel, it is evident that things can also be different. In many ways he is not an exemplary pastor: he smokes, uses soft drugs, drinks and has sexual intercourse; but when it comes to the core of the gospel, he does not compromise. Regularly Komasa portrays Daniel as a Christ figure, suggesting that in the young ex-convict, unlike the old pastor, something of the gospel does become visible. Daniel addresses the pain and the irreconcilability, even if he encounters resistance in doing so. He does not shy away from publicly confronting the villagers with their own dirt-spewing letters toward the widow of the solo driver. Even when the mayor calls him to order he does not want to give in, yet for the sake of a much-needed reconciliation, he is willing to risk his own status and person. The result is that Daniel, as a facilitator of the reconciliation process in the village, ensures that the gospel is not only heard, but also becomes visible in reconciled relationships. Daniel's ministry serves a vision of the good life where reconciliation in mutual relationships is central and social exclusion is combated. Christian faith according to Daniel is not an individual matter focused on the inner psychological state but serves the good of the community (Marsh, 2018: 167, 170).

Liturgical

A third element offered by *Corpus Christi* is the fact that Komasa does not dismiss church rituals as irrelevant, but rather has the most crucial moments take place right around the sacramental acts. Confession, Baptism, Extreme Unction and the Eucharist all occur as pivotal moments when the villagers come to deeper understanding. This eventually culminates in the Mass celebration after the funeral of the solo driver during which actual reconciliation within the village begins to take shape. In Daniel's hands, the rituals and sacraments are not formal acts, but visible expressions of the gospel. From the liturgical embedding of ministry, Daniel allows the gospel to spread far and wide throughout the community of the village.

Summing up

Komasa's *Corpus Christi* provides a good entry point for thinking about ecclesial ministry. Although the protagonist Daniel is not in any way working toward a preconceived plan, he is clearly leading the community in an interpretive process in which the scope and impact of the gospel of reconciliation becomes

concretely visible in the restoration of damaged relationships. Daniel, as someone who has personally experienced the dark side of life, acts from a vision of the good life and tries to bring the community along with him. He does this by giving himself to the community of the village and by confronting them – through proclamation, sacramental rituals and personal attention (pastoral care) – with issues that undermine the good life of the community. Remarkably enough, Daniel never makes an explicit call to reconciliation, and nowhere does he give an order for rapprochement, but he lets the parishioners take the step to reconciliation themselves. He does not force, but invites to participate in the process of reconciliation, though sometimes rather clumsily. From the liturgy, Daniel is a facilitator of the communal process of interpretation.

THE SITUATION IN THE CGKN

I now focus on the situation of the denomination to which I myself, as a minister of the Word, belong: the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Does the picture of the church painted in *Corpus Christi* also apply to the CGKN? And could Daniel's unconventional approach also represent a possible way forward within the tradition of the CGKN? In doing so, it must of course be remembered that this denomination belongs to a different church tradition than the Roman Catholic parish of *Corpus Christi*.

Irrelevance

In 2021 Jan van 't Spijker published a study of the CGKN in which he specifically sought an answer to the question of whether and how the structure of the denomination served its calling to bear witness to the gospel. Spijker focuses his research on the question to what extent the concept of *missio Dei* is reflected in the concrete ecclesiology of the CGKN. It is precisely this emphasis on *missio Dei* that makes his research relevant to this article, since the concept explicitly calls attention to what “God is doing in and beyond the church in His recreational renewing works” and therefore “theology must develop an openness which reflects on what God is doing in the world, in the existing culture and in society, through the Spirit” (Spijker, 2012: 191). In other words: the church should not only focus on the individual salvation of believers, but should instead focus on concrete realities of culture and society in order to connect with the work of God there.

