Ecclesial Futures
2024 – Volume 5 – Issue 1
DOI: 10.54195/ef18728

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

The Two Crises of the Church

Jonna van den Berge-Bakker and Marten van der Meulen

Abstract

In this article we examine the two crises of the Church: crisis 1, which is the decline of the Church, and crisis 2, which is the Church forgetting its calling. Crisis 1 draws the most attention from churches, but it is crisis 2 that churches should attend first. We argue that the order matters: a church paying attention to its calling will not solve its decline, but will help break free from tiresome attempts at repair. It will also help churches to practise an attitude of receiving, being directed at the kingdom of God. The distinction between crisis 1 and 2 will help churches and theologians name the challenges that the Church faces and will help prioritize them. It requires that discernment as a communal practice with others becomes an important part of the theological method.

Keywords: Church decline, Kingdom of God, Discernment, Calling, Eschatology

Introduction[1]

There is a widespread sense that the Church is not doing well. In this article we describe the problem, analyse the causes and suggest a way forward. Seeing and naming the good that has already been given by God helps us out of despondency, without ignoring the sadness that the decline brings.

We find the words of Matthew 6:33 (NIV) important: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." The order is important here. It is about seeking the kingdom of God *first* and then the other things will be given as well. Churches tend to focus on the other things first, such as

1 We like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the many people who have been involved in the making of this article. The ministers, students, colleagues, diaconal workers, theologians and personal friends that have reflected on different drafts of our article and the preceding work have been essential in shaping our thinking and making this article possible.

church growth, the involvement of younger generations, or the social standing of the Church. Focusing attention on the kingdom of God helps churches to detach themselves from "these things", to live more carefree lives and to experience what has already been given by God. This takes courage and might cost us more than we like. This article is intended to theoretically develop the distinction between crisis 1 and 2 further and to bring it into a broader conversation with colleagues. Our main question is: what is the nature of these two crises and how do these crises relate to each other?

The Two Crises of the Church

We distinguish two crises of the Church. Crisis 1 is the decline of the Church. Crisis 2 is that churches forget what they are called to. Both are related, but it is important to distinguish them. Crisis 1 is the crisis in which we "happen" to find ourselves. It is the situation of many churches in recent decades, in most Western societies, including the Netherlands. Crisis 2 is in fact a permanent crisis because, as sinful human beings, we constantly forget, ignore and frustrate our calling in ever new and ingenious ways. We should not be surprised that as a church, we do the same.[2] The good news is that crisis 1 can help churches pay attention to crisis 2. However, this is not a given, because crisis 1 also evokes other reactions. But first we review the current state of the Church in the Netherlands.

The State of the Church

We see three different trends.[3] The first, major trend for Dutch churches is **decline**. It is clear to all that things are not going so well for the Church in the Netherlands. This has been going on for decades and, with a few exceptions, affects almost all denominations and churches. The decline makes many people so despondent that they no longer see the good things that already exist.

The decline of the Church in the Netherlands has been documented in various ways. The Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP) found in 2022 that more than 50% of the Dutch consider themselves to be non-believers. This proportion is growing: in the period from 1991 to 2018, there was a sharp increase of non-believers from 16% to 29%. The Netherlands is now one of the most secular countries in Europe (De

2 Cf. Berkhof (1990, 426) who writes: "To a great extent official church history is the story of the defeats of the Spirit."

3 Here we will give only a brief overview of these trends. For more details and references to empirical research see our article (De Roest et al. 2023).

Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef18728

Hart and Van Houwelingen 2022: 9). This trend is expected to continue, partly due to an ageing membership base of the mainline churches. Even the more conservative denominations have started to decline in recent years, partly due to falling birth rates (Wijma 2022).

At the same time, however, there are also **signs of new things** happening in churches, or **signs of surprising resilience**. This is a second trend we see.[4] Churches and church members are finding ways to continue what they were already doing or finding new ways to be church. Some congregations are growing or showing a new vitality. These new developments are much less visible than the bigger picture of closure and decline. Yet, they are just as important to understand the situation of the Church today. Incidentally, in appreciating both new and old initiatives, it is important to see whether they address crisis 2 or are repair attempts to defuse crisis 1. We think new initiatives are not necessarily better at addressing crisis 2 than old practices of church. More on this later.

The small signs of renewal and resilience do not counterbalance the decline in terms of numbers or social impact. The new that is coming cannot, at least in the short term, properly replace what has been lost. What was, will not return. It is important to make room for lament and mourning over what has been, or will soon be gone (cf. Keifert 2006: 36).

The third trend we notice is that of a shyness, awkwardness or **embarrassment in living out and talking about faith**. The Protestant minister Wim Dekker summarises this as *geloofsverlegenheid* (Dekker 2011). The development of the loss of a sense of transcendence is evident in Dutch society as a whole and has its impact on churches. Dekker argues that the crisis of the Church is not merely a loss of members and buildings, but it is a crisis of faith:

> *This embarrassment, certainly among theologians, but also among church members, has to do with the fact that we are much more secularised than we realise ourselves. We no longer think from the reality of God, as the First. (Dekker 2011: 174. Translation by authors)*

Wim Dekker's analysis is widely shared. People sense that the crisis is not just about decline, nor do they believe that new initiatives of being church will magically help

4 There are several books and articles describing what is happening with regard to these new initiatives in the Netherlands. See De Roest et al. 2023; De Reuver and Vellekoop 2019; Stoppels et al. 2020; Stoppels 2021. For academic research see Verburg-Janssen 2024 and De Jonge 2022.

Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef18728

the Church.[5] We think Wim Dekker and others are exposing a deeper problem, which corresponds to what we call crisis 2.

It is important to note this multiple face of developments in the Church: there is a general, ongoing, structural and painful decline, new things are happening and people are sensing that there may be a deeper problem to do with our faith. We will describe this in more detail later. But first, let's take a closer look at how people respond to crisis 1.

Crisis 1: Three Responses

How do churches respond to decline? We distinguish three ways churches respond to crisis 1: namely cramp, repair and addressing the calling of the Church.

Response 1: Cramp

A common reaction is cramp: people channel their effort and energy into continuing with what is still there.[6] The word "still" in particular is a common and revealing word. It indicates that people are aware that what they do and have is unlikely to last for long, but they carry on anyway. One of the most common questions asked by churches is: how do we find volunteers and ministers? A logical question, but one that focuses on maintaining the status quo. Most people don't think much about the fact that churches could be something completely different. They just go on doing what they are doing until they cannot go on. Often people do not feel the space to rediscover what their church's calling is in their own context.

Cramp – or even paralysis – is common in churches. Cramp is a dead end. Crisis 1 is too profound to ignore for long. Churches in cramp will eventually close or merge with another church.

Response 2: Repair

Another response to crisis 1 is the desire to fix the church system. This manifests itself in all sorts of proposals to address the symptoms of the crisis. Churches invent ways to involve more people in their faith community, they want to be relevant to the neighbourhood, or they start programmes for better faith communication in a post-Christian society. Crisis 1 is then effectively a problem to be solved. Above all,

5 For recent examples see Van Dijk and Van Leerdam (2023) and Van der Deijl (2023), who are Protestant Church ministers reflecting on the crisis of the Church.

6 Not just in the Netherlands. In her study of how churches in the US deal with change, sociologist Nancy Ammerman found that "inertia" was the most common response to decline: "proceed with business as usual" (Ammerman 1997: 63).

Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef18728

churches are expected to adapt to the new reality and come up with creative, innovative ways to overcome the crisis.

Repair is often presented as an alternative to the cramp. People are sold the idea that *this new method* will help them remain or become again a vital, growing and young church. This is not always said explicitly. Church organizations developing new programmes and methods are well aware of how tough and complicated church development is. However, implicitly, the new methods and programmes give the message: there is a solution to your problem. This subtext can make churches despondent when change does not occur or when they cannot start a programme due to a lack of resources.