In his research, however, Spijker clearly shows that the CGKN is characterized precisely by a strong pietistic undertone in which the focus is primarily on “individual, spiritual (non-physical), post-mortem categories” and in which “physical and communal aspects of salvation that are already taking place in today’s world are only secondary” (2012: 190).³

Spijker’s observations align with the belief that the concept of *missio Dei* frees churches from an unhealthy focus on their own survival and, on the contrary, directs them towards the concrete well-being of the context in which they have been given a place. Where churches are guided by the *missio Dei* perspective, they are also explicitly focused on the flourishing of their context (cf. Niemandt, 2020).

However, there seems to be a real danger that the CGKN, through its individualistic and spiritual focus – by analogy with the church in *Corpus Christi* – will make itself irrelevant to the surrounding culture by avoiding the questions of society and culture. Where in *Corpus Christi* the problems of the surrounding culture and society became very concretely visible in a collective unprocessed trauma resulting in an additional irreconcilable separation between fellow villagers, there the questions for the CGKN are perhaps somewhat less specific, but certainly no less urgent. I am thinking of the questions in the areas of sexuality, gender, economic justice and ecology.⁴ When the CGKN does not address the issues in these (sub)areas, irrelevance is lurking. Only by addressing these questions can the CGKN contribute to the good life of the church and its context.

3 Spijker acknowledges the fact that there is a clear line from the pietistic perspective to social and diaconal engagement. However, because it is not linked to a theology of the kingdom and is associated with a one-sided perception of the eschatological tension between the “already” and the “not yet”, this pietistic slant, according to him, leads to an individual, spiritual (non-physical) and post-mortem conception of salvation.

4 The issue of gender is a sensitive one within the CGKN. In the week after Easter 2022, the synod of the CGKN met and made the decision not to open ecclesial ministry to women. This caused a wave of outrage within a great part of the CGKN. Regarding ecology, I refer to Paul Schrader’s 2017 film *First Reformed* of Paul Schrader from 2017 which tells the story of pastor Ernst Toller who is confronted with a climate activist in his small congregation. In addition to the personal struggles this brings, the film also exposes the impotence of the church to speak out in this area.

Wrestling with ministry

The film *Corpus Christi* can be interpreted as a stimulus to rethink the task and form of ordained ministry in the church. The image of the impotent and sick pastor is symbolic of a powerless and weak ecclesial ministry. This need for reorientation is felt within the CGKN as well. At the synod of 2019 there were no less than ten (partial) reports that dealt to a greater or lesser degree with the question of the essence and form of ecclesial ministry.⁵ These reports range from fundamental reflection on ecclesial ministry to some practical issues. From the reports the picture emerges that within the CGKN about ecclesial ministry there is a struggle with concepts like authority, calling, representation, collegiality, and the priesthood of all believers. Also, in several reports the call is made to think through ecclesial ministry explicitly from the *missio Dei*.

There is not enough space here to deal with all the reports mentioned separately, but the picture is clear: within the CGKN there is a great deal of uncertainty regarding ecclesial ministry, and this uncertainty is explicitly related to the need to rethink theology of ministry from the perspective of the *missio Dei*. If this uncertainty is not addressed, ecclesial ministry within the CGKN also risks a high degree of irrelevance.

Liturgical rooting

In *Corpus Christi*, church rituals are the key moments when people come to an understanding or there is a breakthrough in the process of reconciliation. Ecclesial ministry and the (liturgical) rituals of the church are closely connected. The uniqueness and the expressive power of ministry is visible in a condensed way in the sacraments.⁶

This can easily be interpreted as an underlining of the current cultural need for rituals, but from a theological perspective there is also much to be said for it. After all, within most church traditions, ecclesial ministry and the ministry of sacraments are closely linked. Recently the synod of the CGKN pronounced that the ministry of the offices was fully reserved for the ministers

⁵ 9.35 p.85-93 *cie 7 rapport 13 ambten*, retrieved from: <https://cgk.nl/project/rapporten/> (download date: September 26, 2022).

⁶ Roman Catholic sacramental theology and the Reformed doctrine of the sacraments differ widely. However, due to limited space, I will not elaborate on that in this article.

of the Word.⁷ In doing so, the synod was loyal to the Reformed tradition in which from the beginning the right to minister the sacraments was reserved for ordained ministers.

The term liturgical rooting will not be immediately associated with a Reformed theology of the offices, yet there is ample reason to maintain this wording. However, it must be kept in mind that, from an ecumenical point of view, liturgy does not only refer to the ministry of the sacraments, but to the whole of the proclamation of the Word and the administration of sacraments (*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* E §27; Borght, 2007: 230; Koffeman, 2014: 85-6).

Summing up

Looking through the spectacles of *Corpus Christi* at the CGKN, it is striking that many of the struggles are shared. The looming irrelevance of the church that fails to address the questions at hand stands out most, but so do the uncertainties around the essence and form of ecclesial ministry. Komasa's film is helpful in visualizing challenges that lie behind the formal language of church reports. Also, his emphasis on the ritual concentration of ecclesial ministry aligns with the Reformed belief that ordained ministry and administration of the sacraments belong together.

The question that remains open is whether Komasa's portrayal of ministry can be made fruitful for the CGKN. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that ministers within the church should engage in drinking, drugs, tobacco and extramarital sex. Instead, I am referring to the way Daniel, in his capacity as a priest, leads the community in a process of awareness and reconciliation.

The image of the minister as a facilitator of the communal interpretation process is far removed from the role currently assigned to ministers within the CGKN. With some exaggeration it can be said that ministers within the CGKN are trained to shape the interpretation- and embodiment-process on their own. The interpretation of the gospel and its relevance to the community is a matter for the pastors who, as ministers of the Word, expound the Word from the pulpit. The community's role in listening to Scripture is generally limited to attentive listening during worship services. Of course, there are occasional sermon

⁷ <https://www.rd.nl/artikel/971399-mogen-cgk-ouderlingen-straks-sacramenten-bedieneen>.

discussions and various topics are addressed at various Bible study groups, but by and large the interpretation is on the preacher's desk. It is not without reason that people often speak of a solo-pastor and a pastor's church (Dutch: *domineeskerk*). Is it any wonder that when the community has hardly any role in the interpretation process, the church members feel little involved and can get the feeling that the church is a pastor's hobby? Is it any wonder that the minister has a somewhat cynical view of the congregation when the congregation is merely a passive listener?

HISTORICAL STARTING POINTS

There are, as is my suggestion, sufficient starting points within the Reformed tradition to think about a different interpretation of ordained ministry. I will mention two examples from the early days of the Reformed tradition.

Martin Bucer's Strasbourg ideal

The first example is the Christian communities in Strasbourg that existed under the leadership of Martin Bucer from 1547. Bucer and his colleagues had until then always moved within the line of what was expected of the church within the sacral community of the pre-modern city state. This loyalty meant a break with Roman Catholic hierarchical ecclesiology on the one hand. On the other hand, however, the magistracy was afraid of too many anabaptist influences, leaving Bucer and his fellow church men little room to shape to the church as a community in which the priesthood of all believers was given concrete form. From 1547, Bucer therefore decided to form small-scale communities of dedicated believers within the existing church structure (see Bellardi, 1934; Spijker, 1996: 309ff.).

These small communities embodied the ecclesiastical ideal of Bucer. In a letter from 1547 in which he countered some objections against the Christian communities in Strasbourg, Bucer laid out what he had in mind. Based upon Ephesians 4 he emphasized that the building of the community is not only a prerogative of ordained ministry, but of the entire congregation. Therefore, there should not only be public meetings in which the gospel is preached by the ministers of the Word, but also specific gatherings of the community in which every member can share the spiritual gifts they received according to 1 Corinthians 14 (Spijker, 1996: 331).

The picture that emerges is that of small communities of dedicated members who were united in a communal process of spiritual discernment. Interpretation of scripture was not confined to ordained ministry but a feature of the entire congregation as a community of interpretation.