The repair approach is alive and well in Dutch churches. Not infrequently, examples of successful churches are studied to discover the success factors that other churches should benefit from. In this light, it is interesting to pay attention to what people cite as examples of successful churches. For example, the Nieuwe Kerk in Utrecht is often seen as a success within the Protestant Church. The Nieuwe Kerk remarkably succeeds in involving many young people, aged in their twenties and thirties. A publication on this church (Westerbeek 2021) shared the lessons to be learned from their experience. However, Dirk de Bree, one of the ministers of the *Nieuwe Kerk*, is aware of the risks of church growth, and describes the challenges his church faces:

> *As the church attracts more and more members from all parts of the city, there is less involvement in the immediate area around the church building. The missionary DNA is less visible. This has also to do with the energy needed to keep 'things going'. Again, there is always a risk that as a growing church we become so busy with ourselves that the mission falls by the wayside. (De Bree 2019, translation by authors).*

What is considered "successful" here is revealing. It says something about where people set their priorities. For us, the focus of many on these successful churches tells us above all else that most churches would also like to attract many (preferably young) people, especially to their Sunday worship. The idea that you, as a believer, are church for the purpose of something other than church, namely the kingdom of God, is usually secondary. Small, ageing churches are not held up as examples of successful churches, even though they can do just as well (or better) what they are called to do. A church made up of twelve frail elderly people being with refugees may be much more engaged in its calling than a large church with many churchgoers. But few will define that small church as a success.

In fact, any church renewal can be used as a way to repair the Church. The pioneering programme of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands could also be seen as a repair approach. One of the reasons for pioneering was a study by the Dutch research

Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef18728

agency Motivaction,[7] which showed that of the eight "mentality milieus" Motivaction identified in Dutch society, only two were actually well represented in the Protestant Church. Pioneering was an attempt to involve people from these other groups in new forms of church. This is also reflected in the Protestant Church's definition of pioneering: "A pioneering place is a new form of church, for people who do not go to church." (Stoppels et al. 2020: 5).

We do think that a pioneer church can be a place where people rediscover the vocation of the Church. There are pioneers who, in their solidarity with marginalized people, rediscover what the gospel means in their context. However, this addressing of crisis 2 does not happen automatically. Quite often pioneers are "bothered" by the idea that their pioneering place must ensure that the existing church can continue to exist. They are often asked by people from the inherited church: "So, when will we see these people in church?" In this sense, the repair approach can damage new initiatives. They sometimes succumb to the added burden of having to be a solution to crisis 1.

Intermezzo: Why Repair Does not Work

There are three reasons why we think repairing the Church does not work. The first and simplest reason is that *the repair approach underestimates the depth of secularity*. Our culture is marked by what Andrew Root[8] calls "secular 3" – most people in our society are not so much against faith, but find faith, church and God so irrelevant that it no longer has any meaning for their lives. "Secular 3, then, looks sideways and skeptically at any definition or articulation of human experience that draws on anything other than the immanent" (Root 2017a: 139; Root 2017b: 110).

Churches find themselves in a situation where what they do and are is considered strange, irrelevant and even inappropriate by much of contemporary society. Churches cannot do much about this. They can have the best programmes, train fantastic pastors and have the most beautiful buildings with modern kitchens, but at the end of the day, most people still find church irrelevant.

In practice, churches hardly acknowledge this cultural situation. They react within the frame of "secular 2". This is an older version of secularity. The idea of secular 2 is that the secular and the sacred are two separate domains. The Church's job then is to get people into the Christian domain or keep them there, thus reducing the secular domain.[9] It turns out that many churches and believers think that there is a solution

7 Not publicly available.

8 Root here follows Smith's (2014) interpretation of Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age*.

9 We will not elaborate here on what secular 1 is, but for completeness: secular 1 is the model in which the secular and sacred are present in the same domain and the sacred can enter the secular at all sorts of moments.

Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef18728

to secularization somewhere. In this line of thinking, it is difficult, but not impossible, to return to a more pious and Christian society, where secularity can be reduced.

A second reason why repair does not work builds on the first: it maintains *the illusion of a solution*. As long as churches still believe that the crisis is solvable and they themselves are repairable, they will feel the temptation to put their energy into repair. The thinking is: if only we work hard enough, put in place the right structures or believe the right things, our church will become vital and healthy again. As long as this illusion persists, there will be churches that spend a lot of time and energy trying to get their own organisation in order.

For this last thought, we are indebted to Andrew Root who traces how the focus on change keeps churches on a treadmill (Root 2021: 13). Constant change is an aspect of today's society. Churches try to adapt to (increasingly rapid) change. What churches often fail to understand is that this desire for change brings its own problems, because behind every change there is a new change on the horizon. In short, the solution for churches is not the next successful repair programme.

This brings us to a third reason why the repair approach does not work: *it keeps drawing churches' attention to themselves.* In our view, this is the most fundamental reason why the repair approach can be problematic. Churches can use their repair frenzy to keep themselves busy and feel like they are doing good. It helps churches to avoid paying attention to crisis 2. The busyness that is connected to crisis 1 is an obstacle to receiving Christ and keeps a church away from the kingdom of God. And that is a temptation that people and churches constantly fall for.

Response 3: Calling

The only thing left is to get off the treadmill. This is the moment when you can stop focusing on yourself and instead, direct your attention towards the goodness of God that surrounds you, and learn to receive it. Root also moves in this direction. He makes a case for transformation which he defines as an "invitation into grace": "[transformation] comes with an arriving word, 'Peace be with you' (John 20:19). Transformation is not the necessity to speed up but the need to open up and receive" (Root 2021: 15).

Churches therefore need not focus on themselves, but on that which comes from outside, and which only needs to be received. Doing this however is not easy for churches. We recognize what Rooms says in his study of missional churches and their relationship to the world: "God is at work in the world, but it is very hard for local churches to believe this" (Rooms 2019: 190).

While crisis 1 can obscure a church's calling, some churches will need to decline before they can pay attention to what they are meant to do. As Paas says: "In a time of decline we can rediscover what a church really is: a celebrating community through which God's salvation is realised. It is very likely that many congregations

Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef18728

will first have to become smaller in order to see this again" (Paas 2015: 221, translation by authors).

In this sense, crisis 1 can also be a blessing for some churches, helping them get to the question of what their calling is. Particularly churches who have attempted all possible solutions and have arrived at the conclusion that their crisis is unsolvable, and they are unable to fix themselves, have the opportunity to question the reasons behind all their efforts. And that question takes them in the right direction, namely towards their calling as a congregation. This is something Jonna discovered in her research of a diaconal faith community: that decline was one of the reasons to look for other ways of being church (Van den Berge-Bakker 2023: 26). Not all churches do this. We also encounter churches that consciously or unconsciously choose the option of slow but sure death. But some are letting go of the pressure to be successful, big or relevant. They let go of the idea that they first need enough (young) churchgoers, volunteers, money and buildings to fulfil their mission.

Crisis 2: We Forget the Church's Calling

We have already said quite a lot about crisis 2, but it is good to be more specific here about what we mean by it. We believe that crisis 2 has to do with the Church forgetting its calling. There are many answers to the question of what its calling actually is, but we start with the idea that the Church exists for the purpose of the kingdom of God.

Church as Sign, Foretaste and Instrument of the Kingdom

We take the view that the Church is called to be "sign, foretaste and instrument" of the kingdom of God This triad that has been in use, in different versions and variations, in missional literature.[10] We think it is helpful, because it diverts attention away from church, without diminishing the importance of church itself. The triad is often associated with the Protestant missiologist Lesslie Newbigin (cf. Goheen 2000: 33). Newbigin corrected the instrumental approach of Hoekendijk, who saw church only as "a means in God's hands to establish shalom in this world" (Hoekendijk 1964: 24). Besides Newbigin, there are many other theologians who characterize church in similar ways. According to the Roman Catholic theologian Borgman the Church's right to exist "stands or falls with whether it is what it is called to be" (Borgman 2016: 40ff). Borgman comments: "The Church's task is to make clear – she is the 'sign' – and to promote – she is the 'instrument' – that people belong together and take into account in their actions that they are dependent on each other, and that together

10 See for example Guder (2015: 54–5 and 74).

Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef18728

with the rest of creation they are connected to God" (Borgman 2016: 41, translation by authors).