Łaski's Strangers' church

A second example concerns the so-called Strangers' church in London under the leadership of John Łaski. This Strangers' church formed a remarkable phenomenon on the Reformed landscape of Europe in the 16th century. Whereas other Reformed churches (such as Strasbourg and Geneva) were largely dependent on the whims of the city councils, the Strangers' church enjoyed a large degree of independence. This fact, combined with the fact that the members of the congregation joined voluntarily, gives the Stranger's church a unique position, which moreover has more in common with the current church situation in Western Europe, than the people's churches in Strasbourg and Geneva (see Becker, 2007; Muylaert, 2021; Pettegree, 1986; Springer, 2007).

Also, in the Strangers' church the community was fully involved in the interpretation process. Here I am thinking mainly of the so-called *Prophetia*. For example, the French-speaking part of the congregation met every Tuesday for faith instruction in their own language. At the beginning of the meeting, a pastor, an elder, or another designated member of the congregation explained a text from the Bible. After this person finished his explanation, another member would follow, also explaining the portion, who in turn would be followed by the next. This went on until there was no one left to give explanations. The meeting was then closed by the one who had opened it. According to Łaski, the abundance of spiritual gifts was evident in the many Scripture explanations and the resulting warnings and consolations.⁸

The purpose of listening to the various explanations was to instruct the community in the interpretation of Scripture. It is noteworthy that during these Thursday meetings not only the pastors were allowed to give explanations of the Bible, but also the elders and deacons and even some other designated members of the congregation.

⁸ 'Manifeste enim conspicitur opulentia donorum Spiritus sancti in Ecclesia in concordia multarum interpretationum circa unum quemlibet scripture locus varietate et exhortationum simul ac consolationum multarum inde petitarum accomodatione', Kuyper, 1866: II.104.

Laski's Strangers' church embodied the ideal of Bucer's Christian Communities: small interpretive communities of dedicated members who were united in a communal process of spiritual discernment (Spijker, 1996: 471).⁹

Michael Moynagh's conversational ecclesiology

The two examples above make it clear that the Reformed tradition contains sufficient starting points for thinking about the church as an interpretive community, with the ordained minister leading from the liturgy. Yet, of course, there is a big difference between the situation in the sixteenth century and the current situation of the churches in Western Europe. Whereas churches were more or less at the heart of society in the sixteenth century, this is far from the case today. The church has been pushed back to the margin and is forced to think deeply about its place in society. This implies that the church as a community of interpretation is not only faced with the task of interpreting Scripture together, but also the local context.

In this respect, the thoughts of Michael Moynagh are helpful. Moynagh is a minister within the fresh expressions stream of Anglicanism and serves as director of Network Development and Consultant on Theology and Practice. He is sometimes referred to as the "theologian of fresh expressions of church".¹⁰

Moynagh (2017) develops a framework of innovation for churches. This framework is based on two pillars. The first pillar concerns innovation as a theologically based phenomenon that propels the church through change towards God's coming kingdom. The second pillar concerns the conversational nature of organizations.

This second pillar in particular is important in the context of this article. Moynagh emphasizes time and again the conversational nature of the church. Following the *Mission Shaped Church* report, he defines the church in terms of

9 I could also point to other examples from the Protestant tradition, for instance those parts within the Protestant tradition that, inspired in part by Philip Jacob Spener's *Pia Desiderata*, have emphasized the communal interpretation of Scripture, the priesthood of all believers and the reform of theological education. However, I limit myself to these two early examples because they make clear that from the very beginning, the concept of the church as a community of interpretation has been present within the Reformed tradition.

10 <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/theology/>.

four interlocking relationships: with God, with the community, with the world and with the wider church.¹¹

Church leadership

The conversational nature of the church emerges not only in the essence of the church, but also when it comes to its leadership. Leadership according to Moynagh is not a static given, but a dynamic group process. Church leaders should learn how to draw on the gifts of others in areas where they are less qualified themselves.