The Protestant theologian Berkhof emphasizes that the Church should be oriented towards the world, on the basis of its identity as a community. The Church is then the "firstfruits of God's purposes, as the experimental garden of a new humanity" (Berkhof 1990: 419). Berkhof mentions that church is a "foretaste" and that the "apostolary orientation of the church is grounded in her communion with her Lord as well as in that of her members among each other" (Berkhof 1990: 418).

While Moltmann does not seem to use the "sign, foretaste and instrument" triad, he very clearly sees the need for the Church to be directed to the Kingdom of God. He argues: "'Christianity' has its essence and its goal not in itself and not in its own existence, but lives from something and exists for something which reaches far beyond itself" (Moltmann 1993: 325). The Church then is transformed by this "horizon of eschatological hope". On this basis the Church can "resist accommodation" and can say "something peculiar … to the world" (Moltmann 1993: 305).

Summarizing, many theologians see the calling of the Church as being directed towards the kingdom. Relating this to our distinction, we argue that when the Church addresses crisis 2, it points to the other reality of God, which it does not control and on which it itself depends (sign). Nevertheless, we should expect that in every church there is something to taste of the kingdom (foretaste) and that what happens in and through the Church contributes to God's good world (instrument). Thus, while there is something at stake, the Church is freed from an unattainable compulsion to be perfect. It allows a church to seek God's goodness without having to realize it.

The Relationship Between Crisis 1 and 2

How do crisis 1 and 2 relate to each other? Firstly, we think the **order is** important.[11] Focusing on crisis 2 is not going to solve the problems with crisis 1, but focusing on your vocation does put crisis 1 in a different light. Secondly, this orientation requires an attitude of **receiving**, and this is a different response from that often seen in a response to crisis 1.

Order

If the Church is focused on the kingdom of God, as we argue above, this means that the Church must first address crisis 2. This is the actual crisis of the Church.

11 We do not go into detail here, but this reasoning connects with what has been called the "Chalcedonian pattern", where the hierarchical asymmetry between the divine and the human is important. Karl Barth's ecclesiology is built around this idea (cf. Bender 2005).

Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef18728

Addressing crisis 2 means the first question of churches should be what the Church's calling is and listening very carefully to this calling. You can expect that calling to come from outside.

Crisis 1 will not be automatically solved by paying attention to crisis 2. It does not prevent shrinkage. Far from it. The Church might stay small and insignificant. However, distinguishing between crisis 1 and 2 might help faith communities to see what they are doing, and take the edge off the panic that churches are experiencing. This does not mean that crisis 1 is not important. The decline is a sad thing because many things that are dear to us are disappearing. Buildings, volunteers, well-trained workers et cetera are all important. Knowledge of how to engage with young people, set up organisations properly and develop missionary strategies are important. However, our point is that these should be in the service of what you are called to as a church.

Reflecting further on this aspect of order, we believe that the Church is born in the context of the Kingdom and not the other way around. This is reminiscent of Bonhoeffer who says that the Church is where Christ is and is actualised by the Spirit. He himself cites as an example a conversation between two believers, which he also calls church:

> *Where the brother speaks to the brother, Christ is in the middle (Matthew 18:20) – there he stands as the middle between them. This is love – this is how the Spirit actualises the Church, not by words or claims, but by what happens between the members of the congregation. (Bonhoeffer 2018: 114 translation by authors)*

So the Church *happens* in ever-changing places and formations. It is often assumed that the concept of church is already fully understood, leading us to believe that we only need to identify alternative methods through innovative theological reflection. Our thesis is that our understanding of the concept of church is yet to be fully realized, and its discovery is only possible through listening to our calling and following Christ. The Church, in turn, is considered as a divine gift from God, which is actualized (Bonhoeffer) by the Spirit of God. How Church is actualized can be different for every situation.

This approach is a quite radical departure from missional literature that is concerned with "new forms of church". When the focus of the Church is on the Kingdom of God, the form the Church takes is of secondary importance. Again, that does not mean that form is not important, but rather that form follows calling, and not the other way around. Thinking in this way about order might help theologians and practitioners to prioritize and evaluate what they are doing and thinking.

A case in point is the work of Michael Moynagh (2012, 2017), who offers one of the best, practice-based works on what happens in new ecclesial communities, creatively

Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef18728

linking ideas and theories from different fields. His work has been influential in the pioneer movement, in the UK, the Netherlands, Switzerland and other countries (cf. Müller 2016). However, his focus on work can be misused in a repair approach. While Moynagh argues that the Church should be shaped by the kingdom of God, he focuses most of his attention on the Church itself and how it can be adapted to changing circumstances. This makes his work vulnerable to be used as a solution to crisis 1.

Receiving

Crisis 1 puts people in an activist mode. Something has to be fixed, namely the Church. To be directed to the Kingdom, however, requires an attitude of receiving. Being attentive to God's Kingdom will make one receptive to what God is already giving, in and outside of the Church. Churches that focus on the kingdom of God, even if they are just a small group of people, have the space to experience what is already given to them. They can receive who and what comes their way as a special gift from God. As Samuel Wells says, churches that focus on what God gives will experience abundance and joy:

> *Abundance belongs with wonder. It is the conviction that if something is of God, there is no shortage of it; that joy lies in learning to live the things God gives in plenty, while misery awaits those who set their hearts on the ephemeral objects of scarcity. (Wells 2015: 130)*

Addressing crisis 2 helps churches to realize they are working in a different economy, the economy of abundance.

Significance for Church and Theology

What can the distinction between crisis 1 and 2 mean for church and theology? First, we think that **naming and defining crisis 1 and 2 helps** to see what is important first, and what is important next. There are many theologians who have written good things about crisis 1 and 2, without using these names. So crisis 1 and 2 are seen, but often discussed interchangeably. This is not surprising as in daily practice these crises get mixed up, but our simple distinction can help separate the goats from the sheep. For example, it can help a church that has to make a decision about which of two church buildings they are to close. The question, "What are we called to be here and now?" is different from "In which building can we continue Sunday worship service for as long as possible?" Thinking about their calling will lead churches down a different path, which, we believe, will bring more joy and surprise (and who knows, maybe also a full church on Sundays, but that will be of secondary importance).

Ecclesial Futures – DOI: 10.54195/ef18728

Second, if focusing on the kingdom of God is the most important thing for churches, then this also demands something of **theological method**. Theology has a tendency to degenerate into expert knowledge. The demands placed on theology in the academy, but also the great challenges involved in decline and secularization, lead many people to call for more knowledge and further research. While we have nothing against this (and contribute to it – this article is, of course, itself an example of this), we think that here, too, the order is important.

To get a little more concrete: our approach calls for a theological method of discernment with a participatory action approach, where ordinary people who have insights on the kingdom have an important voice. This is a different approach from the ivory tower approach that so often characterises theology.[12] We are indebted for this thought to theologian Clare Watkins, who sees "enabling a culture for discernment" (Watkins 2020: 235) as a central task of the Church.

Discernment encompasses a very different set of skills from the models of change or missionary strategies used for crisis 1. This does not mean that this expert knowledge is not important, but rather that it is not the most important. Change starts with discernment and living out God's good world. This is something you can do with all the people around you, including those who 'happen' to come your way and may not belong to your faith community. So this approach also puts into perspective what theologians (including ourselves), organizational experts or disruptive innovators have to offer.

A church becomes a community where people together discern the goodness of God. As a result, a church might start doing things differently. If this is the result of a collective process, people will be less inclined to want to maintain what is and more likely to try out an alternative. This is the place where theology starts.