Leadership as a dynamic process casts the role of the leader in new ecclesial communities in a different light. Instead of developing a vision and imposing it on a community, the leader helps the organization to make sense of what it is experiencing. This does not mean that the organization has no focus, but rather that developing a vision is a conversational group process, with the leader helping the team to make sense of what is happening. Thus, the leader's role is primarily in the area of sense-making.

Church leaders have an essential role in safeguarding the quality of the conversations in the process of sense-making. Although they are not responsible for everything that is said, they do have a great influence. The leader's task is to encourage the participants and improve their conversations. Thus, the most crucial function of leaders is to safeguard the sense-making conversations (Moynagh, 2017: 353).

The most important part of sense-making is “to craft a narrative that connects what is emerging from the kingdom to the team's God-given values and history, however short that history is.” Here, the language used is very important because it forms and expresses the underlying mindset of the organization (2017: 32-3). Thus, the leader must be able to help the team connect the narrative of the church to the kingdom of God and find the appropriate language to do so.

¹¹ According to Moynagh (2017: 241), using the four words *up*, *in*, *out* and *of*, as the Mission Shaped Church report does, is unfortunate, because they presume a rather one-directional view of these relationships. Moynagh prefers to speak of relationships, since they flow in two directions.

The interpretive community and the role of the minister

The image of the church as a community of interpretation, as developed by Bucer and Łaski, surfaces again in Moynagh's thoughts on ecclesiology. However, in his case not only the Bible and the Christian tradition are objects of interpretation, but also the context in which the congregation finds itself.

In Moynagh's model, the minister of the Word is an interpretive guide who helps the congregation as an interpretive community to understand the narrative of the kingdom in its context and find its place in it. This means that the minister, based on his knowledge of and feeling for the Bible and tradition, should facilitate the interpretive dialogue within the community. This is fundamentally a two-way street. Participating in public life as Christian communities and individuals automatically brings with it implicit and explicit interpretive activities to which the minister should attend carefully, since they may unveil previously unexplored meanings of the gospel. This listening attitude is also necessary to then relate the normative Christian sources to the concrete lives of the community and its members so that the gospel can land in their reality.¹²

The minister of the Word, from the liturgy, plays a leading role in the process of interpretation, but it is fundamentally the congregation itself that must listen to what the Spirit says to the congregation (Roest, 2018: 21). In line with Augustine, it is the task of ordained ministry to keep the (newly formed) community focused on the common objects of love in a communal process of discernment.¹³

Moynagh's thoughts on leadership seem to fit well with Komasa's portrayal of Daniel as is a facilitator of the communal interpretation process from the liturgy. Moreover, they fit well with the two examples from the beginning of the Reformed tradition. Moynagh's proposal therefore deserves to be taken seriously by churches struggling with the essence and practice of ordained ministry.

12 The concept of the interpretive guide comes from Gerkin, 1986: 98 ff. and is further developed in Osmer, 2008.

13 Augustine, 1972: 19.24: "a people is the association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of their love". Besides theological arguments, contextual arguments can also play a role here. In the present post-Christian era, in which churches are increasingly small communities that are moreover made up of dedicated members who are used to being heard and who are more aware of their context than in the past, the time is passing that the ministers of the Word were solely responsible for the interpretation of the gospel. Also, from a cultural point of view, it is recommended to take seriously the image of the interpretive guide.

TOWARDS A NEW PRACTICE

The image of the congregation as a community of interpretation seems to be a promising starting point for a renewed reflection on Reformed theology of ministry in a post-Christian context. On the one hand, the concept is rooted in the Reformed tradition; on the other, it is tailored to the current missionary situation in which congregations are challenged to interpret their own context as well. The question that remains is what is needed to stimulate development in this direction. And are there any concrete starting points for this in the practice of the CGKN?

In my opinion, three elements are decisive when it comes to answering this question. In random order, they are the following. First, there will have to be an in-depth reflection on the position of the minister. Next, the results of this will also have to be taken into account in the design of ministerial training. Finally, congregations themselves will also have to be supported in the search for a new practice. This has three implications.