Third, we think it is important to make **eschatology more central in ecclesiology**. Numerous churches are concerned about the future but consider it solely from their existing situation. Then they have a lot to worry about. Eschatological thinking works the other way round: you understand everyday existence in the light of what is to come. This approach comes from Moltmann. As he says: "The thinking of Christian hope draws God's future into the present and thus opens the present to God's future new world" (Moltmann 2019: 122).[13]

A church that thinks eschatologically identifies for itself and with others where the kingdom of God (for that ís the future) can already be found and rejoices in it. Often church is thought of too narrowly and too imprecisely – too narrow because we don't

12 Although the ivory tower also has its uses, see De Roest (2020: 253).

13 Original quote: "Das Denken der christlichen Hoffnung zieht Gottes Zukunft in die Gegenwart hinein und öffnet damit die Gegenwart für die zukünftige neue Welt Gottes." Translation by authors.

call things that happen in everyday life "church", and too imprecise because there are many things that we call church that actually are not.
Eschatological thinking lends the Church a clarity that can be put to good use. In its relationship with the world, the Church is not just a religious community, it is pointing to "the coming reshaping of the whole present world system" (Moltmann 2004: 338). And in this capacity, it is critical of the world around it and embodies itself – if all goes well – a different reality.

Conclusion

Concluding, we hope that the distinction between crisis 1 and 2 will help churches and theologians to focus their attention on the things that matter, in the proper order. We believe this distinction has been seen or felt by many people. By putting it in words and reflecting theoretically on the relation between the two, we hope to provide language that helps people discern what they are called to do and discover God's wonderful abundance in doing it. We hope that the distinction will inspire new empirical research into what the calling of the Church might be. We believe this does not necessarily involve an organised, large, and successful Church, but that it does involve a Church that loses itself and finds new life for the sake of Christ.

About the Authors

Jonna van den Berge-Bakker (MA) is a PhD student at the Protestant Theological University, Utrecht, The Netherlands. She studies faith communities that engage with people in vulnerable positions, to discover theology from the margins. She also works at the headquarters of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands as an expert on church and poverty.

Dr Marten van der Meulen works as a Senior Lecturer Sociology of Religion at the Protestant Theological University in Utrecht. He also works as Strategic Researcher at the national headquarters of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. He is co-leader of a research project titled "Future-oriented church". He studies how people in fragile churches in the secularised northern provinces of the Netherlands tell about their experiences of the Kingdom of God and reflects with them on how Church can emerge in that context. Contact: mvandermeulen@pthu.nl

References

Ammerman, Nancy. 1997. *Congregation and Community*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press.

Bender, Kimlyn J. 2005. *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology*. Barth Studies. Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Berkhof, Hendrikus. 1990. *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*. Rev. ed., Repr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans.

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. 2018. *De levende kerk. Teksten over de kerk 1932–1933*. Translated by Edward Van 't Slot. Utrecht: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum.

Borgman, Erik Petrus Nicolaas Maria. 2016. *Waar blijft de kerk: gedachten over opbouw in tijden van afbraak*. Baarn: Adveniat.

De Bree, Dirk. 2019. "'Is het met de balkons?' De Nieuwe Kerk in Utrecht". *Inspirare. Tijdschrift Voor Charismatische & Evangelische Theologie* 1 (3): 38–45.

De Hart, Joep, Pepijn van Houwelingen and Willem Huijnk. 2022. "Buiten Kerk En Moskee". 3. Religie in een pluriforme samenleving. Den Haag: Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau.

De Jonge, Annemiek. 2022. *Als een madeliefje tussen de straatstenen: soteriologische en ecclesiologische opvattingen van practitioners in evangelicale missionaire gemeenschapsvorming*. Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn.

Dekker, W. 2011. *Marginaal en missionair: Kleine theologie voor een krimpende kerk*. 2. druk. Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum.