First, there is a need for churches and denominations to profoundly reflect on their perception of the ministry of the Word. The days when the ordained minister as a solo pastor was alone responsible for the exegesis of Scripture are over. Reformed denominations should learn again to take the charismatic character of the church seriously. Moreover, the missionary dimension of the ministry of the Word will also have to be further elaborated and substantiated, especially in view of the contextualization of the congregation in its own surroundings.

Within the denomination of the CGKN, the first beginnings of such reflection are already visible. I already noted that several reports on the synod's table speak of a need for reflection on the pastorate. Several reports argue for a renewed reflection on the doctrine of ministry from the *missio Dei*. In addition, one report examines the social trends that influence the pastoral office and concludes that more teamwork is clearly needed. This is not yet the step towards the minister of the Word as an interpretive guide, but it is clear that a change is underway in the perception of the ministry of the Word. This reflection should, however, not only – and probably not even primarily – be limited to voluminous synod reports or in-depth theological literature.

Second, transformed perception of the ministry of the Word naturally has implications for the way future ministers are trained. Within the education of ministers more attention will have to be paid to the missionary dimension of all church practices, to working within teams and to guiding communities in developing and implementing a missionary vision and strategy. In their training

future pastors should be given concrete tools to lead the congregation as interpretive guides. This means that they will not only learn to interpret the Bible with a view to the weekly sermon, but also with a view to fostering the communal interpretation process. In addition, future pastors will need to be trained in reading the social and cultural context in order to lead the congregation in the search for a credible embodiment of the gospel in its own environment. In doing so, it seems to me of eminent importance that this training should not only take place in the ivory tower of the academy but be intertwined with the concrete ecclesial practice of local congregations from the very beginning.

Signs of change are also observable in this area in the CGKN. The then rector of the theological university of Apeldoorn, the educational institute of the CGKN, H.J. Selderhuis delivered the opening speech for the academic year dated Sept. 3, 2018. In it, Selderhuis mentioned that there are questions about the theological and practical baggage that prospective ministers of the Word are given. Are they adequately prepared for missionary tasks, for the practice of ministry every day? The missionary character of congregations will play an increasingly important role. Evidently, then, the training of pastors must take this into account. This also applies to the cooperation that will become more important in the future. Training for teamwork, peer-to-peer coaching and professionalism is a must, according to Selderhuis.¹⁴

Last, but certainly not least, a changing perception of the church and the ministry of the Word will need to be developed within local congregations. To some extent, this development has already begun because increasing empowerment of 'ordinary' church members, especially in urban areas, makes it progressively more difficult in practice to sustain the role of solo pastor. However, this change will have to be encouraged not only because of cultural influences, but also from the theological belief that the interpretation of Scripture belongs to the entire community, and that the community as a whole should seek a concrete embodiment of the gospel in its own environment.

¹⁴ 9.30 p.1-77 *rapport commissie kleine kerken*, retrieved from: <https://cgk.nl/project/rapporten/> (Download date January 5, 2022), 46-48.

On this point, too, there are promising developments within the CGKN.¹⁵ For instance, from the national commission for missions, so-called missionary learning paths have been offered in which congregations were guided in the search for a credible embodiment of the gospel in their own context. At the moment, it is not yet clear what the fruit of these trajectories has been, but that there is an increasing demand for guidance at the grassroots level indicates a turnaround.

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¹⁵ A clear example of a congregation in the CGKN that sees itself as a community of interpretation is the young Amsterdam congregation *Via Nova* (<https://vianova-amsterdam.nl>). This community started in the first decade of the 21st century as a church plant aimed at young professionals in the urban environment of the Dutch capital but has recently gone through a profound process of reflection. In the middle of the corona period – and partly due to it – *Via Nova* started a communal interpretive process using Michael Moynagh's concept of 360-degree listening. I was involved in this process as theologian-trainer. Whereas *Via Nova* initially started from the attractional church model, after the listening process it opted for a cell-church model, in which the focus on the young professionals shifted to focus on concrete presence in the neighborhood of the various house churches.

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