De Reuver, René, and Martijn Vellekoop. 2019. *Mozaïek van kerkplekken. Over verbinding tussen bestaande en nieuwe vormen van kerk-zijn*. Utrecht: Dienstenorganisatie Protestantse Kerk.

De Roest, Henk. 2020. *Collaborative Practical Theology: Engaging Practitioners in Research on Christian Practices*. Theology in Practice, Volume 8. Leiden; Boston: Brill.

Goheen, Michael W. 2000. *"As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You": J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology.* Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht.

Guder, Darrell L. 2015. *Called to Witness: Doing Missional Theology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Hoekendijk, J. C. 1964. *The Church inside Out*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press.

Keifert, Patrick R. 2006. *We Are Here Now: A New Missional Era, a Missional Journey of Spiritual Discovery*. Eagle, Idaho: Allelon Publishing.

Moltmann, Jürgen. 1993 [1967]. *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*. London: SCM.

Moltmann, Jürgen. 2004. *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*. Repr. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Moltmann, Jürgen. 2019. *Christliche Erneuerungen in Schwierigen Zeiten*. München: Claudius.

Moynagh, Michael. 2012. *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice*. London: SCM Press.

Moynagh, Michael. 2017. *Church in Life: Innovation, Mission and Ecclesiology*. London: SCM Press.

Müller, Sabrina. 2016. *Fresh Expressions of Church: ekklesiologische Beobachtungen und Interpretationen einer neuen kirchlichen Bewegung*. Zürich: TVZ, Theologischer Verlag Zürich.

Paas, Stefan. 2015. *Vreemdelingen en priesters: Christelijke missie in een postchristelijke omgeving*. Derde druk. Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum.

Rooms, Nigel. 2019. "Understanding Local Churches as Porous Living Systems: Insights from the Tavistock Tradition". *Ecclesial Practices* 6 (2): 182–97.

Root, Andrew. 2017a. "Faith Formation in a Secular Age." *Word & World* 37 (2): 128–41.

Root, Andrew. 2017b. *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Volume 1 (Ministry in a Secular Age): Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness*. Baker Academic.
Root, Andrew. 2021. *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life*. Ministry in a Secular Age, volume three. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.
Smith, James K. A. 2014. *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
Stoppels, Sake. 2021. *Vruchtbaar missionair leiderschap*. Utrecht: Dienstenorganisatie Protestantse Kerk.
Stoppels, Sake, Marten van der Meulen, Janneke Nijboer and Elze Riemer. 2020. *Tussenstand pionieren. De impact van pionieren op sociale verbondenheid en geloofsontwikkeling*. Utrecht: Protestantse Kerk in Nederland.
Van den Berge-Bakker, Jonna. 2023. "Onze Lieve Heer, die ziet het wel. Een participatief narratief onderzoek naar leer- en veranderprocessen in een diaconale geloofsgemeenschap". MA thesis, Groningen: Protestantse Theologische Universiteit. https://theoluniv.ub.rug.nl/561/.
Van der Deijl, Aarnoud. 2023. *De toekomst van de kerk: essay vol rouw en hoop*. Middelburg: Uitgeverij Skandalon.
Van Dijk, Gerrit, and Martijn van Leerdam. 2023. *Krimp. Waarom de kerk naar de haaien gaat en wij toch hoopvol zijn*. Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum.
Verburg-Janssen, Marinka. 2024. *Rondom de ruimte van het begin. Een etnografische studie naar de vorming van nieuwe geloofsgemeenschappen met nooit- en ooit-kerkelijken binnen de pioniersbeweging van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*. Utrecht: Eburon.
Watkins, Clare. 2020. *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice*. Oxford: Routledge.
Wells, Samuel. 2015. *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God*. Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons.
Westerbeek, Thea. 2021. "Hoe de Nieuwe Kerk in Utrecht vermenigvuldigde." *Woord & Weg*, January 2021.
Wijma, Merijn. 2022. *A Great Multitude One Can Count: A Statistical Study on the Spatio-Temporal Development of the Reformed Denominations in the Netherlands between 1892 and 2015*. Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn Motief.